# Supporting pupils with autism through sex and relationships education

Before we can help a child with autism come to terms with the bewildering world of sex and relationships, we need to find the right starting point, says **Lynn McCann**

**Autism is a spectrum condition and every child is different. That said, there are some key characteristics that many of them share.**

- **Communication differences:** taking people literally, not understanding different points of view (especially if these don't seem logical), preferring in-depth conversation to small talk, failure to read non-verbal communication.
- **Social interaction differences:** not picking up on other people's motives or intentions, preferring friendships and relationships based on special interests, being misunderstood by others or excluded from social groups, not recognising when someone is teasing or making fun of them.
- **Sensory difficulties:** over-sensitivities or under-sensitivities to touch, smell, noise, personal space and internal states; over- or under-awareness of personal hygiene.
- **Flexible thinking difficulties:** lack of awareness of the potential consequences of their actions, finding it hard to imagine growing up, social naivety and misunderstanding social signals.

When you put all of this together, it's easy to see why flirting, social media and other ways of expressing an interest in someone are too complex and confusing for many young people on the spectrum. At the same time, their social naivety, literal mindset and poor discernment of other people's motives make them especially vulnerable to bullying and sexual exploitation.

So what can we do to keep them safe? How can we help them understand and embrace growing up, and learn to engage in positive and respectful sexual relationships as they get older?

## *A personalised, structured approach*

The TEACCH Report recommends a developmental approach that takes into account 'the communication level, social skills, cognitive ability, conceptual ability, and all other aspects of a person's functioning.'

It also notes that, like any other concept or skill, teaching sex education is a systematic process. 'For people with autism, this means that it must be learned in a highly structured, individualised way, using concrete strategies whenever possible,' it advises. 'In addition, the emphasis on language must be minimal because of the difficulties that people with autism have with communication.'

Children can learn to read facial expression and body language by applying their 'social detective' skills to a series of photos

Using these principles as my guide, I have designed my own structure to help schools plan and implement a personalised programme for pupils with an autism spectrum condition to run alongside their usual sex and relationships education (SRE) curriculum. Parents are crucial to the process and should be given every opportunity to share in decisions about what to teach and when.

> ***Sex education needs to be delivered in a structured, individualised way***

## *Five stages of development*

There are five developmental stages in a child's understanding of what growing up entails and the awakening of their sexual awareness. It is vital that teachers and parents check that the concepts of the earlier stages are secure so that the foundations are in place for taking on the more complex issues around relationships and sexual behaviours.

### 1. Discrimination

Discrimination is about awareness of self and of others. Children with autism often take longer than their peers to develop self-awareness, and although some are hyperaware of everyone around them, sensory and communication difficulties can impede their ability to perceive and understand other people's perspectives.

Discrimination skills can be taught through structured, visual activities, and by drawing pupils' attention to the things they have been learning when they arise in real life situations (applying and generalising the knowledge).

- **Understanding themselves, their abilities and strengths.** Celebrate the pupil's effort and insights as well their more tangible achievements. Giving specific praise such as 'You worked really hard at that piece of writing' or 'You are good at noticing what is missing in these pictures' is much more effective than 'You've done well today'.
- **Understanding emotions.** Before a child can imagine how others might be feeling, they need to be in touch with their own emotions. Start with the key emotions of happy, calm, sad, angry and worried (or anxious) and explore what each of these means for the individual. A calm state of mind is what we hope to be experiencing most of the time, and understanding what that feels like is important in learning to regulate sensory overload.
- **Learning about the differences between themselves and others,** such as gender, age, appearance and

personal characteristics. Again, use practical and visual activities to help the child understand that although everyone is different, we also have things in common.

- **Distinguishing between 'private' and 'public'.** Children need to know that they have a right to be private and that certain parts of the body are private. They also need to be aware that public means anyone can see, especially on the internet. The Underwear Rule from The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) is a good resource for introducing the crucial concepts of privacy and safety. These can be reinforced through a social story, updated as the child grows older.
- **Internet Safety Rules.** A list of key rules, visually presented, should be on permanent display and frequently referred to. Again, these will need to be regularly updated and parents should take the lead on this. An excellent autism resource is the STAR (Safe, Trust, Action, Respect) Toolkit developed by Childnet.

