

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

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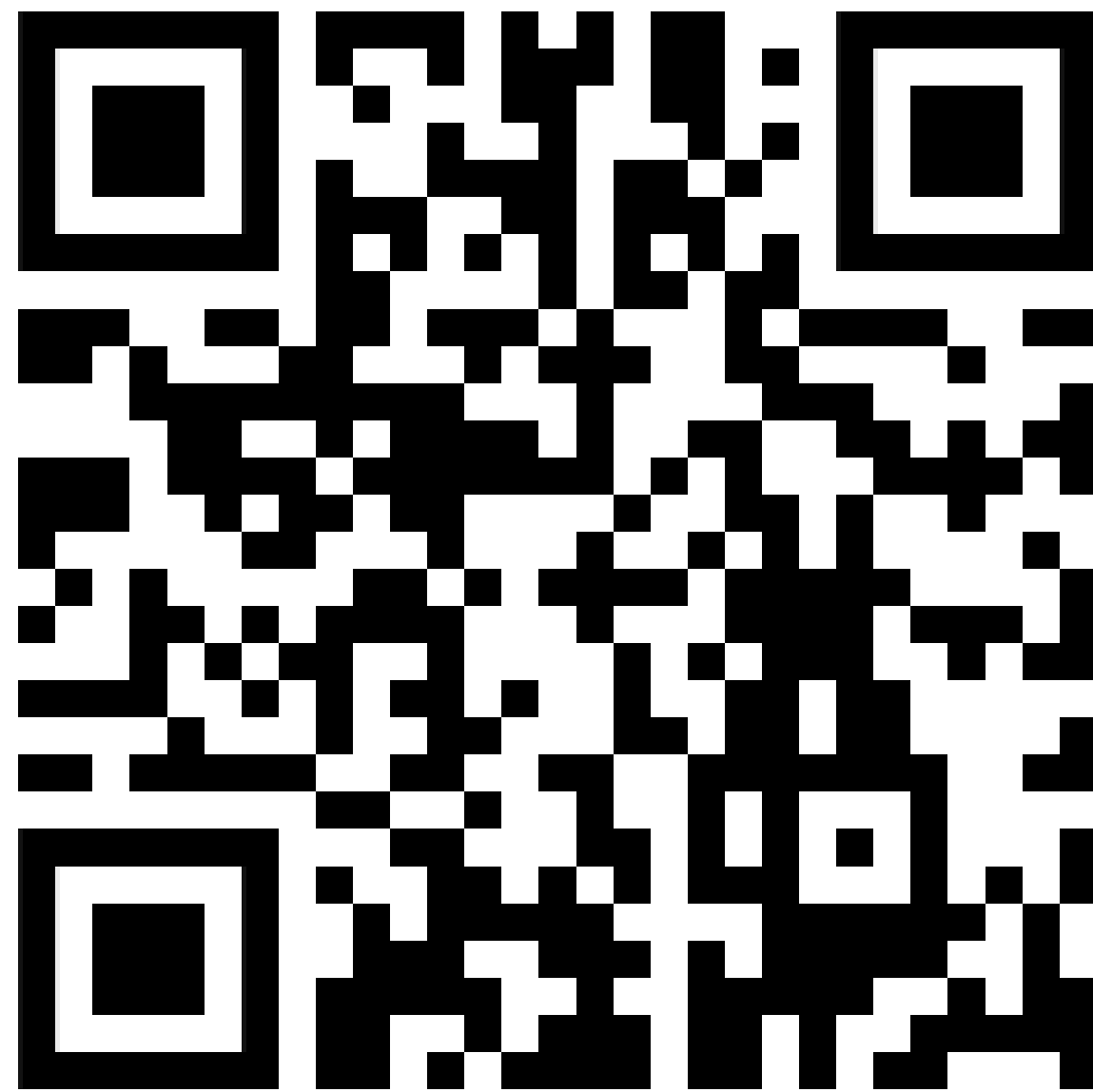


