

Sexuality and the Spectrum: Lessons on Sex, Dating, and Love, Autism Style

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Overview

- ❖ Introduction
- ❖ Firsthand perspective of a woman with ASD
- ❖ How Teachers and Professionals Can Better Address Sexuality and Autism
- ❖ Strategies for Professionals and Parents
- ❖ Questions

Who Do You Talk to About Sex and Dating?

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- ❖ Family
- ❖ Therapist or Counselor
- ❖ Religious leader
- ❖ Friends
- ❖ Don't have anyone to talk to/Don't feel comfortable talking about it



Myths vs. Truths

About Autism and Relationships

- ❖ **MYTH:** Autistic people are asexual/don't have sex
- ❖ **TRUTH:** Autistic people do have sex!

- ❖ **MYTH:** Dating an autistic guy is exactly the same as dating an autistic girl
- ❖ **TRUTH:** Autistic girls and women are not the same as autistic boys

- ❖ **MYTH:** Individuals with autism are all straight
- ❖ **TRUTH:** Individuals with autism identify with many different sexual orientations

- ❖ **MYTH:** Autistic people only date other autistic people
- ❖ **TRUTH:** Autistic people can and do date all kinds of people

Myths vs. Truths

About Autism and Relationships

- ❖ **MYTH:** Autistic people do not feel rejection the same way neurotypicals do
- ❖ **TRUTH:** Rejection hurts no matter who you are

- ❖ **MYTH:** Individuals with autism can't love
- ❖ **TRUTH:** Individuals with autism are FULL of love!

Let's Talk About Sex!

- ❖ Sex is everywhere, but we are uncomfortable having serious conversations about it.
- ❖ This is especially true when the conversation involves individuals with autism.



A Whole New Language

❖ The Secret Language of Emojis



A Whole New Language



<https://youtu.be/UztioBpKIRk?t=66>

So Why Is It Important?

- ❖ Because sexuality isn't assumed to be part of the human experience for disabled people
- ❖ Because sex begins long before sex begins
- ❖ Because communication is key
- ❖ Because the consequences of not providing accurate and comprehensive sex ed are too great

Sexual Abuse and Autism

- ❖ Sexual abuse occurs at higher rates among autistic people than neurotypicals, but is reported much less frequently. Why?
- ❖ Double stigma
- ❖ Teaching what abuse looks like, how to report it
- ❖ ~~Strange Danger~~

Sexual Abuse and Autism

- ❖ Graham Holmes et al. (2020): 6.4% of youth with autism in their survey had a documented history of sexual abuse and 4.5% were bullied by peers for lack of sexual knowledge.
- ❖ Mandell et al. (2005): 16.6% of children with autism in their study had been sexually abused, as reported by their support staff.
- ❖ Brown-Lavoie et al. (2014): 78% of respondents with ASD reported at least one instance of sexual victimization, compared to 47.4% of comparison group.

So what better way to understand the unique sexual experiences of individuals on the spectrum...



...Than with a real life Naughty Autie to tell you all about it!

About Me

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- ❖ Founder and president of A.S.C.O.T Consulting, LLC and Certified Autism Specialist (IBCCES)
- ❖ Relationship Coach at Rutgers Center for Adult Autism Service (RCAAS)
- ❖ International public speaker (“Dr. Ruth of the Autism World”)
- ❖ Featured in film version of *In A Different Key: The Story of Autism* based on the New York Times Bestselling book.
- ❖ Co-author with Dr. Peter Gerhardt and Dr. Jess Cauchi of book chapter, “Sexuality and Sexuality Education with Individuals with Autism: What You Should Know but Probably Don’t” in *Handbook of Quality of Life for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (2022, Springer).
- ❖ Serves on Boards of Yes She Can, Inc., Golden Door International Film Festival of Jersey City, and the Scientific Advisory Board of SPARK.
- ❖ Award-winning author of *The Naughty Autie*

But in 1996, like most any
13-year-old girl...



HOWEVER...

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Age of First Interest \neq Age of
First Experience

- ❖ There was a disconnect between what I was curious about and learning opportunities that I had to explore it.

Puberty Predicaments

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- ❖ Feeling disconnected from my body
- ❖ Misunderstandings about how puberty affected me
 - ❖ Emotional impact of adolescence on growing individuals with autism
- ❖ No time to “talk”



Social Difficulties Lead To...

