

Sexuality Issues on the Autism Spectrum

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Life & Love: Positive Strategies for Autistic Adults

➔ Do Autistic People Have Relationships?

social challenge does not mean
no socializing

Where did you meet him?
MySpace?

No, Outer Space.



So What's the Problem?

- We are missing social information
- We struggle to understand and use nonverbal language
- We don't generalize well
- We have trouble with open-ended problems
- We struggle to identify and express our feelings
- We may have face blindness

Does Research Coincide with Experience?

- inappropriate dating behaviors – yes
- inappropriate attention – yes
- hyperfocus (stalking, obsessions) – yes
- interest in socializing with peers – yes
- normal endocrine functioning – yes



Teaching Triad

- Knowledge: facts, information (typical sex ed)
- Practice: skills acquisition, generalization, and usage (social skills group, peer navigator systems)
- Adaptations: strategies for neurological gaps



The Problem with Sex Ed

- Doesn't account for unique learning profile of autistic adults
- May presume lack of sexuality interest
- May presume knowledge of hidden curriculum

The Problem with Skills Training

- Some gains but methodological problems
- Gains depend on which skill is being targeted
- Programs are generally ineffective in improving social decision-making skills over the long term

The Facts

- Autistics can learn skills
- Autistics do not “outgrow” social difficulties
- Social challenges persist across the spectrum
- Linguistic ability does not correspond to social fluidity
- Social challenges are rooted in the brain



Strategies for When Sex Ed & Skills Training Just Aren't Enough

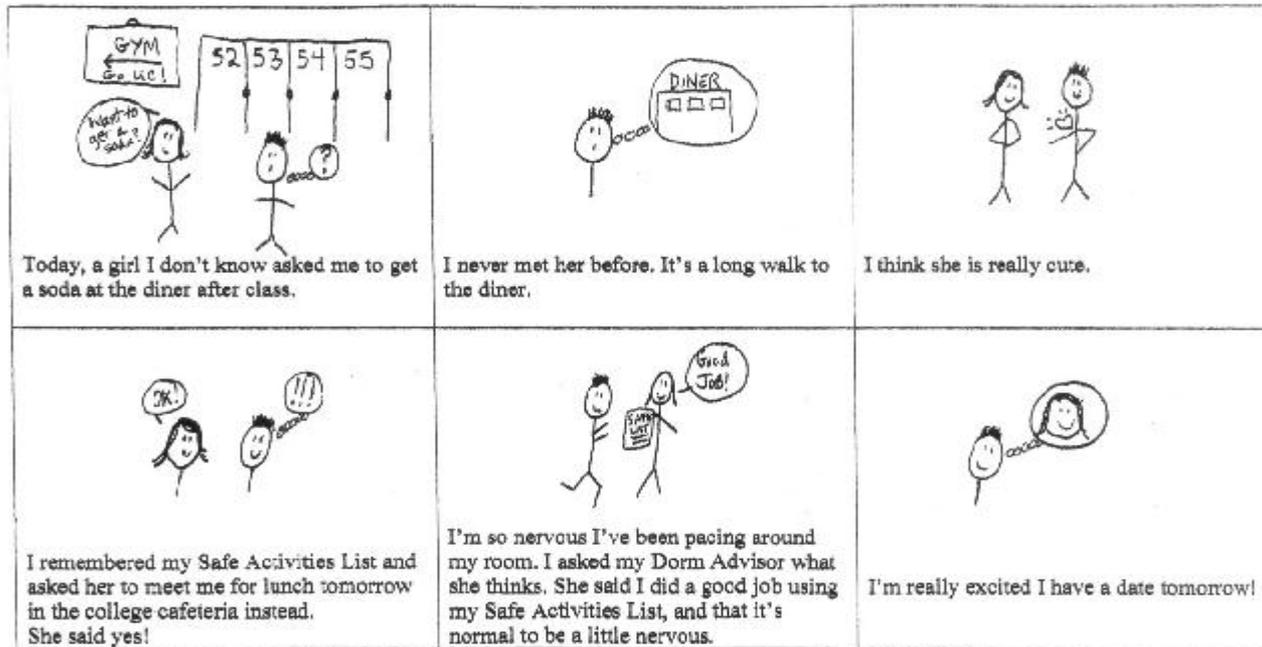
- Safe Activities List
- Bad Maybe Search
- Social Stories™
- Strategies for Facility with Emotions
- Hidden Curriculum
- How to Lie and How to Pretend
- Help Systems
- Emergency Cards

Safe Activities List

- Can be taught in an ABA program or social skills class
- Enables ASD individual to steer social requests and invitations to known safe activities
- Does not require ASD individual to decode social partner's nonverbal messages, subtle emotions, or hidden curriculum
- Can be adapted to individual's needs & interests

