



**Review Article**

**Handling sexuality in autism spectrum disorder**

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**Abstract**

This article explores the nuanced challenges and considerations involved in addressing sexuality within the context of autism. Recognizing the unique needs and experiences of individuals on the autism spectrum disorder, this paper delves into the complexities of navigating intimate relationships, sexual education, and self-expression for this population. Through an examination of existing research, personal narratives, and clinical insights, it sheds light on the multifaceted nature of sexuality in autism, emphasizing the importance of tailored support, comprehensive education, and respectful communication. By fostering understanding and sensitivity, professionals, caregivers, and individuals themselves can work towards promoting healthy sexual development and fulfilling relationships within the autism community.

**Keywords:** Autism spectrum disorder, Autism, Sexuality, Sexual education

**Introduction**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neuro developmental condition characterized by challenges in social communication and interaction, alongside restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. The manifestation and severity of symptoms vary

widely, making each individual's experience with autism unique. ASD typically appears in early childhood and persists throughout a person's life, influencing various aspects of development and daily functioning. The prevalence of ASD in India is a topic of ongoing research and debate. According to recent estimates, over one crore (10 million) individuals in India may be on the autism spectrum.<sup>[1]</sup>

While the exact causes of ASD are not fully understood, it is believed to result from a combination of genetic and environmental factors. Understanding and addressing the diverse needs of individuals with ASD, including aspects of their sexuality, is crucial for promoting their overall well-being and quality of life.<sup>[2]</sup>

Nowadays, it is acknowledged that sexuality in autism is a normal and essential component of growth and functioning.<sup>[3]</sup> Studies indicate that the majority of individuals diagnosed with autism

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spectrum disorder (ASD) exhibit evident curiosity about sexuality and interpersonal relationships, showcasing diverse sexual behaviors.

However, deficits in social skills and communication, which are central to autism spectrum disorder (ASD), can potentially impact how individuals with ASD express and experience their sexuality. These deficits may hinder their ability to understand and interpret social cues, emotions, and nonverbal behaviors from others. Additionally, many individuals with ASD do not receive adequate and developmentally appropriate sexual education and have limited access to sexual health information compared to their typically developing peers. As a result, they often encounter challenges in developing healthy sexuality and forming desired relationships, which can sometimes make them vulnerable to abuse or involvement with the criminal justice system. Consequently, there are notable distinctions in the sexuality and sexual functioning of individuals with ASD when compared to the general population.<sup>[4]</sup>

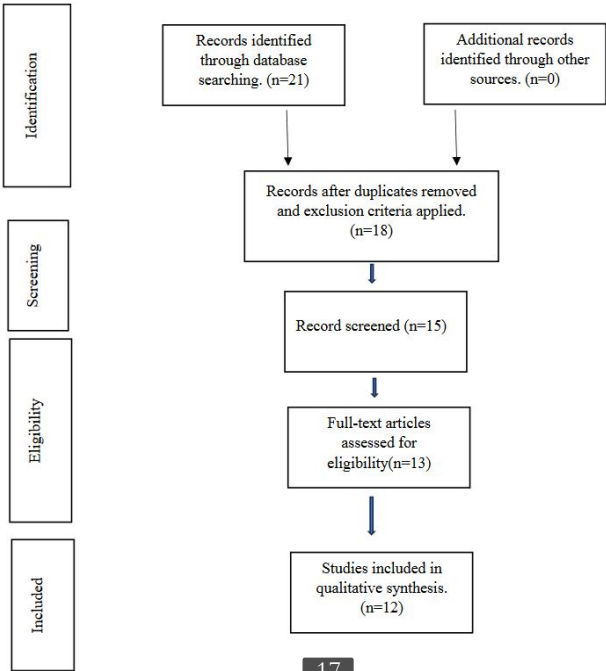
This review aims to comprehensively explore various aspects of sexuality within ASD, including affectionate partnerships, sexual expression, and parental perspectives on addressing sexual education needs. Additionally, it aims to investigate

the relationship between parental stress and the sexual behavior of autistic children, as well as teachers' viewpoints on the sexual experiences of children with ASD. Furthermore, the review will assess educational interventions designed to support autistic children in navigating their sexuality. Through synthesizing existing literature on these topics, the aim is to provide insights for professionals, educators, and caregivers to better understand and support individuals with ASD in their sexual development and education.