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- ❖ Finding friendships online
- ❖ Learning about sex from peers and online
 - ❖ Reading erotica
- ❖ Vulnerability to predators

The disappointment of real life opposite sex experiences...

- ❖ Falling for the boy next door
(or across the street)
- ❖ First French kiss
- ❖ Senior prom



Age 19: First Boyfriend, Finally!

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- ❖ Learning how to be a “girlfriend”



- ❖ What was expected vs. what I was able to do

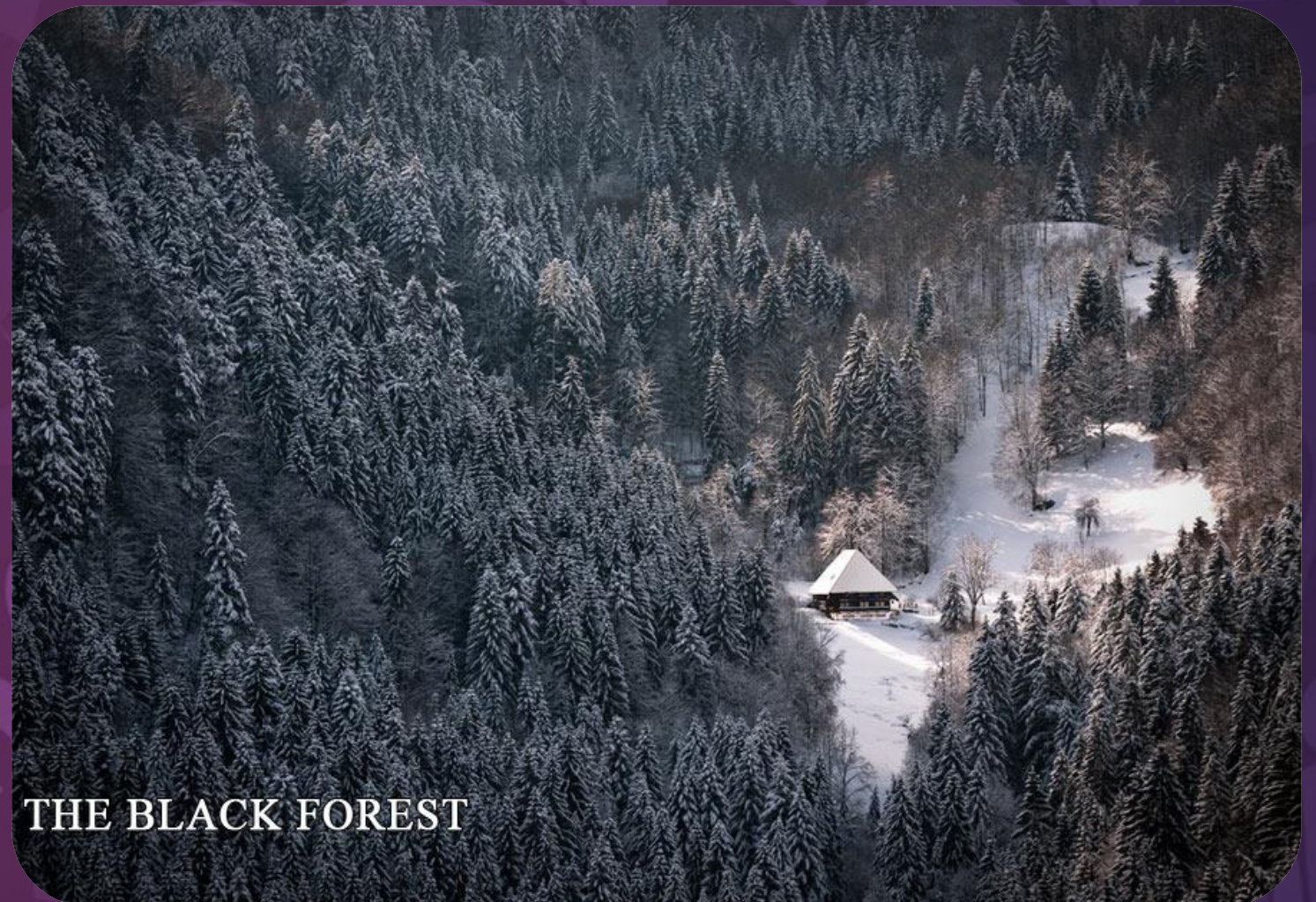
- ❖ Perils and pitfalls of a first relationship

