

AUTISM & PUBERTY



READY OR NOT, HERE IT COMES

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REMEMBER:

Like it or not you will have to deal with puberty and sexual issues eventually. This may be directly and in a positive way, or indirectly and most likely in a negative way

LET'S TELL THE TRUTH

- ◉ Yes, even someone with severe autism goes through puberty. It is part of being a human being and having autism does not change that or protect them from the see-sawing emotions of adolescence.
- ◉ No, what was cute as a child is not necessarily cute as a teenager.
- ◉ Yes, puberty can be extremely embarrassing for those around them, but more frustrating for the person. The subject of puberty and sex is not one most of us like to openly talk about.
- ◉ Remember not all “deviant” behaviour is actually that. Often it is lack of skill and understanding.

LET'S TELL THE TRUTH

- ◉ Much of what happens is an extension of the support and teaching that the child has been receiving during their life, including appropriate clothing and hygiene.
- ◉ Ascertain what is being taught at school and also your own embarrassment and knowledge level.
- ◉ How would you manage your sexuality if you had no sex education, could not ask/talk to anyone and did not have access to books or other written or visual material?

THE CHANGES - THE EXTRA BITS

DEVELOPMENTS IN PUBERTY

⦿ Physical

- Research has shown that 33% of teenagers with autism experience epileptic seizures during puberty when there had been no incidents before.
- Unfortunately there are no clear boundaries and rules in relation to these changes

⦿ Sexual Behaviours

- More difficult to determine the “norm”
- Masturbation - Interest in pornographic material
- Flirtatious behaviour - mutual and consenting sexual behaviour

DEVELOPMENTS IN PUBERTY

◎ Cognitive

- ▶ The move from concrete thinking to more abstract thinking which individuals with autism are more likely to find difficult.
- ▶ Rutter (1970) found that 10% of people with autism in a study group showed “a marked deterioration” in their mental state during adolescence

◎ Social


- Heightened awareness of self
- Issues surrounding sexuality, including transgender.
- Teenagers with special needs may pick up other people’s identities (eg. Television characters) or have low self esteem
- The ability to understand and identify with the experiences and feelings of others.
- Movement from the family into peer groups and the experimenting with forming pairs.


MENSTRUATION

- ▶ As with any teenage girl, this subject can be embarrassing to talk about. It is important to highlight that it happens to all girls and to prepare your daughter in advance by explaining what will happen.
- ▶ Ensure that you have all appropriate information and materials, including sanitary towels, etc.
- ▶ Decide how and when it is best to discuss the subject
- ▶ Consider whether your daughter needs some form of visual reinforcement. Even for menstruation, Social Stories can be developed.

MENSTRUATION


My Story About Menstruation

Once, I was a baby. 

 Then, I was a little girl.

Now, I am a big girl and later, I will be a **woman**.



Women have a menstrual cycle that comes once a month. Blood comes from your **vagina**. 
This is so a grown up woman will be able to have a baby, if she wants. .

The blood flow lasts about **5 days**.

You need to wear a **sanitary pad** inside your panties so that blood does not get on your clothing.



Mayer-Johnson Boardmaker pics

ERECTIONS & WET DREAMS

- ▶ Erections are a perfectly normal function of the male body, especially in males who are going through puberty.
- ▶ Although many erections are caused by sexual arousal, many seem to happen for no particular reason. So if they have an erection in an odd or embarrassing situation, there's no reason to worry that something is wrong with them. Their body is just acting naturally for their age.
- ▶ Your son might find that he has a “sexy” dream at night and wakes up to discover that some sperm has leaked out. This is referred to as **wet dreams in puberty** and is quite normal and natural.
- ▶ There is no reason for them to ever feel guilty about having a wet dream, they are subconscious and cannot be easily controlled or manipulated.

THE SOCIAL SIDE OF LIFE

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

- ◉ All young people need to learn social skills and that they are becoming a young adult. The earlier and more frequently social skills are taught and practiced the better.
- ◉ The best place to learn social skills is by being part of your family and being involved in its social life.
- ◉ They need us to provide as many of the messages and experiences necessary to develop this identity and sense of personal competence.
- ◉ The adolescent with autism may have different values and attributes than their peers, e.g. more concerned about exam grades than romance (perceived as a “nerd”).
- ◉ Be aware of how we can support or even impede the teenager’s social development.

