

Sexuality, Gender Identity, and Consent in ASD

Jonathan Leef, M.A. (Ph.D. Candidate)

University of Toronto and

Autism Research Centre, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehab

jleef@hollandbloorview.ca



AutismONTARIO
see the potential

General Overview

- Sexuality and ASD
- Gender Identity and ASD
- Consent and ASD
- Technology and Social Media



Note on Terminology

- Will use “with ASD” and “autistic” interchangeably
- When referring to gender I will interchangeably use “birth-assigned male/female” and “male/female”
- “Sex” and “gender”



Kids with ASD grow and develop into youth and adults....

- Many parents of kids with ASD may have assumed that autistic people may be asexual....
 - “Phew, at least we don’t have to deal with that...”



- Physiologically, children with ASD go through puberty typically.
- Secondary sex characteristics develop similarly to typically developing peers.
- Sex, gender identity, and sexuality are a central part of life for many autistic youth and adults.



First, Let's Get Comfortable: The Words

- Sexuality:
 - Puberty
 - Sexual anatomy
 - Masturbation
 - Sex
 - Sexual attraction
 - Porn/pornography
 - Fetishes or paraphilias
- Gender identity:
 - Gender variance
 - Gender dysphoria
 - Gender nonconforming
 - Gender non-binary
 - Genderqueer



Overview: Questions to Ponder Today

- What's known about gender identity and sexuality in ASD?
- What is “gender identity”?
- What is “sexuality”?
- How do issues of consent overlay much of these topics?
- How does our consideration of technology, pornography and social media inform these dialogues?



Sexuality and ASD

- Fernandes et al. (2016): Two studies
- Participants diagnosed with ASD in *childhood*.
 - Study 1: Males and Females (majority males).
 - Mean age 25 years.
 - Based on *parent report*.
 - 32% reported NO sexual interest, while majority DID have sexual interests.



Fernandes et al. (2016) Study I Continued:

Of those with sexual interests—

- 60% interest in opposite sex
- 30% interest in ‘same sex or solitary sexual activities’

‘Inappropriate’ sexual behaviours in 29%,
including—

- 21% public masturbation
- 7% ‘indecent exposure’



Fernandes et al. (2016) Study 2

- 76 males with ASD, mean age 22 years
- *Self-report*
- Greater IQ → more sexual interests
- Found 93% had sexual interest
 - 89% heterosexual interests



Fernandes et al. (2016) Study 2 (continued)

- 5% same sex; 5% both sexes
- 24% reported 'paraphilias' (fetishes)
 - 13% 'voyeurism'
 - 11% 'fetishism' (not specified)
 - 3% sadomasochism (2 of the 76 in the study)
 - 1% 'transvestic fetishism.'



Dewinter, De Graaf, & Begeer (2017)

- Large study comparing ASD (n=675) to general population n=8064).
- Ages > 15 years old.
- *Self report*.
- Almost EQUAL % of male : females (unique).
- *Mean age of diagnosis* was 37 years*.



Dewinter, De Graaf, & Begeer (2017) Continued

Results:

- Males:
 - 5% had same-sex attraction.
 - 8.5% bisexual attraction.
 - 4.7% ‘none of these’.
- Females:
 - 6.5% had same-sex attraction.
 - 22.4% bisexual attraction.
 - 15% ‘none of these.’



Sexuality: Take-Home Messages

- Autistic people are sexual beings, like the rest of us
- Most, but not all, experience sexual desires
- Most opposite-sex attracted
- But significant minority are same-sex or both-sex attracted
- Significant minority may have a paraphillia/sexual fetish



Gender Identity



Gender Identity and ASD: Media Attention

The Link Between Autism and Trans Identity

Confusion over why autism is so prevalent among transgender people may be limiting their access to medical care.