- ❖ The night on the stoop

Beginnings of Body Awareness and Self-Discovery

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- ❖ Pubic hair
- ❖ Becoming “connected” to my body
- ❖ Seeing myself as a sexual being for the first time
- ❖ Relationships as learning experiences



THE BLACK FOREST

Stalking



- ❖ Man (who had autism) saw me at a conference and became obsessed
- ❖ Met in person
- ❖ Drove to friend's workplace (MA to PA)
- ❖ Aftermath
 - ❖ Understanding that this actually was stalking

Love, Autism Style

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- ❖ Age 22: Fell in love for the first time
- ❖ The process of saying “I’m in love with you”
- ❖ Preparing to lose my virginity



So here we have a young autistic woman in love, getting ready to have sex, with no idea of what to expect or do...

Sexual Intercourse Comment Card

**Thank You For Having Sexual
Intercourse with Me! If you
could, please take a moment
to fill out this**

Sexual Intercourse Comment Card!

**so that I may better serve your
needs in the future. Thanks
Very Much, and Please Come
Again Soon!**

...And the questions on the back:

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1. What did you enjoy most about this sex session?

2. What do you think could have been better?

3. What happened that you would like to have happen again?

4. What didn't happen that you would like to have happen in the future?

5. Please rate the following from 1 (horrible, awful, pathetic) to 5 (excellent, kickass, hot as all hell):

The outfit I initially had on, pre-intercourse ___

My facial expression(s) during intercourse ___

My vocal volume/the overall quality of my noises ___

My physical actions during intercourse (i.e., thrusting, clenching, etc.) ___

My ability to get you off ___

6. Is there anything I can do in the future to get you aroused more quickly and maximize your pleasure during our session?

7. Any other comments, thoughts, suggestions?

8. Finally, please rate this sex session on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the absolute worst, you'd rather have sex with a leper; 10 being holy crap I've reached nirvana amazing): ____

Thank You For Filling Out This Card! :-)

Heartbreak Hotel

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❖ My first heartbreak, a.k.a. “The worst pain ever”

❖ Being a “target” and keeping my head held high

❖ Learning how to move on

Seattle Saga: Epilogue

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- ❖ New beginnings in New Orleans

- ❖ A different kind of closure

- ❖ Full circle moment



So, how can we help
individuals with autism
learn dating and
sexuality skills?

Current Research Literature

- ❖ Most of the existing research that focuses on autism and sexuality is anecdotal or focuses on cataloguing and analyzing reported experiences of autistic individuals instead of teaching skills.
- ❖ When professionals are brought in to address sexual behavior, it's to stop something instead of teach something

Autism and Sexuality

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- ❖ Why are teachers and professionals reluctant to teach dating and sexuality skills?
 - ❖ Preconceived ideas about autism/taboo
 - ❖ Compliance vs. Noncompliance
 - ❖ Don't know how to teach these skills
 - ❖ Incompatible school sex ed curricula

Autism and Sexuality

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- ❖ How can professionals across disciplines address and improve discussions about ASD and sexuality?
 - ❖ Be proactive instead of reactive
 - ❖ Reframing autism and sexuality (Human expression vs. behaviors to manage)
 - ❖ Listen to autistic people
 - ❖ Fund qualitative and quantitative research into autism and sexuality

Using ABA to Teach Dating Skills

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❖ Purpose of Study

- ❖ To use didactic instruction, in vivo roleplaying, and video modeling to teach adult men diagnosed with autism level 1 how to ask someone out on a date.