DEVELOPING SOCIAL INDEPENDENCE

Think how you can “encourage” your teenager to experience as much social independence as they are capable of. You could encourage them to:

- ⦿ Participate in social activities with friends.
- ⦿ Make their own lunch or drinks
- ⦿ Keep their room tidy
- ⦿ Be totally independent with personal hygiene
- ⦿ Experience privacy in their bedroom and bathroom, as well as respect privacy of others
- ⦿ Earn pocket money
- ⦿ Walk independently (not holding hands)
- ⦿the list is endless

IMPAIRMENT OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

Lack of inherent understanding of:

- ◉ Social Cues
- ◉ Conversational skills
- ◉ Assessing social situations
- ◉ Recognising emotions
- ◉ Reacting to others emotions
- ◉ Reacting appropriately to social situations

And Leads to a poor understanding of:

- ◉ How relationships are formed
- ◉ How to assess suitability of peers
- ◉ What friends are for
- ◉ How to maintain friendships

RISK & VULNERABILITY

A lack of appropriate social development can lead to the teenager being vulnerable because of:

- ▶ Not understanding intent
- ▶ Poor/lack of awareness of appropriate boundaries
- ▶ Lack of experience/ability to learn from experience
- ▶ Lack of guidance
- ▶ Poor recognition of social and emotional cues

Others are vulnerable because of:

- ▶ Lack of understanding of feelings and needs of others
- ▶ Poor understanding of consequences of actions

THE ETIQUETTE OF THE URINAL - AVOIDING THE RISK

There is an unstated code of behaviour in men's public toilets which is instinctively universal.

- ▶ **No pairing**

Unlike women, men visit the toilet entirely for practical reasons, and it is always suspect to follow a friend to the toilet immediately.

- ▶ **No talking**

Terse conversation in the toilet can take place before and after, but not during, use of the urinals.

- ▶ **No looking**

Eyes should be aimed straight ahead or down in concentration; glances towards your neighbour are very suggestive.

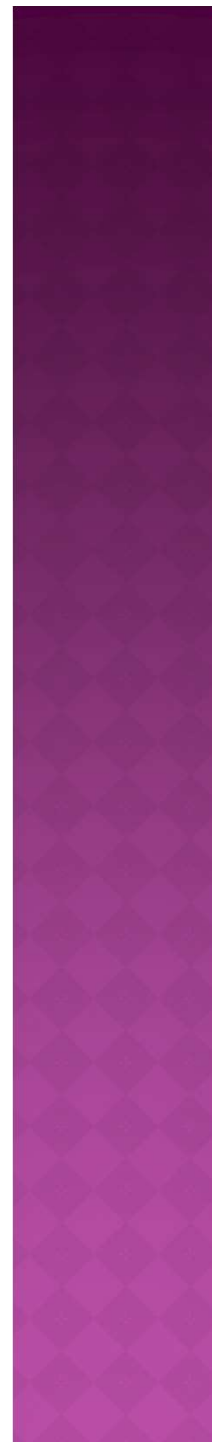
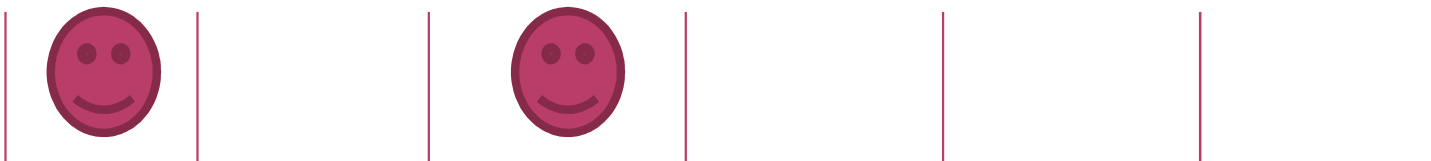
- ▶ **No touching**

Hands should be in front of you. An elbow bump can be deflated by a sober apology, but without turning the head.