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Center for Adult Autism Services

# Join the Conversation!

❖ Slido QR code





# Overview

- ❖ Introduction
- ❖ Firsthand perspective of a woman with ASD
- ❖ How We Can Better Address Sexuality and Autism
- ❖ Strategies for clinicians and parents / Dating Dos and Don'ts
- ❖ Questions



# Who Do You Talk to About Sex and Dating?

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





# Let's Talk About Sex!



**KEEP  
CALM  
AND  
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 autism.

# 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!

# 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 autistic 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 neurotypical, but is reported much less frequently. Why?
- ❖ Double stigma
- ❖ Teaching what abuse looks like, how to report it
- ❖ ~~Strange Dang~~

# Sexual Abuse and Autism

- ❖ 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.
- ❖ 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.



So what better way to understand the unique sexual experiences of people with disabilities...



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



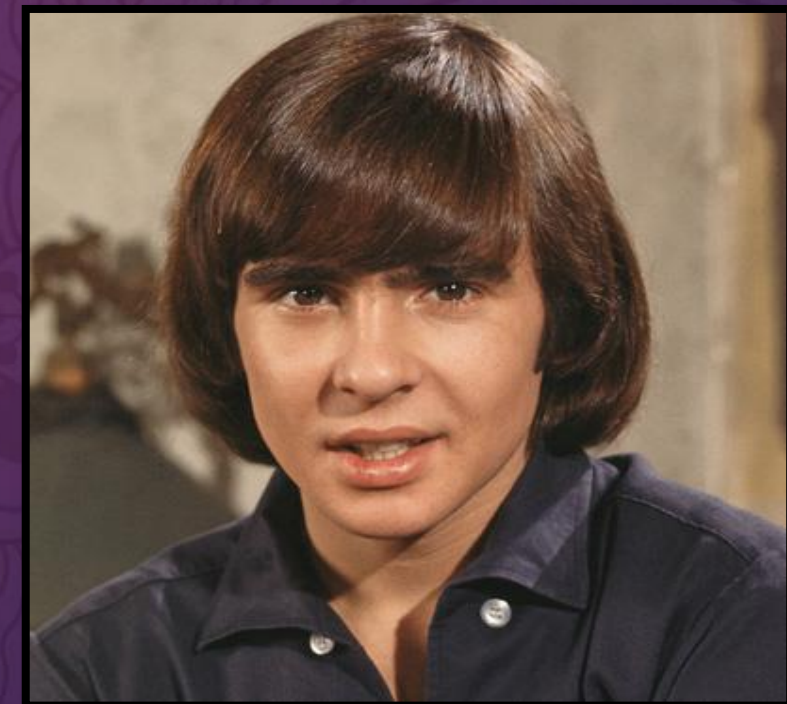
# About Me

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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 on 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 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

- ❖ 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...

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



# Age 19: First Boyfriend, Finally!

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GIRLFRIEND?



