

Talking about sex

Talking to your child about sex is a necessary step in preparing them for adolescence and adulthood. It can also be awkward and uncomfortable, for you and for your child. This resource outlines some tips for navigating conversations about sex, and preparing your autistic child for this new aspect of their life.

Talking about sex

If your child is in mainstream school, they will most likely learn about the basic mechanics of sex in school, but autistic children and teenagers often need to know more information than school provides, particularly around the reasons for certain things. Your child may have many detailed questions about how sex works, why people want to do it, how it feels, or other embarrassing topics – it helps to be prepared for awkward questions, so that you can answer without making your child feel ashamed or silly for asking. (If your child has older siblings, you may want to prepare their siblings for answering some awkward questions as well.)

Your child may ask very personal questions (how often do you have sex, have Grandma and Grandad stopped having sex, how old were you when you first had sex, etc.). It's ok if you don't want to answer these questions about your own life, or if you don't know the details of your relatives' sex lives – try to provide some information as an answer, though. For example, you might not want to tell your teenager how often you have sex, but you can say "Most people don't like to tell others about intimate details like that, but there's really no normal or correct number of times to have sex – what's important is that you and your partner agree on how often the two of you want to have sex."

Autistic children and teenagers often ask questions to figure out the 'correct' way to do something, because they are used to getting it wrong. An autistic teenager who asks everyone how old they were when they first had sex may be trying to work out the 'correct' age to start having sex so that they don't get it wrong – keep reiterating that the right age is whenever you feel ready and want to have sex (as long as everyone involved is enthusiastic and over the age of consent); the right amount of sex to have is the amount you and your partner want to have, etc.

It can be really helpful to involve adults of multiple genders in discussions about sex (whether that's both your child's parents, or an older sibling or close trusted adult). As well as giving your child more trusted sources to go to for information about sex, involving adults of multiple genders helps to give more perspectives on complicated questions.

Autistic people are much more likely than the general population to fit under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella in some way, whether they're gay, bisexual, asexual, transgender, non-binary, or a combination. Even autistic people who don't identify as LGBTQIA+ commonly experience their sexuality differently to non-autistic people. Keep in mind that your child's experiences will likely not match yours, or the experiences of their peers – they may be confused about why anyone would want to have sex, or why everyone they know is suddenly obsessed with sex; they may feel confused about their own gender, or the gender/s they are attracted to; and they might try on a few labels before they find one that fits. Some level of confusion around gender and sexuality is normal for many teenagers and most LGBTQIA+ people, autistic or not; if your child is really struggling though, or if you need support navigating their identity, organisations like [InsideOut](#) and [Rainbow Youth](#) can help.

Talking about consent

It's essential for children and teenagers of all genders and abilities to learn that someone touching them in a sexual way without their consent is never ok, and that they are never allowed to touch someone else in a sexual way without consent.

It can be helpful to give your child some scripts to learn around consent, from both sides of the conversation. If you think your child is likely to miss the non-verbal cues that someone either is or isn't interested in sexual contact, give them a clear way to ask. You can also talk about sex scenes or kissing scenes in movies and TV, and how they're not realistic – no one ever asks for consent in movies, they just seem to automatically know that both people involved want the same thing. Autistic teenagers often look to movies and TV for cues about how to behave, so pointing out when those cues are consistently wrong (and what to do or say instead) can be very helpful.

Having a conversation about what to do if someone touches you sexually in a way you don't like can be awkward, but is important. Some teenagers will feel more comfortable with a list of options (walk or run away, say "I don't want to do that", yell for help, say "no!" loudly, etc.) so that they can choose the one they think fits the situation. Others will do better with a single response to use in any situation where they are being sexually touched without consent (or think they are about to be); something attention-getting like running away or shouting "No" often works well, because it doesn't leave any room for being manipulated into the sexual contact, and because it is likely to attract the attention of someone who can help.

Technology

Social media is a huge part of teenagers' and preteens' social lives. Previous generations of teenagers commonly got incorrect ideas about sex or bad relationship advice from their peers; now teenagers can get bad advice and information from the entire internet.

The best way to protect your child or teenager from online misinformation is to be a trusted and reliable source yourself. Your child will still encounter bad information, but knowing that they can check information with you means they have a safety check before they believe it. Being confident that you've told them the truth also means that when they encounter someone contradicting what you've told them, they have the confidence to stick with the truth.

Your child may want to confront you about something you've said that someone online has contradicted – try not to react with anger or annoyance if this happens. Learning critical thinking skills, including how to separate out misinformation and bad advice from useful and correct info, is essential for every teenager, and part of learning these skills is practicing standing up to authority figures who might be wrong. If your child is often particularly blunt or honest, you may need to be prepared for their confrontational tone. They most likely don't mean to be as hostile as they come off; an autistic teenager bluntly or tonelessly saying "You said it was ok to have sex as little as I wanted, but I saw on TikTok that if I don't have sex three times a week I'll never be able to keep a boyfriend" is most likely genuinely looking for answers, and confused by the contradictory information they've found.