- ◎ **Trousers Up**

Trousers and underwear always remain up when standing at the urinals

URINAL BINGO



RISK & VULNERABILITY

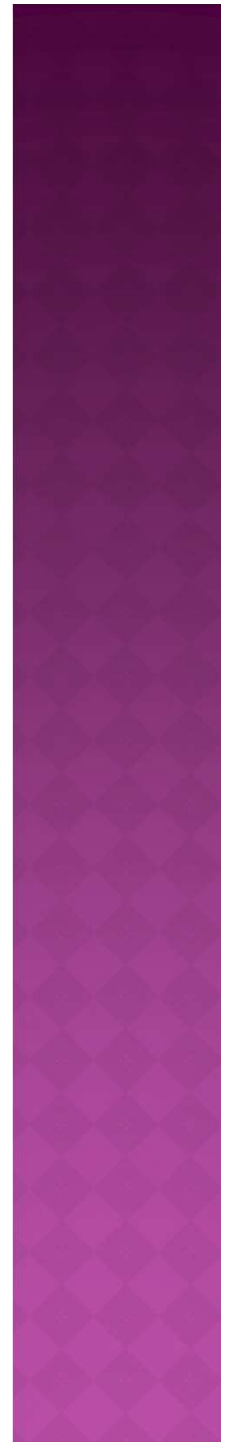
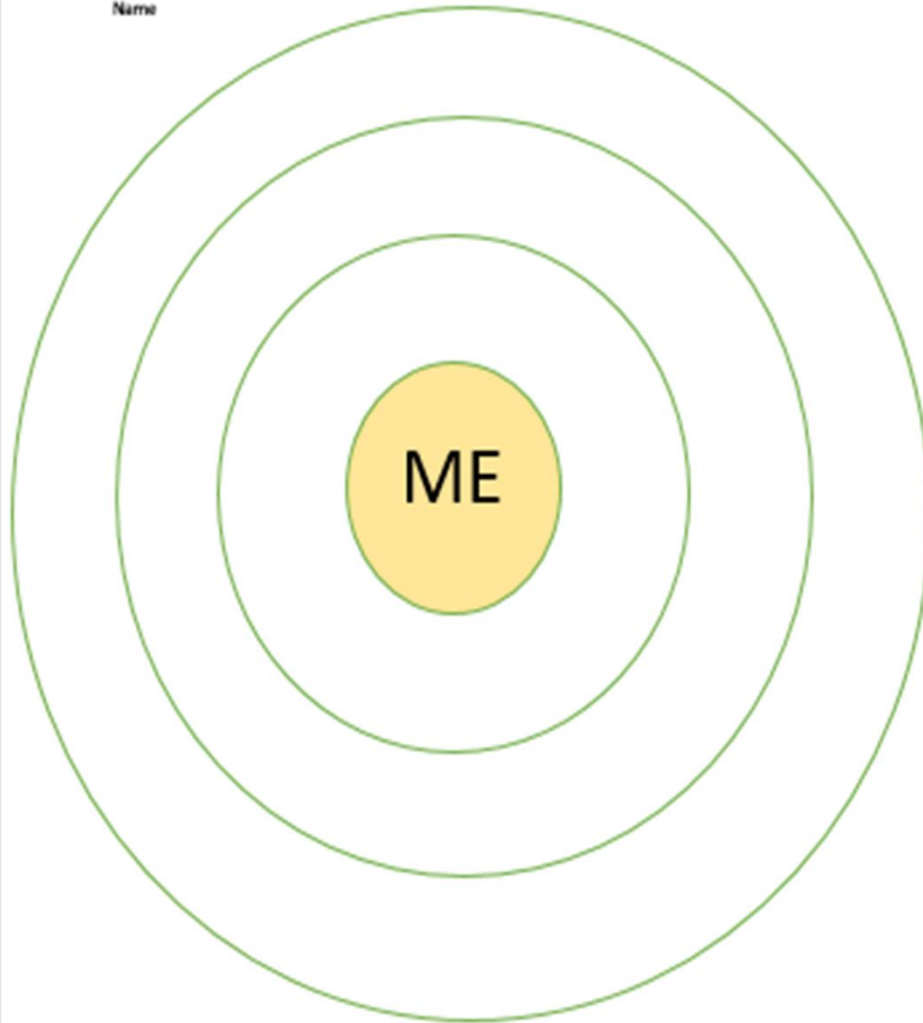
To reduce the teenager's vulnerability it is important for them to learn about:

- Types of relationships
- Building relationships
- Greetings and instigating social interaction
- Difference between strangers and friends
- Saying “No” and being assertive
- Difference between public and private

Circle of Relationships

In the circles below write in the relationships you have. The important ones should be nearer to you

Name



RELATIONSHIPS AND SPECIAL NEEDS

- ◉ Due to difficulties in social skills, some people with autism may naively engage in inappropriate or intrusive courtship behaviours, including stalking, in their attempts to initiate a relationship.
- ◉ Friendship skills need to be developed before more intimate relationships.
- ◉ Teaching about sexual relationships should help the teenager make sense of the world around them.
- ◉ It does not encourage sexual relationships.
- ◉ The issue of sexual relationships should be taught within a value framework that encourages safe, healthy and happy sexual relationships

RELATIONSHIPS AND SPECIAL NEEDS

Strategies:

- ▶ Establish rules for relationships and friendships. Remember “Crushes” can easily develop in intensity.