BRYONY WHITE | NOV 15, 2016 | HEALTH

Are autistic children more likely to believe they're transgender? Controversial Toronto expert backs link

There's Growing Evidence For A Link Between Gender Dysphoria And Autism Spectrum Disorders



Scientific Attention

J Autism Dev Disord (2012) 42:301–306
DOI 10.1007/s10803-011-1227-8

BRIEF REPORT

Brief Report: Female-To-Male Transsexual People and Autistic Traits

**Rebecca M. Jones · Sally Autism Spectrum Disorders in Gender Dysphoric Children
Krista Farrell · Emma M and Adolescents
Domenico Di Ceglie · Sin**

Annelou L. C. de Vries · Ilse L. J. Noens ·
Peggy T. Cohen-Kettenis · Ina A. van Berckelaer-Onnes ·
Theo A. Doreleijers

Autism Spectrum Disorder Risk Factors and Autistic Traits in Gender Dysphoric Children

Doug P. VanderLaan · Jonathan H. Leef ·
Hayley Wood · S. Kathleen Hughes ·
Kenneth J. Zucker



Scientific Attention (cont.)

Arch Sex Behav (2014) 43:1525–1533
DOI 10.1007/s10508-014-0285-3

ORIGINAL PAPER

Increased Gender Variance in Autism Spectrum Disorders and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

John F. Strang · Lauren Kenworthy · Aleksandra Dominska · Jennifer Sokoloff ·
Laura E. Kenealy · Madison Berl · Karin Walsh · Edgardo Menvielle ·
Graciela Slesaransky-Poe · Kyung-Eun Kim · Caroline Luong-Tran ·
Haley Meagher · Gregory L. Wallace

Transgender Health 

Mary Ann Liebert, Inc. publishers 

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Open Access

Gender Variance Among Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Retrospective Chart Review


Aron Janssen,^{1,*} Howard Huang,² and Christina Duncan²

J Autism Dev Disord
DOI 10.1007/s10803-017-3199-9



BRIEF COMMUNICATION

Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Romantic Relationships in Adolescents and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder

J. Dewinter^{1,2}  · H. De Graaf³ · S. Begeer⁴



Gender Identity and ASD: Summary

- Increased gender variance and gender dysphoria.
- Higher-than-expected rates of ASD in children, youth, and adults with gender dysphoria or varied gender expressions.
- Evidence of higher-than-expected rates of gender dysphoria, gender non-conformity, non-binary gender identities and/or transgender identities.



Times have changed....

- Sex and sexuality have evolved in the past 10-20 years....
 - For the general population!
 - Access to online pornography, chat rooms, dating apps, 'hook-up' apps, Instagram, SnapChat, etc.



Consent



Consent: Issues to Consider

- **Age of Consent to Sexual Activity**
- **Consent to sexual activity in Canada**
- The age of consent is the age at which a young person can legally agree to sexual activity.
- The age of consent to sexual activity is **16 years**
- In some cases, the age of consent is higher (for example, when there is a relationship of trust, authority or dependency)
- In other words, a person must be at least 16 years old to be able to legally agree to sexual activity.



Consent: Issues to Consider (continued)

- **Close in age exceptions**
- A 14 or 15 year old can consent to sexual activity if:
 - The partner is **less than five years older**.
 - There is no relationship of trust, authority or dependency or any other exploitation of the young person.
 - This means that if the partner is 5 years or older than the 14 or 15 year old, any sexual activity is a criminal offence.

Another Exception....



Consent: Issues to Consider (continued)

- “Close in age” exception for 12 and 13 year olds:
- A 12- or 13-year-old can consent to sexual activity with a partner if:
 - The partner is less than two years older.
 - There is no relationship of trust, authority or dependency or any other exploitation of the young person.
 - This means that if the partner is 2 years or older than the 12 or 13 year old, any sexual activity is a criminal offence.



Consent:

Legal versus “emotional” age?

- In ASD, there is sometimes an inconsistency between intelligence, chronological age, and social-emotional maturity
 - “emotional age”
- How does this influence consent to sexual activity?
 - Should it influence?
 - How?