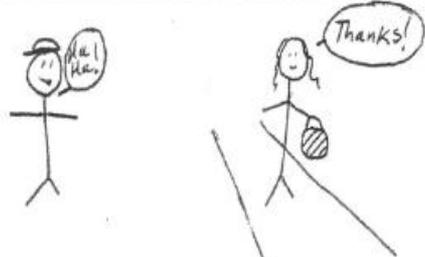
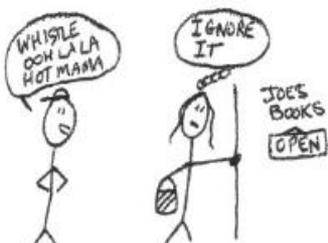
Safety Strategies: Safe Activities List In Action

Chapter 10: Using Comic Strips to Understand Safe Social Behavior
Example 2: Safe Activities List In Action



Social Stories™

Chapter 10: Using Comic Strips to Understand Safe Social Behavior Example 1: Cat Calls on the Street

 <p>Walking home from work, a guy whistled at me and said, "Sexy Mamma!" I said, "Thank you!" He laughed at me.</p>	 <p>When I got home, I asked my brother why. He said sometimes guys on the street whistle, hoot, or make comments about women. This is called "making cat calls".</p>	 <p>My brother demonstrated different kinds of whistles and noises guys on the street like to make.</p>
 <p>My brother explained that guys who make cat calls do not care about me the way my friends and family do.</p>	<p>≡BAD IDEA≡</p>  <p>Responding to cat calls is not a good way to have a conversation, make friends, or meet a boyfriend.</p>	 <p>The proper response is to walk away. I can go into a store to get away, too. Next time, I will ignore cat calls.</p>

Why Facility with Emotions?

- Feelings are social clues
- Socializing requires rapid identification of emotions and adaptation of one's behavior based on type and amount of emotions
- Autistic adults have differences in the limbic system of the brain that may make self-regulation difficult



Example: Romantic Interest



Red Level –
Extremely interested!

Talk to someone I trust immediately; don't make decisions until I check in



Orange Level –
Very interested!

Talk to someone I trust ASAP; keep using Safety Strategies



Yellow Level –
Somewhat interested

Date casually; use Safety Strategies



Green Level –
Friends

Use Safe Activities List and Buddy System

Example: Anxiety Scale

4



Red Level – Emergency!

3



Orange Level – Increasing

2



Yellow Level – Mild

1



Green Level – Neutral

Hidden Curriculum: What Is Age Appropriate?

- The Scribe Example
- The Soda Example
- The Dyed Hair Example
- The Oreo Cookie Example
- The Hide and Seek Example

Teaching Hidden Curriculum: Ideas

- Break down abstract concepts
- Avoid euphemisms but teach them, too
- Deconstruct media
- Live “out loud”
- Provide observation opportunities
- Also, always point out that learning about sex does not mean you have to have sex or be sexual

Teaching How to Lie & Pretend



- These are important skills for saving yourself, avoiding trouble, or sparing someone's feelings
- Teaching these skills is not equivalent to condoning unethical behavior.
- We won't get it right on our own!

Help Systems

- Asking for help and getting help are social skills
- Neurotypicals do not get through life alone
- Asking for and accepting help is a sign of strength



Asking for Help – Ten Step Break Down

1. Identify that you have a problem
2. Approach somebody and ask for help
3. Tell what happened – describe the situation or problem
4. Ask questions
5. Listen for advice and reactions
6. Clarify anything confusing
7. Draw conclusions
8. Make a plan of action
9. Follow up with your helper
10. Review outcomes to adjust plans or learn for the future

Why Emergency Cards?

- Explain your behavior when speech is absent or difficult
- Request accommodations politely
- Cooperate with the NT majority

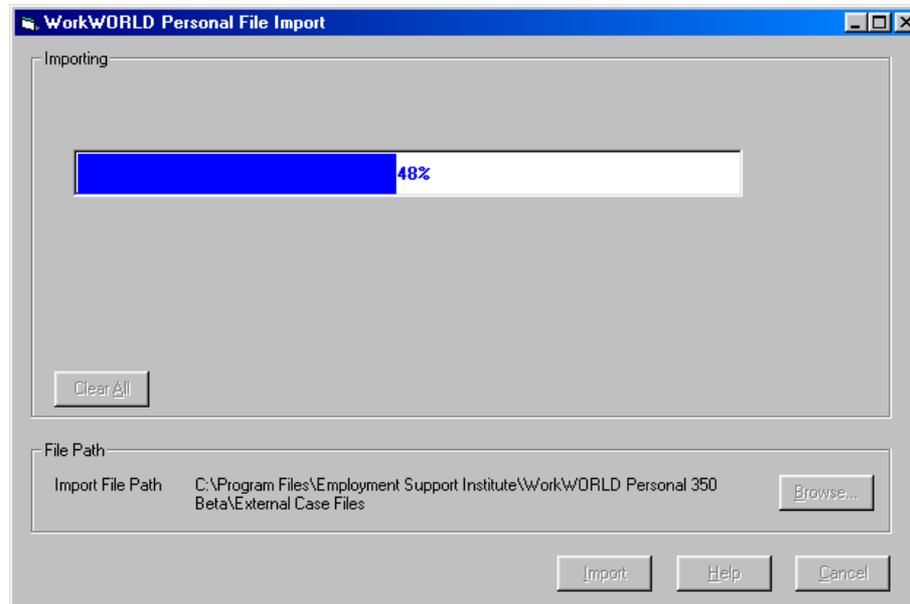
Example #1

Processing



Example #2

Not able to respond verbally at this moment.
Please wait for response.