Methods

The methodology employed in this study adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. Initially, a comprehensive search of relevant literature was conducted using various academic databases. The search strategy included specific keywords to ensure the identification of pertinent studies. After screening titles and abstracts, a total of 26 papers were initially identified for potential inclusion. Subsequently, duplicate papers were removed, resulting in a refined pool of unique papers. The figure below illustrates the process of selecting papers for the review following PRISMA guidelines.

Figure 1: Paper selection process for review following PRISMA guidelines



Following this, the remaining papers underwent a detailed full-text assessment to determine their eligibility based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. These criteria were established to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected studies.

Upon completion of the screening process, a total of 12 papers were deemed suitable for inclusion in the review. Data extraction was then carried out from these selected papers using a standardized form, which included relevant information such as study design, participant characteristics, interventions, outcomes, and key findings.

## Results and discussion

### Navigating sexuality in autism spectrum disorders

Although individuals raising children with autism may experience sexual functioning, their sexuality often manifests with a higher prevalence of gender dysphoria and inappropriate sexual behavior.

Individuals responsible for the care of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often navigate complex issues related to sexual functioning within this population. Research suggests that care givers may observe a higher prevalence of gender dysphoria, characterized by distress related to a misalignment between one's assigned gender and experienced gender identity, among individuals with ASD. This phenomenon may stem from various factors, including atypical neuro developmental pathways influencing self-awareness and social perception.

Furthermore, care givers may encounter instances of inappropriate sexual behavior exhibited by individuals with ASD. These behaviors can range from socially unacceptable comments or gestures to more concerning actions such as public nudity or sexual aggression. Such behaviors may arise due to challenges in understanding social norms and boundaries, deficits in communication skills, sensory sensitivities, or difficulties in impulse control commonly associated with ASD. Moreover, individuals with ASD may experience unique challenges in expressing their sexual orientation or identity, potentially leading to confusion or frustration for both themselves and their care givers. Limited social interaction and difficulties in understanding and expressing

emotions may contribute to these challenges.<sup>[5]</sup>

Moreover, there is a decreased sexual awareness within this demographic, and adolescents with ASD exhibit a greater likelihood of various sexual orientations such as homosexuality, asexuality, and bisexuality compared to their non-autistic counterparts. Autistic children exhibit elevated rates of non-heterosexuality in contrast to typical peers. Individuals with ASD are more likely to identify as asexual, potentially due to challenges in social interaction and communication.<sup>[6]</sup>

### Affectionate partnerships, sexual expression, and autism spectrum disorders

Adolescents and adults diagnosed with ASD often exhibit more inappropriate sexual conduct compared to their peers. For instance, they may demonstrate fewer privacy-related behaviors, like not seeking privacy while undressing or masturbating, and possess limited knowledge about privacy norms, such as knocking before entering closed doors. Additionally, they may engage in socially inappropriate sexual actions, such as discussing intimate activities in public, at a higher frequency than neurotypical individuals. Masturbation emerges as the prevalent sexual behavior among those with ASD, often manifesting in inappropriate public settings. Concerningly, there's uncertainty regarding their ability to partake in mutually satisfying relationships, whether due to an inability to articulate emotions effectively or a lack of comprehension of the intricacies of such relationships. Thus, verbal indications of these challenges warrant attention and support.<sup>[7]</sup>

### Parental perspectives on addressing the sexual education needs of their autistic kids

Parents had to consider how well their children could socialize and whether they wanted close relationships. What came out from the data was that parents generally believed that kids who were better at communicating had more chances of having romantic relationships later on. But for children with lower abilities, parents thought their sexual experiences would mostly be alone. This shows that parents understand that autistic individuals vary in their social and intimacy skills, and it highlights the need to support them accordingly.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Parental stress and autistic children's sexual behavior