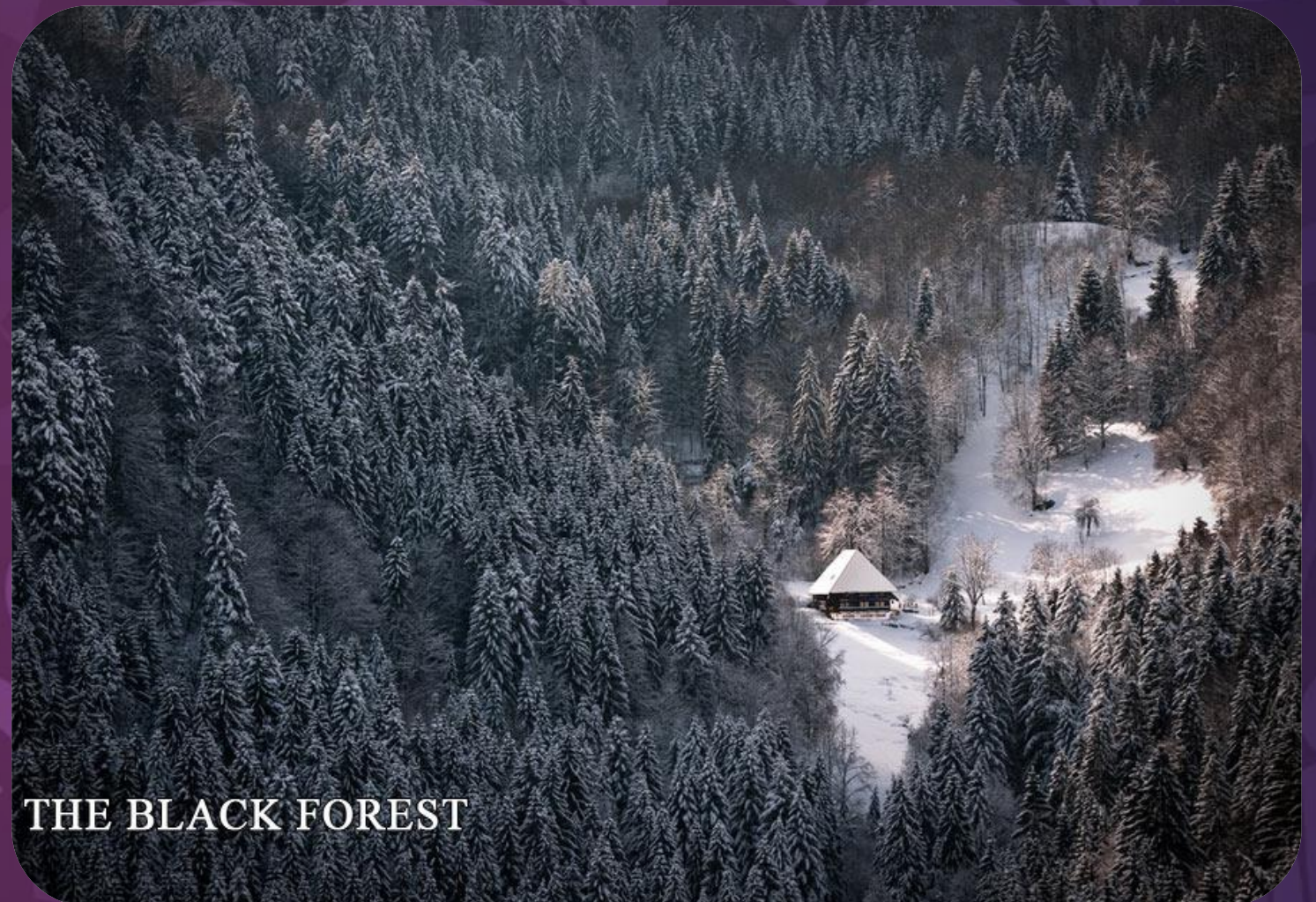
- ❖ Learning how to be a “girlfriend”
- ❖ What was expected vs. what I was able to do
- ❖ Perils and pitfalls of a first relationship
  - ❖ The night on the stoop



# 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



# Self-Discovery Continues Through College...

- ❖ Masturbation (Yes, girls can do it, too!)
- ❖ Lack of “shame” – perception-based
- ❖ Getting to know my own body - my “buttons”



# 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

- ❖ 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

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**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

- ❖ 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 clinicians are brought in to address sexual behavior, it's to stop something instead of teach something

# Autism and Sexuality

- ❖ Why are clinicians 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

- ❖ How can clinicians 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

# Adult Autism and Sexuality Kit (AASK)

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- ❖ Received \$25,000 grant for development of curriculum
- ❖ Curriculum will cover seven main topic areas
  - ❖ Follow 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 Parents

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





# Strategies for Parents

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- ❖ Be a safe space for your child.
- ❖ Discuss issues at an age/maturity-appropriate level
- ❖ Don't take it personally!



