

## A note about terminology

Throughout this discussion the terms “autism”, “on the autism spectrum”, “ASD”, “person with autism”, and “autistic person” are used interchangeably. While the experimenter recognizes that amongst the clinical, medical, and neurodiverse community there are preferences and conventions in terminology use, the selection of terminology in this presentation is based on grammar and stylistic needs and does not reflect a particular terminological intent.

---

## A note about sexuality

Sexuality is complex in nature and reflects a high degree of individualization; of preference, of experience, and of level of comfort. It is the intention of this talk to provide accurate, technical, and direct content in order to provide the best education in this area. However, it is recognized that, for some, this material may seem direct and abrupt and may evoke feelings of discomfort. Discretion is advised

---



So how did I get here?  
(and why should you be here too)

**BUT WHY  
AUTISM?**



## Social Communication

- Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
- Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.
- Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understand relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.

# Repetitive and restricted behaviour

- Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypes, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).
- Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or non-verbal behaviour (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day).
- Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests).
- Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g. apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).

## Risks for people with autism

- Risks for People with Autism
- Infantilization (e.g. Newman, 2022)
- Reported sexual assault and/or victimization (Byrne, 2017) Sexual misconduct (Mandell et al., 2005)



## Other barriers

- Higher prevalence of non-heterosexual orientation (George & Stokes, 2018), gender variance (DeVries et al. 2010), and transgender identity (Shumer et al., 2016)
- Attitudes of sexual ableism (O'Connell, 2020).
- Peer groups (Volkmar & Wiesner, 2003)
- Parents (Dewinter et al., 2016)
- Often responsive (Griffiths, 1989)
- Complexity of skill
- Taboo
- Sex ed in a classroom (Whitby, 2021, SIECUS 2021)





More of us [people with ASD] just give up on having a great sex life, and this is heartbreaking; for like it or not, sexual contact is an unapologetically fantastic part of the human experience” (Carley, 2021, p. 35)



*So what should we  
be teaching  
autistic individuals  
about sexuality?*

# Considerations for safety

SKILLS IN THE AREA OF:  
ABUSE PREVENTION  
OFFENSE PREVENTION  
SEX FOR FUN

## Other considerations

- This is not a comprehensive list!
- Manage risks in teaching
- Consider who should be teaching
  - Personal skills
  - Best knowledge
  - Comfort with teaching
- Planning for maintenance



A case for  
component  
skills...



## Component skills

- Take a big skill
- Break it down
- And some more
- Until you find something you can teach

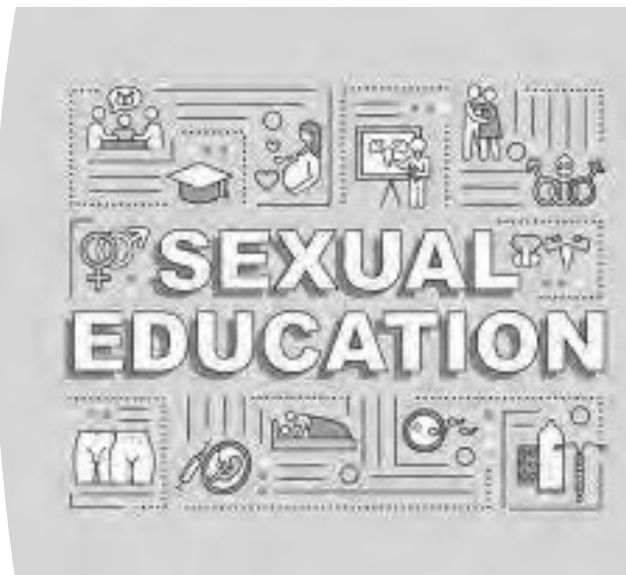
## Benefits of component skills

- We know how to do this!
- Can start early
- Often nothing to do with sex



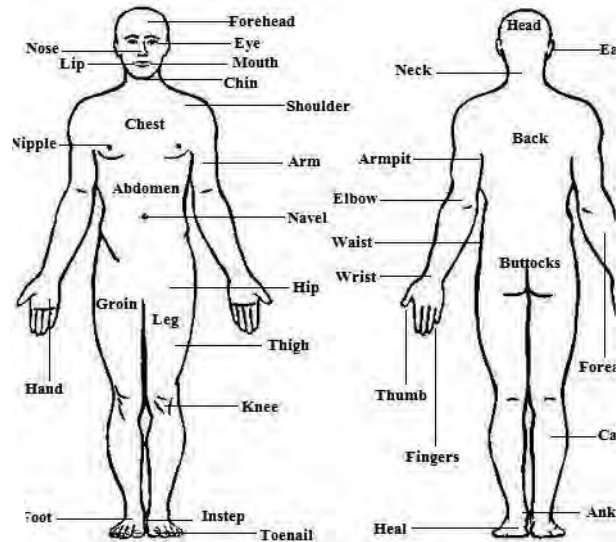
## Broad skill areas

- Body knowledge, puberty and reproduction
- Autonomy
- Consent
- Social skills
- Recall and reporting



