Individuals with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) progress similarly to their typically-developing peers in terms of sexual health (Henault, 2006). The physical changes that occur during puberty generally happen between age 12-17 for boys and 7-14 for girls (Yarber, Sayad & Strong, 2012). This physical maturation age doesn’t change if your son or daughter has ASD or if their intellectual or social skills are lagging behind their chronological age. Although your son or daughter may not be ready for these changes emotionally, they need to be prepared for them, as they are going to happen whether they (or you!) are ready or not. Additionally, there is a wealth of evidence that individuals with ASD need to learn about both the facts as they pertain to sex and the details of social relationships in order to enable them to develop healthy relationships as adults and reduce the risk of them becoming victimized by others (Davies & Dubie, 2012). Therefore, it is important to think about how these issues are going to be addressed with your son or daughter before they begin puberty and when they develop into adults. It is also important to note that if this isn’t addressed, your child will find another source for this information. Typically, this might be the media or your child’s peers, and the concern is that both of these resources are likely to provide inadequate and incorrect information.
Where Do I Start?

Consider who the person will be that begins to talk to your child about puberty and breaches the topic of sex. This person needs to be available as questions arise, clear about your family values and beliefs, and open to talking about topics that sometimes are uncomfortable. Most often the best person to do this is the parent or caregiver, as they know the child best and understand how their bodies are changing, how they think, and how they learn. If your child has questions they don’t want to address with a parent, or want more information about detailed medical facts or issues, you can supplement the information you give your child by having them talk to someone else (e.g., the nurse practitioner at your doctor’s office). If you do decide that you cannot address these topics with your child, ask a trusted family member or friend with the same morals and values as your own family.

A free online video you may find helpful when considering how to begin addressing these issues with your child is “How to Have the Sex Talk with Your Child” (see Resources). It is common to feel a little uneasy when talking about sex, as long as you don’t let your own discomfort prevent you from educating your child. To minimize embarrassment, think about switching your emotional brain off for a moment and become an informed resource of medical facts to teach your son or daughter. It is important to note you don’t have to have all the answers, none of us do. Your main purpose is to be “askable” (open to questions) and willing to share factual information as clearly and accurately as possible. For example, if your child asks “Why does my penis get hard?” try to simply answer the question factually by saying, “Your penis becomes hard when there is a change in blood flow. This is natural and can happen at any time for no particular reason.” If you don’t know the answers, say you will find the information and get back with them. If your child finds it difficult to know what is appropriate/inappropriate to talk about, provide them with rules about this and then give them factual information.

Think about how much information your child is able to process when learning something new and tailor your explanations to fit this. For example, you may need to provide just one fact at a time. Some parents find that their child does better with a conversation if they are not looking directly at them (can be less embarrassing or less socially confusing). If this is the case with your child, try initiating the conversation during a simple activity such as building Legos or even during a car ride; either during or after the conversation follow-up by showing your child visual information (written rules/lists, pictures, or video) to increase their understanding. Add in any other methods that have been useful when teaching your child other things in the past, such as social narratives (written-picture information that explains a concept). Try to answer your child’s questions, stay calm, and do not overreact if you are surprised by something your child says, so that they continue to be open to talking with you in the future.

What Information Does My Son or Daughter Need to Know about the Physical Details?

The amount and type of information will vary according to your child’s age and ability to understand information, but a good starting point is to teach the names of body parts. In the
same way that you teach names for body parts such as nose, ears, and legs, also teach the names of their own reproductive organs and those of the opposite gender. It is important to make sure they know the correct terminology and avoid slang terms (e.g., pee pee or down there) as these can cause confusion. As your child grows older or more mature, they will need more detailed labels and an understanding of the reproductive anatomy including that of the opposite gender (so that they are educated before they enter into a relationship). They will also need to understand all the processes involved in sexual maturation and sexual interaction. These include (please note that the list below covers topics into adulthood and not everything on the list needs to be included for children or those at a younger developmental stage; the free downloadable handbook by Dr. Berman on the resources list includes a list of things your child needs to know at different ages):

