

Bridges to Adulthood for Learners With Autism Spectrum Disorders: Targeting Skills for the Next Environment

Peter F. Gerhardt, Ed.D.

Organization for Autism Research

Pgerhardt@researchautism.org





Transition Planning
for Competent
Adulthood:
Overview & Issues



This presentation contains language and imagery of a sexual nature and may be considered inappropriate for younger listeners.

Sadly...

- Sex and sexuality, as serious topics for discussion, are ones that many of us would rather avoid than address. This may be even more true when the issue is sexuality and learners with ASD.

Sexuality Defined

- “Sexuality is an integral part of the personality of everyone: man, woman, and child. It is a basic need and an aspect of being human that cannot be separated from other aspects of human life. Sexuality is not synonymous with sexual intercourse [and it] influences thoughts feelings, actions, and interactions and thereby our mental and physical health” (WHO, 1975)

Historical Considerations (Sobsey, 1994)

- Eugenics Movement

- Starting in the late 1800's laws were passed banning marriage or sexual intercourse involving women with a developmental disability or epilepsy (Sobsey, 1994).
- Between 1907 & 1957 (and later in some cases), some 60,000 individuals with a developmental disability were sterilized without their consent or, at times, knowledge.

Historical Considerations (Sobsey, 1994)

- Both programs were designed to 1) protect learners with a developmental disability from sexual abuse and 2) eliminate developmental disabilities by restricting reproduction.
- Until the mid-1960s such actions remained relatively commonplace with displays of sexuality by learners with developmental disabilities punished as inappropriate or deviant.

Myths about Sexuality

- In the community at large, there continue to exist a number of myths regarding sexuality and learners with ASD including:
 - Persons with ASD and other developmental disabilities have little or no interest in sexuality.
 - Persons with ASDs and other developmental disabilities are hypersexual.
 - Persons with ASD are solely heterosexual

But the Truth Is...

- Persons with ASD are sexual beings. However, individual interest in sex or in developing an intimate sexual relationship with another person varies widely across individuals at all ability levels. As such, there is a significant need for individualized, effective instruction for persons with ASD across the ability spectrum.

However...

- In two (somewhat) recent studies, (McCabe & Cummins, 1996; Szollo & McCabe, 1995) researchers concluded that individuals who have an intellectual disability have lower levels of sexual knowledge and experience in all areas except menstruation and body part identification when compared to a typical student population.
 - Watson, Griffiths, Richards, & Dysktra, (2002). *Sex Education*, In Griffiths, Richards, Federoff, & Watson (Eds.). Ethical Dilemmas: Sexuality and Developmental Disability. (pp 175-225). Kingston, NY: NADD Press

And for the Learner with ASD...

- sexuality education is complicated by language and communication problems and social deficits. Unfortunately, while sexual feelings and interest may be high, a primary information source available to neurotypical teens, (i.e., other teens), is generally not available. (Volkmar & Wiesner, 2003)