## Body parts, puberty, and reproduction

- Label body parts on self and others
  - Include biological names, slang
  - Update as developmentally appropriate
  - Discrimination skills
  - Focus on important things!
- Function of body parts
- Health reporting
- Hygiene - independence



## Body parts, puberty, reproduction

- Puberty changes
  - Focus on important for individual learner
- Reproduction
  - Basics of how this works
  - More information as individuals become more sexually active
- Birth control
  - What it does (and doesn't do)
  - How to get it, store it
  - Preferences
  - Communication with partners
  - What to do in a fail



## Autonomy

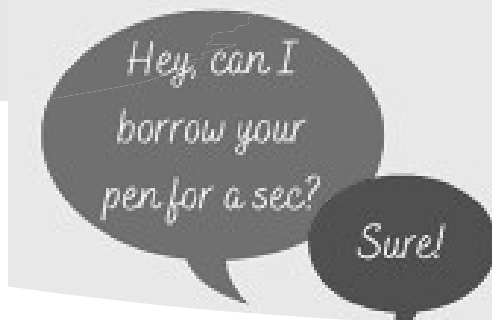
- Choice making
  - Forced choices
  - Spontaneous choices
- Problem solving
- Organization of life
- Public/private
  - Acts
  - Spaces
  - Body parts



## Autonomy



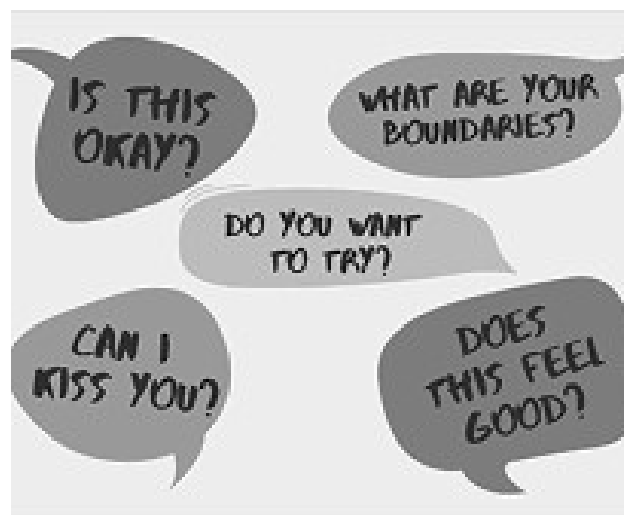
## Consent - giving



- Preferences
- Differential communication
- Using nonverbal communication
- Functional NO

## Consent - understanding

- Understanding nonverbal cues
- Tolerating delay and denial
- Management of transient nature





# Social skills

- Social norms
  - Personal space
  - Individual boundaries
- Dating:
  - Interest, flirting, starting and ending interactions
  - Planning
  - Conversations
  - Considerations for others' preferences
    - Activities
    - Sexual acts
    - PDA's
- Understanding (and respecting) different relationships



## Recall and reporting

- Recall events up to 2 days later
- Answer questions about events accurately
  - Even coercive ones!
- Determine what is noteworthy
- Determine who to share with



## And we didn't even get to...

- Online safety
- Skills related to sexual orientation and gender
- Tolerating medical procedures
- Legal issues
- Specifics around masturbation
- Sexual acts
- And so much more!



## When teaching!

- Use clear, direct language
- Use real materials where accessible
- Consider say-do
- Plan for maintenance
- Consider physiology

**LIFE IS REALLY SIMPLE,  
BUT WE INSIST ON  
MAKING IT COMPLICATED**

Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis / Volume 23, Issue 1 / p. 79-89

**BALANCING THE RIGHT TO HABILITATION WITH THE RIGHT TO PERSONAL  
LIBERTIES: THE RIGHTS OF PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES TO EAT  
TOO MANY DOUGHNUTS AND TAKE A NAP**

Diane J. Bannerman, Jan B. Sheldon, James A. Sherman, Alan E. Harchik

First published: Spring 1990

## A note on dignity and risk...



## Dignity and risk

WHOSE DECISION IS IT?

## Dignity and risk

- To protect dignity and provide for (safe) risk we need:
  - Allow choice and control
  - Allow mistakes
  - Allow individualization
  - Teach more than we think we need



## In conclusion...

- Sexuality is complicated
- Sexuality and autism is even more complicated
- Be creative
- Collaborate with each other
- Have a sense of humour



Thank you!

Jessica Cauchi, Ph.D, BCBA-D.,  
CPBA-AP

[jcauchi@atlasbehaviour.com](mailto:jcauchi@atlasbehaviour.com)

[www.atlasinsights.ca](http://www.atlasinsights.ca)