Parents of autistic children often experience stress when dealing with their child's sexual behaviors. This stress can arise due to several reasons. Firstly, communication challenges may hinder the development of a strong emotional bond between parents and their autistic children. Additionally, misdiagnosis or medical and behavioral issues can further compound the situation, leaving parents feeling frustrated and unable to meet their child's needs effectively. Moreover, parents may struggle to understand and manage their child's behaviors, such as not recognizing triggers for tantrums or being unsure how to calm them during emotional outbursts. Furthermore, the difficulty autistic children face in following instructions can lead to increased tension and frustration for both parents and the child. Overall, the complex nature of managing sexual behaviors in autistic children can significantly contribute to parental stress.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Teachers' viewpoints on the sexual experiences of children with autism spectrum disorders

Teachers observed that children with autism tend to display more challenging behaviors. The severity of autism appears to influence their sexual conduct. Teachers perceived that as children with autism develop better verbal skills, their social awareness increases, potentially resulting in reduced instances of sexual behaviors in public settings. Nevertheless, despite these advancements in social skills, children with autism struggle to meet the escalating social expectations as they grow older. This aspect requires vigilant attention from teachers who must consistently offer support and guidance. Difficulties in grasping and adhering to subtle social norms may exacerbate issues related to sexuality, underscoring the importance of interventions targeting empathy, flexibility, and social interaction skills during this developmental stage.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Adolescent boys and girls with autism spectrum disorder and their sexual experience

A typical high-functioning teenage boy with ASD begins to exhibit signs of masturbation at the age of thirteen, falls in love during that same time, and has his first orgasm soon after. He starts dating a lady before the age of sixteen and begins kissing

and touching her. Ten percent of boys question their inclination toward girls or harbor dreams of having sex with another boy. The average male with ASD has a positive outlook on sex, is rather permissive, and is unconcerned with his peers' same-sex inclinations. A significant portion (20-34%) have engaged in other partnered sexual behaviors, such as oral and manual sex, and one in five have engaged in sexual activity during this time.<sup>[11]</sup>

Compared to autistic males, girls with autism reported more experiences but less sexual attraction. A higher number of female autistics also reported having experienced unwelcome sexual advances or regretting past sexual behaviors. There were notable differences between females with autism and those who developed normally. The findings show that autistic women are more likely than autistic men to have unpleasant sexual experiences, such as victimization and abuse, because of a mismatch between decreased sexual interest and increased sexual behaviors.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Sexual education intervention for autistic kids

Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) garnered less sexual knowledge from social sources, relied more on non-social sources for sexual information, possessed lower perceived and actual knowledge levels, and faced a higher likelihood of sexual victimization compared to typically developing children. This shows why it's really important to have good sexual education.<sup>[13]</sup> Apart from this, the teenagers with ASD engage in inappropriate love gestures, hyper masturbation, public masturbation, excessive arousal, and exhibitionism as sexual behaviors. It is believed that these behaviors are brought on by a lack of knowledge about typical puberty, a lack of appropriate sex education, the severity of their ASD, and other related issues. It is recommended that accessible, individualized, repetitious education begin at a young age. The development of social skills is also crucial before teaching sex education's more technical components.<sup>[14]</sup>

In supporting the development of sexual behavior in autistic children, three key educational interventions are essential: 1. Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), 2. Social Stories, and 3. Social Behavior Mapping. ABA employs principles of learning and behavior to help children understand and navigate appropriate sexual behavior. 'Social

Stories’, a component of ABA, use tailored narratives to teach children about social norms and appropriate responses in sexual situations. ‘Social Behavior Mapping’ visually outlines the impact of one’s actions on oneself and others, aiding autistic children in understanding the consequences of their sexual behavior. These interventions provide structured support for the development of healthy sexual behavior in autistic children, guaranteeing their health and safety.<sup>[15]</sup>

Challenges in sexual education

Imparting ex education to autistic learners presents significant challenges, particularly regarding pedagogical limitations in the classroom and the unique sexual impulses of the learners themselves. These insights represent a positive advancement in designing more inclusive and accessible sex education lessons tailored to individuals with autism.<sup>[16]</sup>