# Strategies for Clinicians

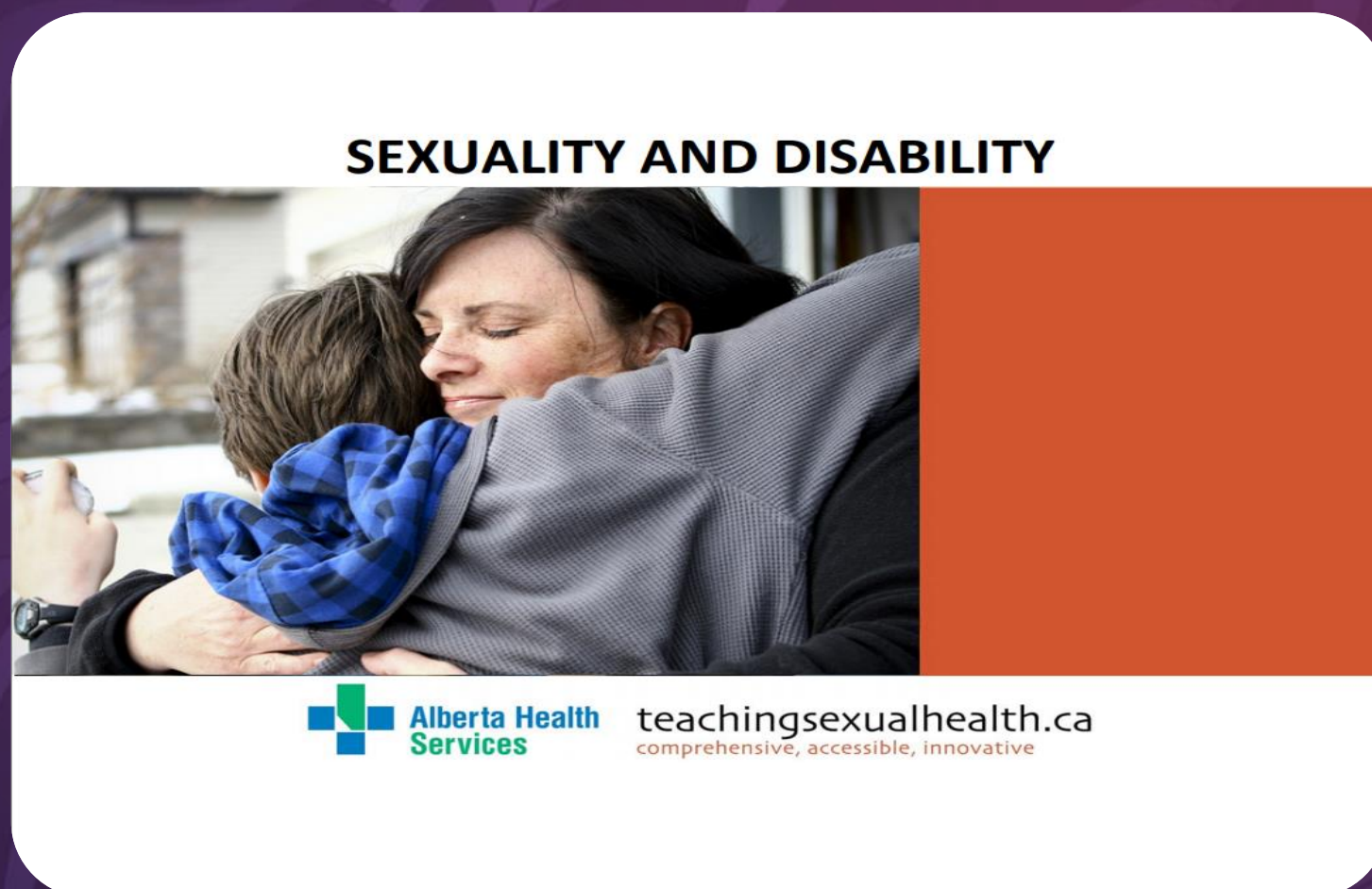


- ❖ Acknowledge sexual needs and desires of individuals with ASD
- ❖ Get buy-in from all stakeholders
- ❖ Know what you don't know