## Case study

*Jamie in Year 5 became very angry when anyone mentioned birthdays. It had always been an issue and people had learned not to talk about his birthday, but this year it had got much worse, so much so that he would attack any child who mentioned that a birthday was coming up. He had started targeting pupils by looking at the birthday list on the wall. He also spoke in a very high-pitched voice.*

*Jamie had a deep fear of growing up. He had heard about puberty in a lesson and he had teenage brothers. He had been frightened when their voices changed and was a child who already found change very difficult.*

Jamie was given some extra lessons in a small group of boys who were his friends. They started by looking at how we can tell how old someone is and what stage of life they are at (discrimination) and arranged lots of magazine pictures of people into categories of baby, toddler, child, teenager, adult and elderly. As he listened to the other boys talking about what they were looking forward to when they were older, staff supported Jamie to understand that growing up is a natural process and that it happens gradually, not on a specific day (a birthday).

He then made a book charting his own growth from babyhood, noting what was the same as well as what had changed. A social story was written reiterating the messages that had come out this work, with lots of positive and affirmative reinforcement to help him understand and accept that growing up is good and happens to everyone.

### 2. Personal hygiene

Personal hygiene topics are often covered in EYFS and Key Stage 1 through the PSHE curriculum, but children with ASC may need a more individual approach depending on their area of difficulty.

With the onset of puberty, self-care becomes especially important, but lack of self-awareness can make some children oblivious to their hygiene needs. Conversely, those who are over-sensitive may become excessively anxious about keeping clean, to the point of it becoming an obsession.

- **Sensory issues.** Many of the child's personal habits may be driven by sensory processing difficulties. Telling them to stop playing with their private parts in public or not to eat non-food items off the floor does not address this fundamental issue. Working together, parents and teachers need to find ways of helping the child learn to meet their sensory needs in an appropriate way.
- **Visual timetables.** Washing, using the toilet, healthy eating and other aspects of self-care can be explained through visual timetables once any sensory needs have been supported. Showing children what to do is more effective than telling them. It also helps them learn to organise these tasks for themselves by following the steps, one by one, on their timetable.
- **Puberty and growing up.** As puberty approaches, children need to be taught about privacy in the bathroom and getting changed discreetly in public places, like the gym or the swimming pool. Older pupils also need to learn about the menstrual cycle and all the other changes that lie ahead, and how to keep themselves clean when they begin to sweat and secrete more. This should include how to shower or bath, look after their hair, shave (boys and girls) and find the right deodorant if they are sensitive to certain ingredients or perfumes. Social stories and visuals will help – see *Find out more* for useful resources.


Take nothing for granted when identifying parts of the body and use visuals to support learning

### 3. Identifying parts of the body and their functions

Sensory issues and lack of self-awareness can impact on a child's understanding of this, so it is important to take nothing for granted. Using visuals and a full-length mirror can help, and at home they can look at themselves naked in a mirror to become really familiar with their body.

- **External and internal organs and their functions, including sexual organs.** Identify the different names for these, including slang terms commonly used by the peer group, on the internet and at home.
- **How the body changes through puberty and how to manage these changes.** Be careful to check the child's understanding and to use simple, literal language. Rather than saying: 'Your voice will break', you could say: 'Your voice will change to a deeper voice. This is OK. It takes time and sometimes your voice will be high, and sometimes lower. This happens to all boys and at different times. Sometimes people laugh because your voice sounds different. This is OK. Soon your voice will settle down and you can get used to it. A lower voice is a sign that you are changing from a boy to a man. This is good.'

  Girls may need reassurance that the blood they lose during a period does not mean they are going to die. Explain that it is something the body doesn't need any more and that they can plan for it by having pads or tampons in their bag or in a safe place. Tell them how to keep clean and what to do if they are in pain.
- **How hormones affect feelings and emotions.** The sudden surges of emotion adolescents often experience for no apparent reason can be very

distressing, especially if they don't understand what might lie behind them. Talking about the impact of hormones and using visuals to support your explanation can really help.

- **Appropriate touch, personal space and body language.** Children with ASC find these issues particularly difficult, but with support they can learn what is appropriate. Role play, social stories and DVD clips are a good way of getting across the key concepts and social rules.

### 4. Relationships

Understanding and developing relationships is one of the most challenging areas for a young person with ASC. Be careful to avoid placing all the responsibility onto them and explore what a good relationship looks like in terms of how others treat them, so they can protect themselves from potential harm. Enlist parents' support to monitor online relationships and discuss the fact that people are not always who they claim to be.