Example #3

My Turn!



Example #4: NOT





Additional Components of Autism-Relevant Sexuality Education

- Alternatives to dating: coping with loneliness
- Fostering self-esteem and self-confidence
- Balancing your life
- Training NTs
- Autistic strengths

Healthy Alternatives

- Clubs
- Volunteer work
- Hobbies
- Religious groups
- Sports
- Exercise
- Classes
- Interest groups
- Arts & crafts
- Personal projects



Self-Esteem & Self-Confidence

Do you have to meet somebody at a bar?

Do you have to go to a restaurant for dinner?

Do you have to go to the movies?



Being Yourself: Autonomy and Volition

- The sweatpants debate



- The Halloween costume debate



- How Little House on the Prairie became a college major



Balancing Your Life

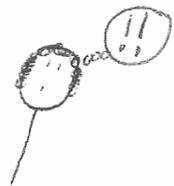
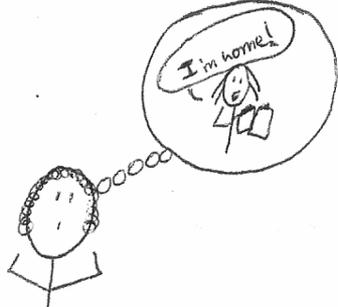
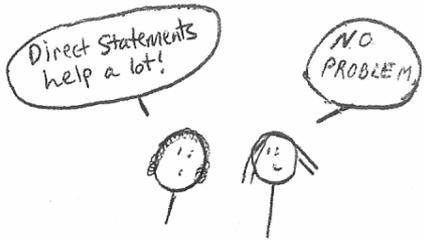
- Your family and friends
- Your own activities
- Your career



Training NTs: Direct Statements

Chapter 9: Using Comic Strips to Decode the Social World

Example: Helping Out at Home

 <p>My wife came home with the groceries. I was busy on my computer.</p>	 <p>I didn't realize she was struggling with the packages because she didn't say so. Her feelings were hurt that I didn't rush over to help, but how was I supposed to know?</p>	 <p>Then she used a Direct Statement. She said, "Honey, the bags are heavy. Please help me carry them to the kitchen."</p>
 <p>I was glad to help.</p>	 <p>When my wife comes home from the store, she needs help with the bags.</p>	 <p>We talked about it briefly. My wife will keep using direct statements. I will try to remember to help automatically next time.</p>

Training NTs: Attitude Adjustment

- Difference is OK
- People show love in multiple ways
- Direct communication is good!
- Not everyone is speedy, subtle, chatty, or effusive, and this is good too
- Autistic people live in families, have friends, fall in love, and sometimes become parents

Autistic Strengths in Relationships

- Emergencies
- Logic
- Step-by-step resolution
- Healthy relationship ideals
- Novel ideas and interests
- Loyalty
- Individual development
- Rarely distracted by social concerns
- Routines and systems
- Quiet and calm
- Zen communication



What We Can Give Each Other

NTs

- friendship
- encouragement
- advice
- support & advocacy
- model behavior
- social navigation
- emotional fluidity
- self-awareness
- spontaneity

Autistics

- direct communication
- honesty
- objective analysis
- practical focus
- data
- routines and structure
- steadiness
- loyalty
- realistic relationship ideals



Abuse Issues

- Face blindness
- Communication cards
- Strategies for passivity
- Visual thinking may require a visual explanation



Values Education

- Don't assume we know what you want us to know
- Don't assume we will do what you do
- Don't assume you don't have to tell us about things that make you uncomfortable

Values Continued

- Teach values concretely with logical reasons
- Respect adults who develop their own values that may be different than yours
- Provide knowledge that adults need even if you don't like discussing it



Sexual Identity & Gender Identity Issues

- Prevalence rates are higher on the spectrum
- Current thinking:
 - American Psychiatric Association
 - American Academy of Pediatrics
- Accepting yourself
- Getting help and support



Conclusion

- Autistic children grow up to be autistic adults
- We have a lot in common with you
- Often we are alone because we don't know *how* to be social or because we have experienced too many social failures
- We need compassion, respect, and assistance

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for Autistic Adults**

References

- Please email for a PDF of references