

Sexuality & Autism

Written by: Lucinda Waddell and Jason Rowe

Sexuality

Ready or not, here it is...

Sexuality is part of being a human being and having autism doesn't change that.

Sex and sexuality are not things most of us like to talk about openly, especially in regards to children. Words like penis, vagina, and masturbation make the most liberal of us cringe.

But like it or not, if you have a child, sexuality and sexual issues are things you're going to deal with eventually, either directly (and positively), or indirectly (and most likely negatively) from the imprints made on your child by other people or sources. If your child has autism, this blissful topic gets even more interesting, or uncomfortable, depending on your perspective.

What you must remember is that sexual behavior in child development is normal and it can be tracked through the developmental stages of your child. You can either ignore it, pretend the issue doesn't exist, or you can do what the boy scouts always tell us: "Be Prepared!"

You don't have to be completely *comfortable* with all that we're talking about here but you do have to be completely *committed* to learning all that is necessary in order to ensure that your child develops properly, learns to be socially responsible and remains safe.

Prepare Yourself

Waiting until there is a problem is not the time to be asking for help. A learned behavior takes time to learn, and likewise, it takes time to unlearn. Depending on the severity of a situation arising from your child's sexuality or sexual issues, an unlearning of the behavior may not come soon enough for you, or your child.

Sexuality and learning both begin at birth from the moment you first change your baby's diaper, bathe it, etc. We teach our children whether we mean to or not, so it is recommended that you prepare yourself to begin meaningful and effective teaching starting now if you haven't done so already.

It can't be stressed enough that your effectiveness as a teacher to your child will depend largely on your on comfort with discussing these matters. It is also important to keep in mind that by talking about sex, our bodies and personal boundaries, you are neither encouraging nor condoning sex for your child. Likewise, you are not talking about sex when discussing sexuality.

To prepare yourself as teacher and role model for your child the following checklist is recommended as a guideline:

- Determine where your comfort level is with discussing sexuality and sex with your child. Educate yourself on all that sexuality entails and discuss your thoughts with your spouse

or another adult. It may also help you to consult with a specialist like Lucinda Waddell, prior to actual intervention with your child.

- Determine where your child is at in their development. (See list below)
- Obtain social and emotional age appropriate materials to use while teaching your child.
- Find peer age individuals to work with you in modeling proper interaction and behavior.
- If your child has matured physically but is delayed socially and emotionally, it is also vital that you communicate openly and consistently with your child's teachers, care providers and even local authorities on where your child is at in development and what you are teaching them in order to prevent social and/or legal issues arising from unintentionally inappropriate public behavior.

To determine your Autistic or Asperger's child's development in order to teach them at a level they will understand, it is recommended that you know the answers to the following questions before you see a specialist and/or begin teaching your child:

- What are your child's language and communication skills?
- What are your child's abstract reasoning skills?
- Is your child hyper or hypo sensitive to: Visual, Auditory, Tactile, Smell, or Taste?
- Does your child have any other physical challenges that could affect learning?
- **Where is your child's social and emotional (S/E) age in comparison with their chronological age and intellect?**

Social and Emotional Age (S/E)

Knowing your child's S/E age will tell you why your child behaves as they do, what to expect from your child socially and emotionally, and what your child is capable of comprehending in regards to what you teach them.

Because society judges predominantly by outward appearance, it is especially important to know your child's S/E age so that you can educate others, not to mention save yourself unnecessary confusion and possibly embarrassment as a parent. Even if your child is in his or her teens, is physically maturing and displays good intellect (Like good reading, for instance) if they are a toddler socially and emotionally, that is how they are actually seeing the world around them, and that is how they are going to act socially and emotionally.

Teach early, teach often

Once you're prepared and you have a good handle on what S/E age your child is at and what your child is capable of learning, it's time to TEACH, TEACH, TEACH!

The basic fundamentals of teaching you should focus on are:

1. My body – What are the parts called and what are they used for?
2. Hygiene – How should you properly cleanse yourself and why is that important?
3. Sexual awareness – What is sex, what is acceptable behavior and when is it acceptable?
4. Boundaries – What boundaries should we have for our bodies, as well as when interacting with others?
5. Who, When, Where and How of sex, sexuality and personal boundaries.

Whatever S/E age your child happens to be, you need to start teaching them **now** about their body! If your child is S/E young, regardless of IQ, keep the information age appropriate to their S/E age.

Just because they can read it doesn't mean that they'll get it!

Watching the Video

Keep in mind that no single video could cover every possible challenge, precaution or fact about sexuality and raising a maturing child with autism, however, there is quite a bit of information contained in the video to get you started on the right track.

It is recommended that you view the video(s) more than once to absorb everything that the video presents. It is also recommended that you pause and take notes on what you are learning as needed.

We wish you the very best as you prepare for this period of growth for your child and we hope that you find the video helpful in your efforts.

Recommended Reading by Lucinda Waddell

The Ultimate Sex Book – Anne Harper

A Child is Born – Lennart Nilsson

Girls are Girls and Boys are Boys; So What's the Difference? – Sol Gordon

Sex on TV: A Guide for Parents – David Green

Talking with Your Child About Sex – Mary and James W. Ramey

High Functioning Autism and Sexuality: A Parental Perspective – Stokes and Kaur

Autism/Asperger's and Sexuality: Puberty and Beyond – Jerry & Mary Newport

Sexuality and Autism – TEACCH PROJECT (Danish Report) –
www.autismuk.com/index9sub.htm

Sexuality and Autism – TEACCH PROJECT (Danish Report): Sex education for matching programs to levels of functionality
www.autismuk.com/index9sub1.htm

Sexuality and Your Child: For Children 3-7 years – Lynn Blinn Pike / Department of Human Development and Family Studies