

**Sexuality and Sexual Education Resources for Autistic Youth: Increasing Accessibility and  
Awareness**

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## **Abstract**

This paper synthesizes a variety of resources regarding sexuality and sexual education with a focus on problematic sexual behavior (PSB) relating to autistic adolescents. The aim of this paper is to explore the current state of autism and sexuality literature whilst also highlighting the clear lack of information that still exists in the field of study. The topics that will be discussed include the perception of problematic sexual behavior over time, myths pertaining to autistic individuals, ecological factors that influence problematic sexual behavior, interventions, and future directions.

## **Introduction**

Numerous sources regarding the topic of autism and sexuality open with a preface about the limited studies available and conclude with the urgency of increasing awareness and accessibility for the autistic population. The intersection between autism and sexuality is often omitted from daily conversations, research, school curricula and more due to the stigma placed on both of these subjects (Ousley, Mesibov, 1991). Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that impacts individuals through difficulties interpreting certain social interactions such as facial expressions and body language, thinking rigidly, and having fixed and repetitive behaviors (Maggio et al., 2022). While a handful of research studies have focused on the cognitive and social aspects of autism, there is still a significant gap in understanding how autism influences an individual's sexuality. Autistic individuals are often living in 'task mode' which is an energy-intensive state that requires the ability to explore new paths through emulation (Schmidt et al., 2018). This population must navigate life through the societal barriers in place. It is important to overcome lingering myths and limited accessibility and opportunity to improve the quality of life for autistic individuals – specifically regarding sexuality in this paper.

Research on the relationship between autism and problematic sexual behavior preceding present-day studies has contributed to misunderstandings on the topic (Schmidt et al., 2018). There have been three noted phases of the chronological phases regarding the research of autism and sexuality. The first widespread sentiment toward the autistic population and sexuality was that they simply did not experience it. Since autistic individuals' need for sexuality and relationships was dismissed, research of the topic also ceased. The next phase occurred once researchers realized that the autistic population has needs. However, the focus shifted to

exclusively highlighting deviant, undesired behaviors. The present phase has normalized the intersection of autism and sexuality, though there are still sources of information that contribute to harmful perspectives. Two of the common approaches that can yield misleading results include a phenomenological-descriptive focus and deficit-oriented focus. The first approach simply describes a subject's observed behaviors and omits any explanation behind them. Leaving out the reasoning behind behavior can reinforce negative views pertaining to autistic individuals. For example, a common problematic sexual behavior such as removing clothing in public is inappropriate; however, it is troublesome to exclude the cause of this behavior especially if the individual has ASD. Autistic individuals struggle with sensory hypersensitivity and temperature regulation which is often the reasoning behind removing their clothes. Without this key piece of information, people jump to conclusions and make negative assumptions about the population. The deficit-oriented approach is similarly problematic. This approach focuses on the individual in isolation rather than in an interactive and socio-cultural context. The deficit-oriented approach can prevent individuals from looking beyond autism as a diagnosis. It is important that new approaches are selected for studying the autistic population and the topic of sexuality to avoid negative bias and assumptions.

Sexual education is an important component to youth development and learning. This knowledge can help prevent both risky and inappropriate sexual behaviors later on in life, yet the topic is presented as a distant and theoretical subject (Schmidt et al., 2018). In countries where there is mandatory sexual education, there is a later start to sex life as well as a lower rate of accidental pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (Pavelová et al., 2021). However, a majority of sexual education curricula are aimed toward neurotypical adolescents, and there are also a handful of programs that are designated for individuals with developmental delays;

unfortunately, neither of these programs translate for people with ASD (Sullivan, Caterino, 2008). There must be significant progress made to develop sexual education programs that address sexual behaviors in the context of social and communication skills, cognitive ability, and other strengths and weaknesses which would greatly improve the accessibility of resources for autistic individuals.

### **Model for Problematic Sexual Behavior**

This paper explores the literature on sexuality but particularly the topic of problematic sexual behavior. PSB encompasses quite a few behaviors and has multiple definitions for an individual to refer to. At the most basic level, the conditions for problematic behavior are regarding the term, ‘problem’. An act may be coined as ‘problematic’ if (1) an individual is directly suffering or (2) the behavior does not meet the environment’s culturally-conditioned expectations, causing a negative impact on the individual’s relationship with society (Schmidt et al., 2018). Delmonico and Griffin (1997) introduce a four-quadrant working model for classifying PSB that can be broken down into (1) sexually addicted sex offender; (2) sexual offender; (3) sexual addict; and, (4) sexually concerned. These labels help categorize different types of PSB but do not necessarily represent cases of autistic individuals.