- **Consent** is a concept that needs to be taught in terms of respecting others and of agreeing to have sex.
- **Knowing how to join in with others** and how to leave a situation they are not comfortable with safely.
- **Recognising teasing and bullying** and knowing what to do about it.
- **Finding out what is safe and enjoyable in relationships**, who they can trust, and where they can get help when they need it.
- **Understanding how relationships evolve** as people move from childhood through adolescence into adulthood, and the different types of relationships they might have. Include parenthood if appropriate.
- **Reading social signals,** including flirting, touch, facial expression and body language. This could be turned into a guessing game, where students apply their 'social detective' skills to a series of photos or DVD clips.
- **Conversation skills**. How to give compliments, arrange meetings, and ask good questions to find out about others (including someone they are interested in).
- **Developing their own moral framework**. Explore sexual relationships in the context of religious, secular and legal frameworks and support the young person to say what they think is important to them.


Photos of public and private places support a conversation about what constitutes appropriate behaviour in different contexts

### 5. Sex education

The conventional materials produced to support sex education programmes are often too complicated for a child with ASC to process and understand. Moreover, the need to know something as a fact can create difficulties when there are so many grey areas, and misinterpretations can lead to sexual behaviours that are potentially harmful, too public or open to being taken advantage of.

- **Acquire appropriate resources**. Use simple, structured visual resources and back these up with social stories. See *Find out more* for ideas.
- **Explain the important facts and issues**. Sexual development, sexual feelings and emotions, masturbation, what having sex involves, appropriate talk and actions, public and private, consent, safety, the law, contraception, STDs, rape, pregnancy, and what might be involved in marriage or living with someone.
- **Train key staff in autism and sexual development**. Staff need to be constantly checking the child's level of understanding and building their confidence before moving on. That requires considerable understanding and skill.

## Case study

*Peter in Year 10 was following a girl he found attractive everywhere at school. He was put on report, but he still continued. He was excluded for three days when he punched his fist through a window because a teacher had stopped him from going into a room where the girl was. One night he followed her home and stood outside for an hour until her parents called the police. He said she had smiled at him and that meant she liked him.*

Peter had listened carefully in the SRE lessons, but had taken it literally when the discussion explored how looking at someone and smiling was a way of expressing an interest in them. He'd also been watching soaps for tips on getting a girlfriend and one particular story about someone stalking a woman he liked had stuck in his mind.

The school organised some sessions on anger management and bought in a monthly session with an external ASC specialist, where he talked about his feelings about girls and his dreams of entering into a relationship, and received some positive advice and support using autism-friendly resources and social stories.

The school also spoke to the girl and her parents. They dropped the police action and Peter was able to apologise to the girl. The school worked with both students to agree not to pursue the matter, especially on social media.

### *SRE at primary school*

In primary schools, PSHE and SRE are usually delivered by the class teacher, who is in a position to know each pupil really well.

For children with ASC, it will be useful to look at the first three parts of the developmental structure to support them

## Relationships and autism – an insider's view

**Relationships have always been really difficult for me and the reality is that I just cannot meet the 'neurotypical' expectations that most people have.**

For example, the type, frequency and duration of socialising that many people do – particularly at the start of a relationship – are impossible for me to keep up with. I don't like doing things in the evenings, I find meeting another person's friends and family stressful, I don't like talking on the phone, I need a very large amount of alone time and privacy, and I don't seek activities that are outside my usual routine. Even very 'normal' things such as going to a pub, cinema or an art gallery cause me enormous anxiety.

**Communication is key**

I have learned that one of the most desirable things in a potential partner is good communication skills – or at least a willingness to be a better communicator. The person needs to be open-minded and patient, and understand that conversation is hard for me, particularly when I'm feeling stressed. Writing, drawing or typing to each other – even if not done in real time – can be really effective.

They will also need to understand that my routine is critical to my mental wellbeing. Often this means I will be inflexible about the things we do and the times we do them, but if someone is able to fit in around the routine (and we're both happy with the arrangement), then we will both end up enjoying each other's company a lot more. Advance planning for other things outside the norm is important and can allow us to do these with as little stress as possible, rather than missing out on them altogether. For example, if the partner wants to see a particular film at the cinema, we will plan together:

- the most comfortable time to go (weekday mornings tend to be quietest)
- how we will travel (cycling or walking are always preferable to public transport)
- what we are going to do afterwards (usually we go straight home).