# Resources

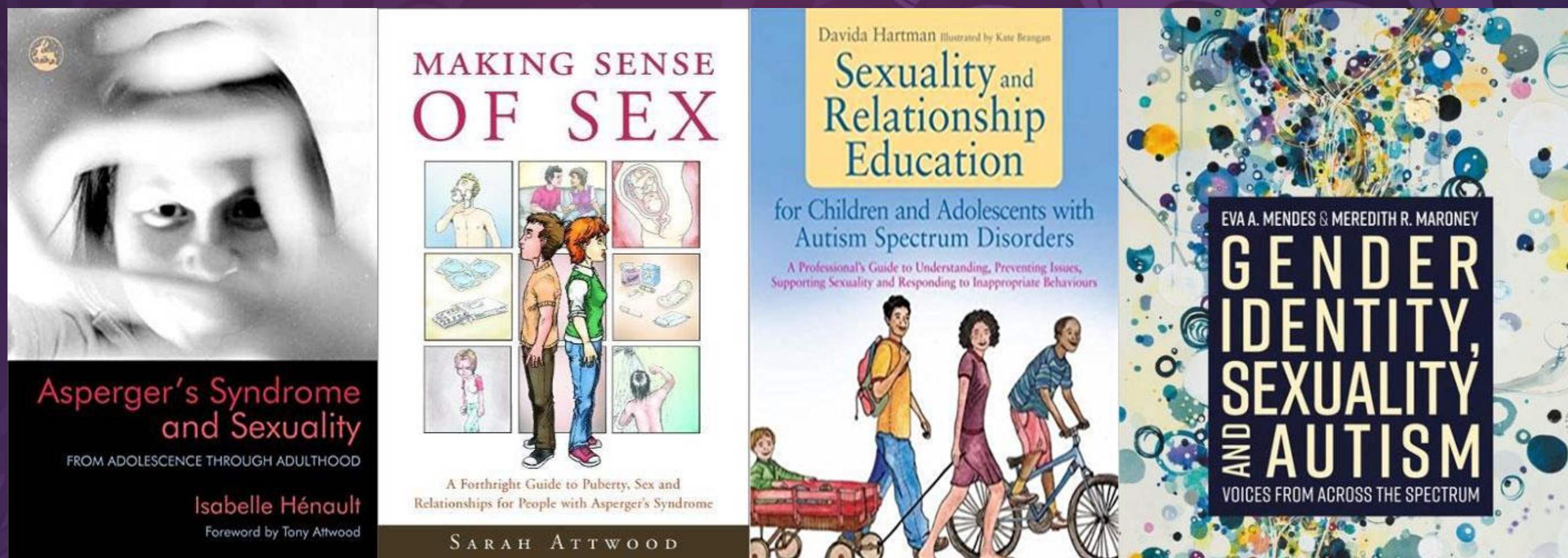
- ❖ Sex Ed. for Self-Advocates  
(Organization for Autism Research)



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



# Resources





# Dating Sites for Autistic Adults

❖ AspieSingles



❖ Hiki



❖ Autism Date



❖ Uneepi





# Remember...

- ❖ You can't stop life from happening.





# Contact Information

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## *Social Media*



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



[Facebook.com/AmyGravinoFanPage](https://www.facebook.com/AmyGravinoFanPage)



[@Amy.Gravino](https://www.instagram.com/Amy.Gravino)



[Linkedin.com/in/amygravino](https://www.linkedin.com/in/amygravino)



# Questions

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ANY  
QUESTIONS?