❖ Method

❖ Participants

- ❖ Diagnosis

❖ Setting

- ❖ Treatment vs. Generalization

❖ Dependent Variables

- ❖ Eye contact
- ❖ Vocal tone (monotone)
- ❖ Physical proximity
- ❖ Number of utterances

Limitations of Study/Problems with Using ABA to Teach Dating Skills



- ❖ Difficulty obtaining participants/limited participant pool
- ❖ Participants differ from expected criteria
- ❖ Lack of change in data from baseline to generalization
- ❖ Cannot control outcome in the real world

Adult Autism and Sexuality Kit (AASK)

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- ❖ Received \$25,000 grant for development of curriculum
- ❖ Curriculum examines seven main topic areas
 - ❖ Using guidelines set forth in National Sexuality Education Standards, Second Edition (NSES)
 - ❖ Adapting lesson plans from ANSWER
- ❖ Hiring autistic consultants to aid in feedback process
- ❖ A living document informed by the population we serve

Strategies for Teachers and Professionals

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- ❖ Create/respect boundaries with students that will carry over into the real world
 - ❖ Consent
- ❖ “NO” is a complete sentence
- ❖ Life skills vs. academic skills



Strategies for Teachers and Professionals

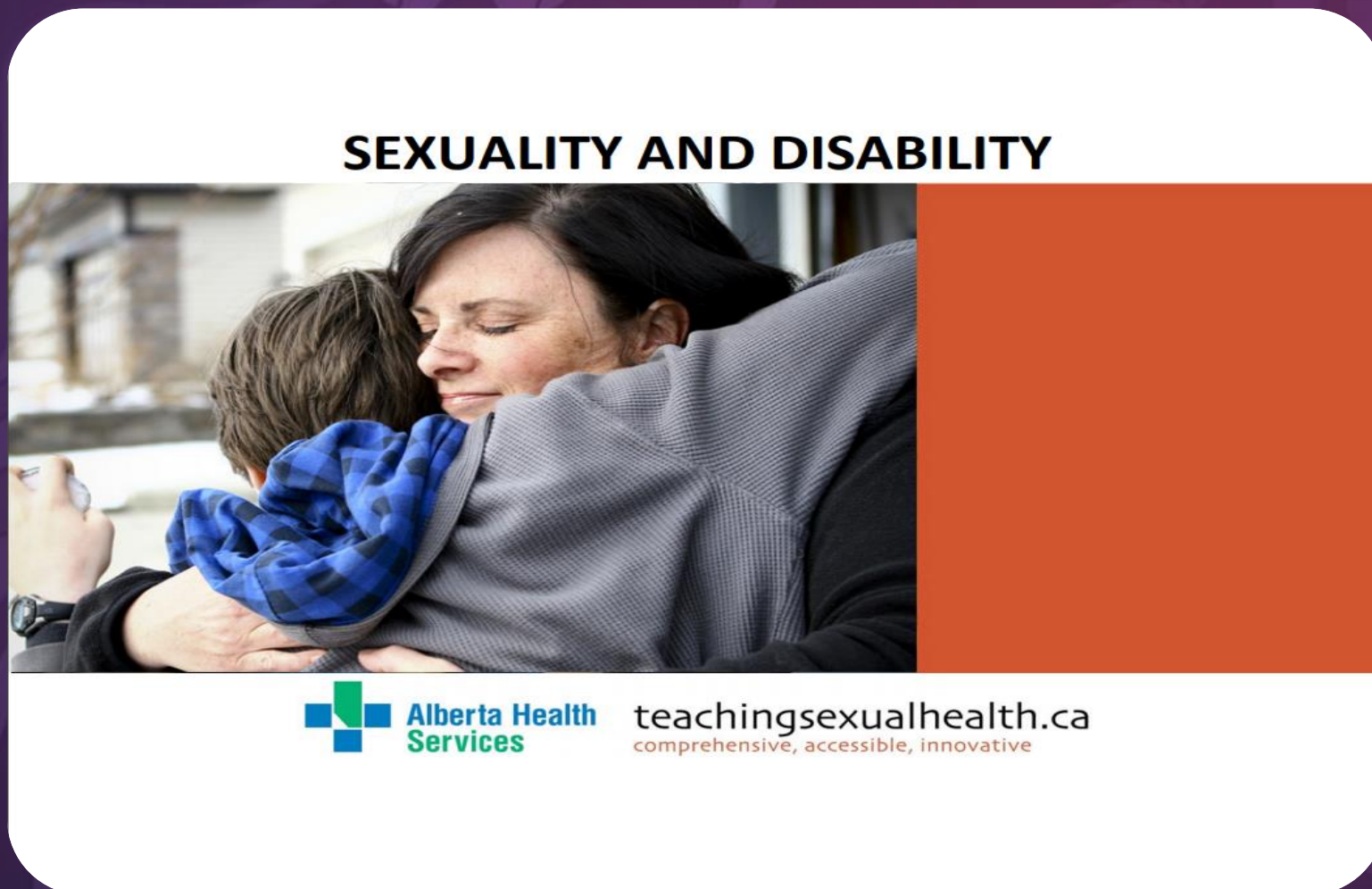
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- ❖ Acknowledge sexual needs and desires of individuals with ASD
- ❖ Get buy-in from all stakeholders
- ❖ Know what you don't know

