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The National Autism
Resource & Information Center

A national initiative of The Arc



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Relationships and Sexuality

People often assume that individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities are not interested in developing romantic relationships.

However, building relationships and learning about sexuality are very natural desires that all people have and want to express. It is important for loved ones to support individuals developing relationships so that they can achieve a fulfilling quality of life.

Is it possible for people with autism and other developmental disabilities to have romantic and intimate relationships?

Yes. The desire to connect with another person and build a satisfying relationship exists in everyone. People on the autism spectrum often experience problems forming relationships due to difficulties communicating with others and recognizing non-verbal cues. However, with support, people with disabilities are able to overcome challenges and sustain successful relationships and marriages.

What makes for a successful relationship?

The factors that contribute to the success of relationships involving people with autism and other developmental disabilities are identical to those that contribute to the success of relationships for all people. These include:

- **Understanding.** Because communicating with others can be difficult for people with autism, potential partners should be aware of and accepting of how a person with autism communicates and interacts with others. At the same time, a person with autism or another developmental disability should be aware of how their partner may communicate and interact with them and others.
- **Support.** In a relationship, it is important for partners to be encouraging and supportive of one another. Partners need to accept one another as they are; understand that he/she has flaws; and try to find a comfortable median.
- **Open, honest communication.** Partners cannot expect to read each other's minds. Instead, each partner needs to voice his/her preferences, needs and dislikes in a respectful and explicit manner.

What is sexuality?

Sexuality is "a basic need and aspect of being human that cannot be separated from other aspects of life" (World Health Organization, 1975). Sexuality involves the expression of our thoughts, feelings and emotions about being a man or a woman. Sexuality is more than just physical intimacy; it expresses how we feel about ourselves and others.

Three Common Myths about Individuals with Disabilities and Sexuality

by Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered (SABE)



Myth #1: My child is not interested in sex. My child is asexual.

All people are sexual beings. We all need love and intimacy. Having sexual feelings is a typical part of growth and development.

Myth #2: My child will never have adult feelings and urges.

Your son or daughter will grow into an adult. This means a person's needs and wants may change. It is time to look ahead and prepare for that. It is important to acknowledge your child's sexuality and help him or her to learn how to participate equally in an intimate relationship.

Myth #3: If I talk about sex, it may encourage my child to try out undesirable, inappropriate behavior.

There is no evidence that teaching information about sexuality promotes inappropriate acts. In fact, people who have a better understanding of their beliefs, of themselves as social and sexual beings, and of the possible consequences of their behavior are less likely to be deceived and exploited by their peers.

Resources:

Dating, Marriage, and Autism: A Personal Perspective

By Stephen Shore

<http://legacy.autism.com/individuals/datarau.pdf>

Navigating Love and Autism

NY Times article about two individuals on the spectrum and their relationship:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/26/us/navigating-love-and-autism.html?pagewanted=all>

Sexuality and Intellectual Disability

American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

http://www.aamr.org/content_198.cfm

Sexuality Education for Students with Disabilities

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities

<http://nichcy.org/schools-administrators/sexed>

The Journey to Adulthood: What Every Parent Needs To Know

The PACER Center's Family Advocacy and Support Training Project (FAST)

<http://www.fastfamilysupport.org/fasttraining/Adulthood/English/FAST%20-%20tools%20parents%20can%20use.pdf>

Sexuality and Disability: Important Conversations to Have on the Way to Adulthood

Sue Fager, Colorado Developmental Disability Council

<http://www.pacer.org/pride/sexualityanddisability.pdf>

About The National Autism Resource & Information Center

The National Autism Resource and Information Center is a dynamic and interactive central point of quality resources and information for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and other developmental disabilities, and their families.

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