**Why starting out is the hardest part**

Developing a relationship is probably more difficult than maintaining it. It takes a lot of effort to develop a starting 'level' of intimacy (i.e. friendship), because in order to get to know one another, I have to be committed to learning about the other person and spending time with them. This commitment can be hard, because my natural priorities in life are: alone time, routine and my special interest.

Until the other person understands what autism is and – most importantly – how it affects me (which can only really happen through time and experience), it's easy for them to doubt my level of interest and commitment, causing them to walk away from relationship possibilities.

Maintaining a relationship requires hard work and effort from both people, but once we know each other well enough (hobbies, reliability, punctuality, daily schedules, even the sorts of words and language we use), there is less pressure to 'perform', and instead of being unable to meet unrealistic expectations, we are able to meet real ones.

**Establishing rules**

The key to a long-lasting, happy relationship for both people is to establish 'rules' so that each person knows what they can and can't expect from one another and hence will not be disappointed if their expectations are not met. For example, if my partner has told me that watching football is important to him, I will cope better if he chooses to watch a match rather than see me for our normal 'routine time'. If he had not told me this from the start, I'd find it hard to cope with his decision due to my strong desire for things to always be the same, regardless of outside factors.

For me, the advantages of being in a relationship are being able to connect with someone and feel less alone in the world. I like that we can do 'normal' things together, such as talking, walking the dog, or having a cup of tea, without getting bored.

For him, he has someone very straightforward who is genuinely interested in learning about his experiences, thoughts and feelings. He knows where he is with me. For both of us, our life together is predictable, relaxing, and comforting.

*Alis Rowe, who has Asperger syndrome, is director of The Curly Hair Project, a social enterprise that supports women and girls with ASC and their neurotypical loved ones. http://thegirlwiththecurlyhair.co.uk/*

This was originally published on a community website for autism professionals run by The National Autistic Society. www.networkautism.org.uk

in their early concepts. The best approach is to have a long-term plan, train key staff and timetable sessions where these children learn alongside a small group of their peers.

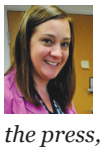
There will still be situations, however, when something unforeseen happens which causes a child distress. In this case, it will be important to find out what they are fearful of, what they have misinterpreted or what vital piece of information has completely passed them by. The five developmental stages can be used as a guide to help the SENCO or teacher work out what that missing link might be.

### *SRE at secondary school*

At secondary level, the SENCO may be the key person who monitors pupils with ASC as they move through the year groups and, if aware of a need, can provide extra support in SRE lessons.

Checking pupils' understanding will be important, making sure that the teacher delivering the lessons understands autism and the difficulties these children may have with understanding and interpretation. In some schools, it may be possible to arrange regular one-to-one or small-group sessions with a specialist ASC teacher or trained staff member, where pupils can talk about issues they find confusing or that are causing them concern.

If something untoward happens, it is important not to overreact and to investigate what the child may have misunderstood or misinterpreted. If the incident is serious, put help in place rather than excluding the child, which may infringe disability law if their action has arisen from their condition. Work with other pupils involved, whether perpetrators or recipients of the inappropriate behaviours.



*Lynn McCann is a specialist autism teacher and consultant, and owner of Reachout ASC, www.reachoutasc.com. Hot off the press, her latest book,* How to Support Children with Autism Spectrum Condition in Primary School*, is available at www.ldalearning.com*

### FIND OUT MORE

- **The TEACCH Report:** http://bit.ly/sc230-03
- **The Underwear Rule:** http://bit.ly/sc223-37
- **The Childnet STAR Toolkit:** http://bit.ly/sc223-38
- ***Taking Care of Myself: A Hygiene, Puberty and Personal Curriculum for Young People with Autism*** by Mary Wrobel, published by Future Horizons Inc
- **Anti-Bullying Alliance Resources for Autism/ Aspergers:** http://bit.ly/sc230-04
- ***Talking together about Sex and Relationships. Puberty & Sexuality for Children and Young People with a Learning Disability*** from the Family Planning Association: http://bit.ly/sc230-05
- ***Sexuality and Relationship Education for Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders*** by Davida Hartman, published by Jessica Kingley Publishers
- ***The Growing Up Book for Boys: What Boys on the Autism Spectrum Need to Know!*** by Davida Hartman, published by Jessica Kingley Publishers
- ***The Growing Up Guide for Girls: What Girls on the Autism Spectrum Need to Know!*** by Davida Hartman, published by Jessica Kingley Publishers
- **For advice on writing social stories**, see *Special Children* 228