Table 1: Key findings of the articles included this review paper

Sl. no	Key findings
1.	Care givers of individuals with ASD may encounter inappropriate sexual behaviors due to difficulties in understanding social norms, communication deficits, and impulse control issues. These challenges, along with struggles in expressing sexual orientation and emotions, can lead to confusion and frustration for both the individuals and their care givers. <sup>[5]</sup>
2.	adolescents with ASD show decreased sexual awareness and a higher likelihood of non-heterosexual orientations compared to non-autistic peers. Individuals with ASD are more likely to identify as asexual, possibly due to social interaction and communication challenges. <sup>[6]</sup>
3.	Adolescents and adults with ASD often exhibit more inappropriate sexual behaviors, such as not seeking privacy and discussing intimate activities in public, compared to their peers. They also show a higher frequency of masturbation in inappropriate settings and face challenges in forming mutually satisfying relationships due to difficulties in communication and understanding privacy norms. <sup>[7]</sup>
4.	Parents believe that children with better communication skills are more likely to have romantic relationships, while those with lower abilities may experience sexuality alone. This highlights the need to support autistic individuals according to their varying social and intimacy skills. <sup>[8]</sup>
5.	Parents of autistic children experience stress due to communication challenges, mis diagnosis, medical and behavioral issues, and difficulty managing their child's behaviors. These complexities underscore the need for targeted support strategies to help parents navigate their child's sexual behaviors effectively. <sup>[9]</sup>
6.	Parents of autistic children experience stress due to communication challenges, mis diagnosis, and difficulty managing their child’s behaviors, highlighting the need for targeted support strategies. <sup>[10]</sup>
7.	The typical male with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) tends to have a positive attitude towards sex and is generally permissive about it. <sup>[11]</sup>
8.	Gender disparities in autism and sexuality are evident: autistic females report more experiences but less attraction than males and face higher risks of unwelcome advances and regrettable behaviors compared to neurotypical females. <sup>[12]</sup>
9.	Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) lack social sources for sexual knowledge, rely more on non-social sources, have lower perceived and actual knowledge levels, and face higher risks of sexual victimization, highlighting the crucial role of comprehensive sexual education. <sup>[13]</sup>
10.	Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and ASD exhibit heightened inappropriate behaviors like hyper masturbation due to insufficient education. Adequate education can significantly benefit these children. <sup>[14]</sup>



11.	Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), Social Stories, and Social Behavior Mapping-are crucial in supporting the sexual behavior development of autistic children. ABA utilizes learning principles to teach appropriate behavior, while Social Stories and Social Behavior Mapping offer tailored narratives and visual aids to reinforce understanding of social norms and consequences. These interventions ensure structured support for fostering healthy sexual behavior, prioritizing the well-being and safety of autistic children. <sup>[15]</sup>
12.	Imparting sex education to autistic learners faces challenges due to classroom pedagogical limits and unique sexual impulses. Addressing these can advance inclusive, accessible sex education tailored for individuals with autism. <sup>[16]</sup>

Shortcomings of the existing articles

The studies conducted were constrained by small sample sizes, which restricted the broader application of their findings. A more rigorous approach focusing on specific age groups would enhance the effectiveness and reliability of the results, providing more precise insights into the impact of the interventions studied.

Conclusion

This review has shed light on various dimensions of sexuality within ASD, ranging from affectionate partnerships to parental perspectives on sexual education. It has highlighted the significant impact of parental stress on the sexual behavior of autistic children and emphasized the importance of teachers’ viewpoints in understanding the sexual experiences of children with ASD. Furthermore, the review underscores the necessity of educational interventions tailored to support individuals with ASD in navigating their sexuality. Notably, it advocates for sexual education initiatives at home as a fundamental right for adolescents with ASD, alongside the need for specialized orientation sessions targeting parents to facilitate effective home-based sexual education. This holistic approach aims to empower individuals with ASD and their caregivers in fostering healthy sexual development and education.

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Conflict of interest: None

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