- ▶ Provide accurate information on all aspects of relationships including:
 - ⦿ An appropriate time scale and age in relation to sexual relationships
 - ⦿ The concept of consent and permission in relation to all sexual touch, including kissing.
 - ⦿ The need to recognise feelings with a partner
 - ⦿ How relationships may shift and change.

- ▶ Provide encouragement and opportunities to make acquaintances and friends, where appropriate.



DEALING WITH THE ANXIETIES AND ANGER OF PUBERTY

ANXIETY & ANGER

Manifest itself in areas such as:

- ⦿ Behaviour changes
- ⦿ Increased or new obsessional behaviours
- ⦿ Regression in skills including self help skills
- ⦿ Attitude and approach toward others

WHAT CAUSES ANXIETY/ANGER

- ⦿ Increased social expectations about what a teenager should be able to do
- ⦿ Hormonal changes
- ⦿ Worries about what is happening to them; both physically and socially
- ⦿ Lack of skills and understanding in relation to what a teenager can and cannot do
- ⦿ Being placed in unknown situations

HOW TO DEAL WITH THE SITUATION

- ◉ Talking with someone, whether it is a parent, friend or professional.
- ◉ Explore the teenager's anxiety and anger, including helping them to recognise how their emotions and anger work on a physical level. This can utilise visual methods to overcome the abstract aspect of emotions.
- ◉ Where possible, work with the teenager to recognise the issues and develop practical solutions from within to provide them with ownership of the situation.

HOW TO DEAL WITH THE SITUATION

- ◉ Develop everyone's knowledge and awareness about the issues involved. Ensure everyone is consistent in their approach toward the situation.
- ◉ Put structure, boundaries and rules into the situation. If appropriate, use reward systems.
- ◉ If necessary, develop approaches with all involved that can be used when the anger spills over. These could include visual indications about how to calm down or safely relocate.
- ◉ Consider appropriate relaxation techniques or alternative therapies.

INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR

REMEMBER:

People with autism **CAN, WILL AND HAVE** been arrested for what was seen as inappropriate sexualised behaviour

AND

once this happens they can be labelled as dangerous even though it may have been an innocent mistake.

INAPPROPRIATE TOUCHING OF OTHERS

Remember It is much easier to modify behaviours in a child than it is to change those same behaviours in an adult.

- ◉ Explain to your child that touching other people without permission is completely unacceptable behaviour, utilising prompts and approaches (Social Stories, PECS)
- ◉ Give your child time to talk about their feelings on a daily or weekly basis. Talking about urges and developing healthy ways to satisfy or dispel them can help them avoid a problematic situation.
- ◉ Remove the child from the room or area if an infraction should occur. After explaining why the touching was wrong, have the person apologize. They should then sit down with a trusted adult and talk about alternative ways to handle their urges.
- ◉ Talk to the child about good and bad touching to help them discern the difference between what is appropriate and not in a public and private situation.

MASTURBATION - HOW CAN WE HELP?

- Has to be a “hands off” approach, literally.
- Cannot provide a role model.
- If masturbation becomes the person’s principle activity, then it is important to investigate the underlying motivations or possible causal factors. This is the same for an inability to climax.
- The frequency of masturbation usually decreases naturally after adolescence.
- However it is possible to provide structure and boundaries to the situation. Thus reducing embarrassment for those involved, and reduce the risks of abuse.

MASTURBATION - HOW CAN WE HELP?

- Decided upon appropriate location for the adolescent with autism to masturbate.
- Provide relevant items e.g. tissues, etc. in the area. Remember age appropriate.
- It is important to remember the possibility of any objects (e.g. cuddly toys, etc) being associated with the act of masturbation in the same way as feelings and emotions are.
- Agree what would be classed as a reason for them to go to the location and how frequently.
- Provide a means of indicating when they should relocate.

FINAL WORDS

- ◉ It is going to happen and your child has the right to express themselves, so ignoring it will cause problems.
- ◉ Remember your child will need to be taught many of the social rules.
- ◉ Never make assumptions about their knowledge as it could be disastrous.
- ◉ Much of what is needed is an extension of what they know as a young child.
- ◉ By informing your child, they are less vulnerable.