Male Bodies:
- Sexual and reproductive organs (Dr. Berman’s handbook includes diagrams for this)
- Physical changes of puberty
- How these changes during puberty relate to reproduction
- How these effects may bring change in feelings and mood during puberty
- How everyone matures at different ages and at different speeds
- How to maintain genital health (including annual medical exams)
- Erections and nocturnal emissions (“wet dreams”):
  - What they are
  - To know that they are normal for all boys
  - Boys need to make a plan for how to deal with an unwanted erection in public (e.g., hold a binder in front of it at school so that others don’t see)
  - Boys need to make a plan for coping with nocturnal emissions

Female Bodies:
- Sexual and reproductive organs (Dr. Berman’s handbook includes diagrams for this)
- Physical changes of puberty
- How these changes during puberty relate to reproduction
- How these effects may bring change in feelings and mood during puberty
- How everyone matures at different ages and at different speeds
- How to maintain genital health (including annual medical exams)
- Menstruation
  - What it is
  - When it occurs
  - To know that it happens to all girls
  - Girls need to make a plan to be prepared

Individual Sexual Responses:
- Define private (in bedroom with door closed) and public (everywhere else) places
- Address any behaviors that are inappropriate in certain situations (e.g., something that may be okay in one setting is inappropriate in another setting).
- Masturbation
  - What it is
  - Make a plan for “private” time
Sexual Intimacy with Others:
• What is it? Definitions of
  o Kissing
  o Touching
  o Oral Sex
  o Vaginal Sex
  o Anal Sex
• Possible consequences of each the above (including pregnancy)
• Decision making regarding the above behaviors
• When the above behaviors are inappropriate, including rules about how to keep yourself/others safe, and what to do if someone touches you and you don’t want them to.
• Contraception
  o List of most common types, including failure rate
  o Risk of disease transmission with each type
• Sexually transmitted infections
  o List of most common types and how they are transmitted
  o Plan of what to do if you suspect you have a sexually transmitted infection

What Information Does My Son or Daughter Need to Know About Social Aspects of Relationships

This is a very complex area to teach. You should be aware that individuals with ASD may need more specific teaching in terms of relationships than most people due to their difficulties in social understanding (sometimes it can be beneficial to have a professional, such as a therapist or social skills instructor, help). Some of the topics individuals may need support to understand are:

• Definitions of different types of relationships (e.g., what is a friend vs. a classmate)
• How to initiate and maintain different types of relationships
• Behaviors for each type of relationship (e.g., you talk differently to a friend than a teacher)
• When are the different types of appropriate relationships (e.g., you can’t date someone who doesn’t want to date you)
• Sexual orientation and gender issues (e.g., “coming out,” bigotry)
• Dating
• Long-term relationships
• Parenting
• Sexual intimidation (definitions of harassment, abuse, and illegal sexual behaviors and how to avoid or respond to these, including cyber dangers)

Summary

Given the breath and complexity of the issues listed in this article, it is impossible to provide all the information that you will need to teach your child. We have, therefore, provided a list of resources below that can support and guide you. Even though the task still seems
challenging, the pay-off for your son or daughter will be enormous, not only in terms of their safety in relationships, but their general well-being as they become informed adults.

**Resources & References**


fpa.org.uk/help-and-advice/advice-for-parents-carers – Family Planning Association (FPA) is one of 150 member associations of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). Has information, advice, and support on sexual health, sex, and relationships.


goaskalice.com – Columbia University site where you can type in a health related question and receive an accurate answer.


kidshealth.org – website with doctor approved science facts, quizzes, and informational videos about the body and health. Has pages for younger children, teens and parents.

sexetc.org website published by answer.rutgers.edu a national organization that provides comprehensive sexuality education for young people and the adults who teach them. Has a factual forum, blog, glossary, and up-to-date information answering questions about sex written by both teen and adult staff writers. Includes humorous videos- you may want to check that your teen understands this humor before you show them these videos.

sexualityandu.ca – information and education on sexual health by the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada.

siecus.org – SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States) provides parents, educators and young people information about sexuality issues.