

Approaching contextually inappropriate sexual behaviours

Autism does not necessarily impact the time that a person enters puberty. The physical impact of puberty on a person's body does not differ whether they are autistic or not. Autistic young adults also experience sexuality. It is important to prepare your young adult for these changes before and while they are in puberty.

New behaviours may be observed due to emotional and biological changes. Autistic adolescents will go through sexual experimentation and explorations just like other adolescents. They may not know how to appropriately express their natural instincts, and this may lead to contextually inappropriate sexual behaviours.

The nationally recognised [Brooks Sexual Behaviours Traffic Light Tool](#) shows what behaviours are considered normal and what behaviours we should be concerned about. It helps identify and understand sexual behaviours in autistic young people. It also helps us to respond appropriately to these behaviours.

When you notice behaviours of concern, speak to professionals such as your school's Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo), nurse or GP. They will be able to help you address these concerns. They will need some information to understand why the behaviour is happening.

Interventions put in place should be consistent across all settings and people.

Here are some things to think about:

- What settings does it happen in? What people, places or things make the behaviour more likely to happen?
- What triggers the behaviour? What happens or what is your young adult doing just before the behaviour happens? Think about the people around you and any other changes to the environment.
- What is the behaviour? What does the behaviour look like?
- What response was given? What reaction or actions happened immediately after? Did anything change in the environment as a response to the behaviour?

Here are some interventions that may be suggested

Redirection: Where appropriate, your young adult can be redirected to an appropriate location with privacy such as their bedroom or bathroom. Having a safe space will reduce the contextually inappropriate sexualised behaviours happening in inappropriate places. A visual of their bedroom or bathroom could be used alongside this with a tick sign displayed.

Enriching environment: Boredom may be the reason why some of these behaviours happen, and the behaviour can bring them enjoyment. Increasing the number of social skills and activities your young adult engages in can bring about enjoyment from other sources. Increasing community outings and activities can also help.

Self-management: Teaching skills to help self-regulate will help when they feel any urges. Teaching them to self-manage their timetable through a visual schedule will help them understand when and where they can safely engage in these behaviours. The type of intervention put in place needs to take into consideration your family's personal, moral, and cultural beliefs. It is best to decide how you will approach this before any intervention is put in place.

Safeguarding

Autistic children and young adults are vulnerable to sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation due to differences in their social understanding and communication. In some cases, a display of inappropriate sexual behaviour may be a sign. They may be unable to, or find it difficult to, tell someone they are experiencing abuse. It is important not to interpret these signs as a result of them being autistic. Other indicators of abuse are changes in their emotional wellbeing, being withdrawn and increasingly secretive, changes in behaviour or unexplained marks around intimate areas; indicators are not limited to this list. If you have any concerns, please express these to the school safeguarding officer or the police.

References

- Brook. Traffic Light Control Course. Accessed at <https://www.brook.org.uk/education/sexual-behaviours-traffic-light-tool/>
- Cambian Group. Inappropriate Sexual Behaviour and the Child with an Autism Spectrum Condition. Accessed at <https://www.cambianguroup.com/media/1474414/Inappropriate-Sexual-Behaviour-2018.pdf>
- Hayward, Brent. (2016). Avoiding and responding to sexualised behaviours of concern in young people with intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder: a guide for disability service providers. 10.13140/RG.2.2.16280.80641.
- National Autistic Society (May 2020) Safeguarding young people on the autism spectrum.