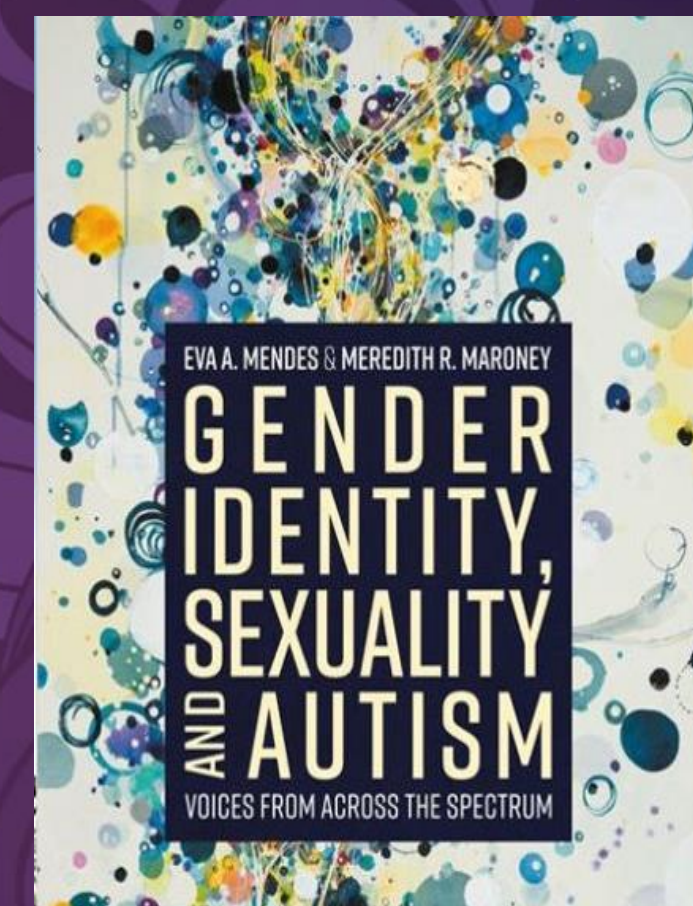
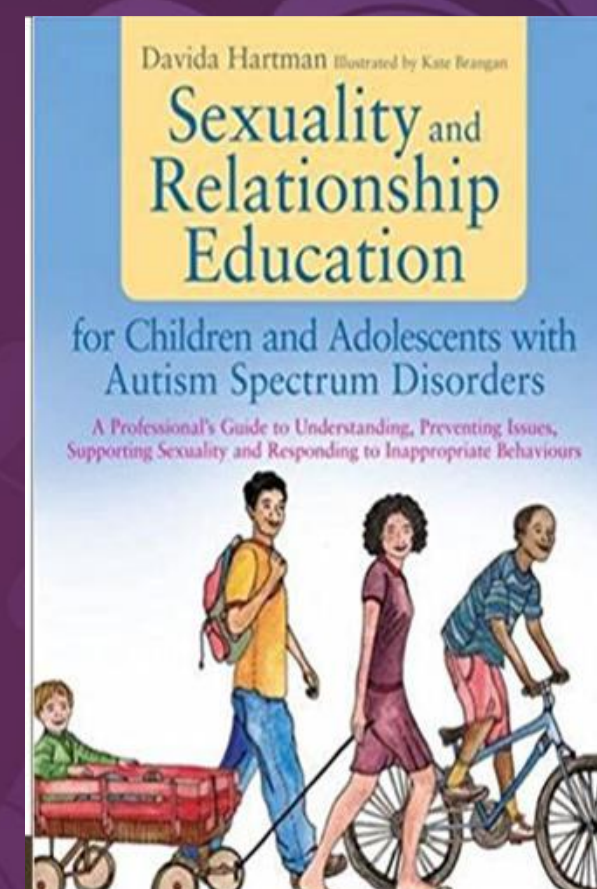
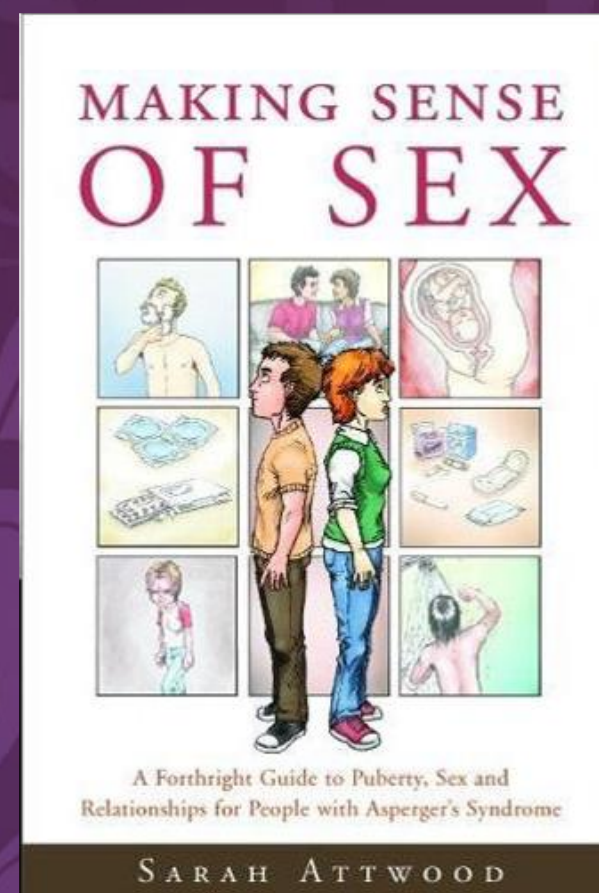
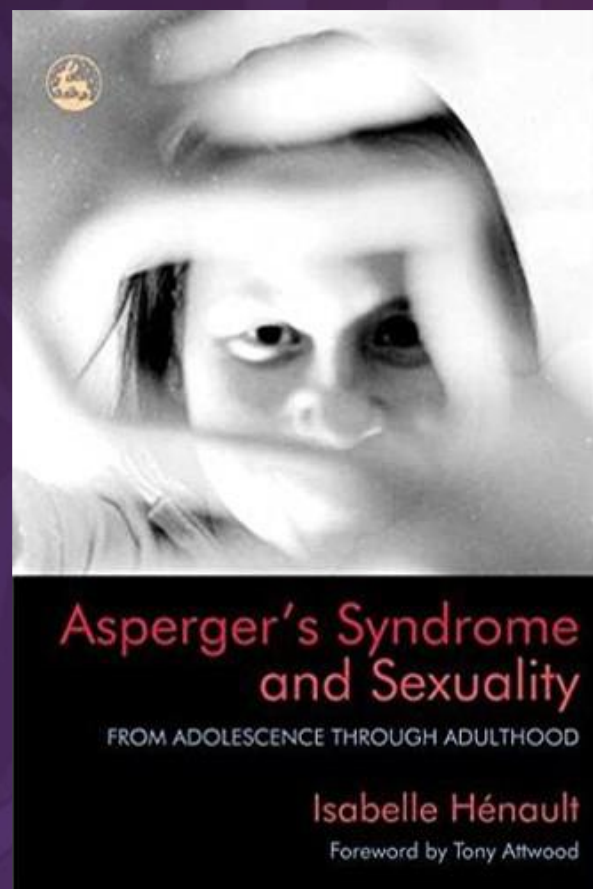
Resources

- ❖ Sex Ed. for Self-Advocates
(Organization for Autism Research)



- ❖ Sexuality & Disability: A Guide for Parents
(Alberta Health Services)

Resources



Dating Sites for Autistic Adults

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❖ AspieSingles



❖ Hiki



❖ Autism Date



❖ Uneepi



Remember...

- ❖ You can't stop life from happening.



“*Al final del día
podemos
soportar más de
lo que creemos.
- Frida Kahlo*”

Contact Information



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Social Media



[@AmyGravino](https://twitter.com/AmyGravino)



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Questions



ANY
QUESTIONS?