



SEXUALITY

Sexuality education and Asperger's Syndrome – information for parents and carers



Asperger's Syndrome falls within the spectrum of autistic disorders. It is important that parents and carers of people with Asperger's Syndrome have access to information, resources and support that enables them to provide ongoing and effective sexuality education.

What is Asperger's Syndrome?

Asperger's Syndrome falls within the spectrum of autistic disorders. People with Asperger's Syndrome are likely to have highly functional and fluent expressive language skills. They may, however, have difficulties with social interpretation, motor skills and communication.

Asperger's Syndrome and sexuality issues

All people are sexual beings from the day they are born. It is normal for every person to express his or her sexuality. This expression of sexuality may take a variety of forms.

People with Asperger's Syndrome experience the same process of sexual development as people without Asperger's Syndrome.

Physical sexual development occurs at puberty regardless of social and emotional maturity. For people with Asperger's Syndrome, a gap may occur between physical development and social development. Specifically the socialisation process required in order for a person's sexuality to be fulfilled within relationships may be lacking or impaired.

Some of the characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome are specific to social behaviours these may include:

- naivety
- anxiety
- one-sided social interactions
- poor non-verbal communication
- lack of empathy
- limited ability to form friendships

People with Asperger's Syndrome may also experience sensory hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity, and this can also impact upon interpersonal interactions and relationships.

Some of the medications used in the treatment of autistic spectrum disorders may also effect libido and/or sexual functioning, and it is important that these potential side effects are discussed openly with the prescribing medical practitioner.

Parents and carers

Parents and carers are the primary sexuality educators of their children. Other significant people in a caring role may also provide important messages about sexuality.

Parents and carers can help people with Asperger's Syndrome to:

- understand and accept physical and emotional changes with confidence
- feel positive about their bodies
- appreciate and accept individual differences
- make informed and responsible sexual decisions
- feel good about themselves as a male or female
- be capable of communicating about sexual matters
- realise their potential for interpersonal relationships and sexual expression
- understand clear behavioural boundaries

For parents and carers to have a positive role in sexuality education and promote the development of a sexually healthy adult, they need to be aware of their own attitudes, values and motives about sexuality and sexuality education.

Some parents and carers feel embarrassed and uncomfortable discussing sexuality with their children.

Some may also be concerned about the management and outcomes of sexuality education and issues for their child. These concerns may be heightened where a child has Asperger's Syndrome.

Sexuality education

Receiving positive messages about sexuality from an early age and ongoing sexuality education is important in reducing distress and isolation during puberty.

It is important that people with Asperger's Syndrome receive and have access to sexuality education. An experience of being perceived as silly, inept or naive because of lack of knowledge may be distressing for the individual.

Sexuality education should consider the language ability, social functioning level, behaviour and emotional maturity of the individual.

Sexuality education needs to be ongoing and consistently reinforce appropriate behaviours within the context of day-to-day interactions. Sexuality education should ideally start in childhood.

Specific areas that need to be addressed include:

- body parts and sexual functioning
- distinguishing between public and private (body parts, places and behaviour)

- positive attitudes towards masturbation
- puberty
- menstrual management
- expressing feelings appropriately
- relationships
- self esteem
- self protection
- assertion skills
- safer sex and sexual health checks
- sexual abuse issues
- appropriate sexual behaviours

Other things to consider about sexuality education

Sexuality education and information needs to address individual anxieties, particularly if these relate to body and emotional changes. Specific tips for parents and carers of people with Asperger's Syndrome include:

- utilise realistic visual aids as much as possible
- break down complex information or explanations into digestible or 'building block' pieces
- reinforce rules and structure within sexuality, eg in relation to public/private body parts
- promote active learning, and the opportunity to discuss values and clarify beliefs

Positive reinforcement and acceptance of the individual is important at all times.

Presented within a positive, caring framework by an optimistic and supportive parent or carer, sexuality education will enhance a child's chance of realising their potential for interpersonal competence and sexual expression.

Where can I get more information on discussing sexuality and puberty?

Family Planning Queensland (FPQ) has a range of parent and carer education factsheets and brochures including:

- *Communicating about sexuality with children*
- *Sexual development in early childhood*
- *Puberty – information for parents and carers*
- *Feel Safe – promoting self protection*
- *About periods*

References

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- Meister, C., Moneyman, S., Morlock, D., & Pierce, K. (1994). Sexuality and autism: A parenting skills enhancement group. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 3(3), 283–289.



NOTES

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