While certain sexual behaviors are inappropriate, they are not always intended to be problematic. In the second edition of *Problematic Sexual Behavior in Schools: How to Spot It and What to Do about It*, Kenney (2020) compares when autistic adolescents are in the midst of a problematic sexual act to relieving an itch by scratching it. There is a more suitable model for adolescents in a school setting that also has four categories (Ey & McInnes, 2017). The first criteria for a student to qualify as a perpetrator of PSB is being sexual with another student. The second criteria adds on where the scenario is either the victim was forced or coerced or is too

young to realize the situation. The third criteria is an age gap of two or more years, and the last one is that the perpetrator has a pattern of this behavior in their history. For autistic adolescents, problematic behaviors are for the most part caused by erroneous interpretations of what is appropriate in public and not because of malice (Schmidt et al., 2018).

### **Influential Factors**

The better that researchers, educators, and other important figures can understand the influential factors that trigger PSB in youths, the better they can develop methods to deter and treat this population. If youths have early exposure to adult material and behavior, experience abuse and/or exploitation, or grow up in a sexualized environment with poor boundaries, they are likely to evidence PSB later on as a result of being left confused, anxious, and/or sexually aroused from their experiences (Kenney, 2020). Youths need to be supported and have these incidents explained in hopes of resolving this behavior from its root cause. Other factors, especially for autistic adolescents, include a lack of understanding of social normative behavior. By violating these unwritten rules, autistic adolescents risk exclusion from a community setting while simultaneously losing the opportunity to practice appropriate peer interactions in an informal educational manner (Sullivan, Caterino, 2008). Another component that influences PSB is victim empathy or lack thereof (Kenney, 2020). This aspect is related to the socio-emotional development of an individual in the socio-cultural environment. There are some cases when autistic individuals are more intrusive and persistent with minor regard about distressing the other party – the blurred line between normal courtship behavior and problematic behavior dissipates (Stokes, Newton, Kaur, 2007). The last factor to be discussed in this paper is that autistic individuals simply have an interest in sexuality inspired by their needs (Ousley, Mesibov, 1991). Adolescence is a time for behavioral experimentation and risk-taking (Kar, Choudhury,

Singh, 2015). Middle school and high school become an exploratory period of curiosity about personal boundaries, experiencing impulsiveness, and gaining feelings of entitlement and a desire for control (Kenney, 2020). Although these factors cannot all be controlled, they are important to be aware of during an adolescent's developmental trajectory when PSB is a possible outcome.

### **Platforms of Sexual Education Distribution**

Aside from the standard classroom lecture, there are growing alternative methods for distributing sexual education as technology develops and the field expands. Adolescents gather information on sexual topics through parents, other adult figures such as school staff or medical professionals, peers, and most commonly nowadays, online (Pavelová et al., 2021). According to Koller (2000), parents are the best sex educators. While parental figures are often the closest people to developing adolescents, proximity and trust-wise, there is an abundant coverage of sexual education that needs to be accomplished for a thorough grasp of topics ranging from consent to body function as well as the appropriate behaviors and terms deemed socially normative. Parents should collaborate with teachers and other trusted adult figures in their child's life to increase chances of a comprehensive understanding of sexual topics. Especially for autistic individuals, learning occurs over repetition, reinforcement, and routines (Sullivan, Caterino, 2008). Parents have the advantage with the option of a more personalized and attention-to-detail approach in the comfort of their own home. According to Pavelová (2021), students hold more trust in school nurses to address sexual topics over health educators. Cooperation from the individual in addition to a positive attitude and approach from the sex education distributor can increase the efficacy of the learning. Another medium that adolescents tend to get their information from is through their peers. This method of learning is more

experience-based and unconscious/observed (Schmidt et al., 2018). Since autistic adolescents have poorer unconscious communication skills, they often experience disordered social interaction which is not at all beneficial for their sexual education. Although autistic individuals are interested in sexuality and relationships, they often have less sex-related knowledge and have less access to reliable sources (Chianese, Jackson, Souders, 2020). As society advances, more accessible sources like artificial intelligence emerge (Taverner, 2023). There are concerns surrounding the usage of artificial intelligence including fear of privacy, misinformation, inability to eliminate biases, and more. Despite these worries, online resources including artificial intelligence greatly increase access to information and can be considered as an option. During Taverner's (2023) sexual education webinar, he demonstrates how one can use ChatGPT to explain sexual topics. He requested for certain topics to be explained and additionally applied filters regarding the delivery of the information. For example, for a topic such as consent and boundaries, he requested it to be taught in a way appropriate for a certain age. Another source he suggests is Replika, an artificial intelligence platform that can act as a friend, romantic partner, or even intimate partner. Since autistic adolescents have a likely chance of being ostracized by their peers, reducing opportunities to practice or even acquire social skills, Replika is a suitable resource to work on interpersonal interactions without the severity of real-life consequences. Along with online resources comes censorship as well. Oftentimes, helpful resources are not promoted on mass media and are sometimes even censored which makes it harder than it already is to access information about sexuality (Weiss, 2023).

### **Addressing Problematic Sexual Behavior in a School Setting**

Currently, there is no universal protocol following an in-school incident relating to PSB. However, Kenney (2020) suggests that modeling after a leveled threat assessment system which

is currently used to protect schools against violent threats would be an effective adoption for sexual incidents as well. The model is an effective method to mitigate threat as well as address safety, supervision, and liability. In order to mitigate threat, the three factors that must be addressed are intent, opportunity, and access. Groups of trusted individuals must work together to gather and share time-sensitive and risk-sensitive information. Within a school setting, PSB tends to happen where there is little-to-no adult supervision in locations like the school bus, the bathrooms, the locker rooms, etc. For younger adolescents (around middle school), the primary instigators of PSB are impulsivity and opportunity whereas for older adolescents (around high school), the motivators are feelings of entitlement and an urge to exert control over others. Sexual incidents may often be misconstrued as situations of bullying or even consensual behavior. In most cases, there is a lack of disciplinary action when there is inadequate concrete evidence which is why it is important to focus on preventions and follow-up to avoid unresolved incidents.

## **Prevention**

Before reviewing the various prevention methods and their efficacy or inefficacy, Schmidt et. al (2018) shed light on the important question of whether interventions should be targeting an individual who may be creating a disruption by exhibiting PSB or whether they should be targeting the entire socio-cultural environment for positive change and a shift in mindset. It is rather common to see society single out the individual, or in this case the population, without taking the influential ecological factors into consideration. Factors that have preventable measures such as child sexual abuse and inadequate sexual education should be attended to in hopes of reducing PSB later on in life. Oftentimes, autistic individuals have trouble comprehending societal norms for acceptable social, romantic, and sexual behaviors.

This fact means this population is susceptible to becoming perpetrators of PSB but also becoming victims.

Trusted adults such as teachers and parents are usually the most effective supervisors and educators. They should be aware of which type of supervision these adolescents need (Kenney, 2020). Some individuals may only need 'line-of-sight' supervision which means they must remain visible to the adults whereas others need 'arm's-reach' supervision where an adult must be close enough to intervene before the individual can touch another person. It is also these trusted adults' responsibility to be wary of signs of abuse in these adolescents (King, 2023). Most times, abusers are individuals already intertwined in the adolescent's life. Physical signs of abuse include rashes, bruises, urinary and stomach problems, etc. Emotional signs manifest as behavioral changes, depression, hyperactivity, and etc. These indicators are important to catch early on in order to prevent and reduce cases of abuse and exploitation.

It is imperative that schools implement comprehensive sexual education curricula that cater to neurotypical students as well as have an equally informative alternative for autistic students. Mitelman (2020) presents a few tips on how to effectively distribute sexual education for autistic youth in her sexual education lecture. It is helpful to use anatomically correct terms, appropriate images, and give adequate processing time. Another aspect of sexuality that can sometimes be neglected in sexual education are the colloquial terms. Autistic individuals mostly interpret concepts literally, so a guide to modern slang is useful in preparing them to interact with others. The goal of sexual education for autistic adolescents is to avoid sexual exploitation, promote healthy sex habits and appropriate behaviors, and improve self-esteem and advocacy skills (Koller, 2000). In addition to training autistic adolescents, it is equally important to train parents and teachers. There are home-based programs such as the Son-Rise Program which

promotes communication and social behavior in children (Thompson, Jenkins, 2016). The result of the caregiver-training is a more initiative child because of the parents' positive reinforcement. A more serious intervention, that is less favorable and less used according to school administrators, is bringing in law enforcement (Kenney, 2020). The hesitation behind this decision is usually not wanting to have the perpetrator labeled as a sex offender. However, by bringing in law enforcement, previous complaints can be revealed and treatment and assessment can be provided. While there are many preventions mentioned, there are still many to be reviewed in order to determine the efficacy of each one in comparison.

## **Methods**

This review of literature was conducted by doing an initial search through peer-reviewed articles using the Google Scholar database. A thorough search was made using the following keywords: "Autism", "Autistic", "Adolescents", "Sexuality", "Sex Education", "Problematic sexual behavior" AND/OR "sexual awareness". After narrowing the focus of the paper, the term, "Risky Sexual Behavior" was removed from search results. In future stages of research, sources were selected from reference pages of reliable journal articles and papers. There were no geographical bounds to these searches nor was there a filter to exclude sources with certain dates; however, articles within the past 50 years were preferred.

## **Conclusion**

After overviewing the numerous resources relating to autism, sexuality, and sexual education, there is still a vast amount of knowledge missing. Many suggestions and lessons have been proposed in theory, yet it is difficult to find an accessible and comprehensive resource that can explain sexuality to the ASD population. For a great duration in history, the sexual and romantic needs of autistic individuals have been ignored and misunderstood. As research

progresses today, it is important to include holistic records of sexuality regarding autistic individuals as well as making sure researchers expand on what information already exists.

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