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# Puberty, Sex, and Sexuality



**An Introduction for Autistic Teens and Adults**

## Introduction

**Additional  
resources online at:  
[triad.vkclearning.org](http://triad.vkclearning.org)**

This toolkit provides information about puberty, sex, and sexuality for autistic teens and adults. Sometimes autistic people and people with other developmental disabilities aren't given the chance to learn about sex. But you have the same need and right to learn as everyone else! Learning about sex and sexuality is an important way to help you understand yourself and others, as well as make informed and safe decisions about what sex and sexuality mean to you.

This toolkit is written for teens and adults who can read and understand this information on their own. However, it is often helpful to read or talk about this information with a person you trust. The best person to talk to about these topics will be someone over the age of 18 whom you trust to keep your conversations private and who is helpful to you.

A more detailed review of this material and additional resources can be found in the interactive online version of this toolkit. Register for a free account at [triad.vkclearning.org](http://triad.vkclearning.org) and access the information in either of the following folders:

### Caregiver



### School-Age Services



## All About Puberty

### What is puberty?

All people grow and change as they get older. Puberty is the process that our bodies go through as we move from being children to being adults. For example, most people will start to grow hair on their underarms and their genitals. You may also notice that you sweat more or that your skin and hair have more oil. Going through puberty is a normal part of growing up!

It is important to clean and take care of your body by doing the things below every day:

- Changing your clothing every day
- Keeping your body clean by taking a bath or shower
- Washing your hair and body with shampoo and soap
- Using deodorant
- Brushing your teeth

Genitals are:

- The parts of your body that are sexual, meaning that people use them to have sex.
- Sometimes called “private parts.”

The changes that happen in your body during puberty will be different depending on your biological sex (male or female). Not everyone has the same genitals or sexual body parts.







## Common body changes during puberty for people with a penis

In addition to noticing more hair on your arms, legs, and genitals, you may notice hair growing on your face. This is called facial hair. Most people shave or groom their facial hair using a razor.

You may notice that there are times when your penis gets harder and longer. This is called an erection. An erection can happen when you touch your penis in a way that feels good. Erections can also happen when you don't expect them to or don't want them to.

Sometimes, a sticky, white fluid comes out of a penis. The fluid is called semen. When it comes out of a penis, this is called ejaculation. You might ejaculate when you touch or rub your penis in a way that feels good. Erections and ejaculation are normal and mean that your body is working the way it should. Sometimes, a penis releases semen during sleep. This is called a nocturnal emission. It is also sometimes called a wet dream.



## Common body changes during puberty for people with a vagina

You may grow more hair on your arms, legs, and genitals.

Most people with a vagina begin menstruation. Menstruation is also called "getting a period." A period is when blood comes out of the vagina. Periods are normal and mean that your body is working the way it should. During a period, many people use pads or tampons to catch the blood and keep their clothes clean. You can talk to your doctor or another person you trust about ways to wear a pad or tampon most comfortably.

You may notice your breasts growing and changing. Many people wear a bra to cover and support their breasts.

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## All About Health and Reproduction

It is important to take care of your body to help you stay clean and healthy. The table below has suggestions on how to take care of your body.

Taking Care of Your Body	
For people with a penis	For people with a vagina
Wearing an athletic supporter or a jockstrap during physical activity can help protect your penis from injury.	Wear clean and dry cotton underwear that are comfortable. Be sure to change your underwear daily and wash them in hot, soapy water.
Wear clean and dry cotton underwear that are comfortable. Be sure to change your underwear daily and wash them in hot, soapy water.	Gently wash your vulva and bottom once a day with warm, soapy water and rinse well.
Clean your penis and bottom at least once a day with warm, soapy water and rinse well.	A gynecologist is a doctor who helps to make sure that your vulva and vagina are healthy. Most people with a vagina go to a gynecologist for an examination about once a year, beginning during puberty.

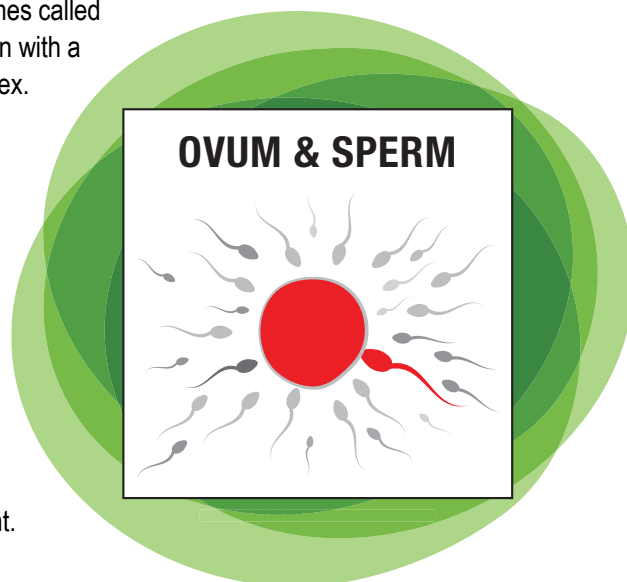
### Fertilization and Pregnancy

The changes in your body during puberty happen so that your body is able to reproduce, or make a baby, if that is something that you decide to do.

Fertilization happens when a sex cell inside a person with a penis (a sperm) joins with a sex cell inside a person with a vagina (an ovum, sometimes called an egg). This sometimes happens when a person with a penis and a person with a vagina have vaginal sex.

During vaginal sex, the penis moves in and out of the vagina, which can cause the penis to ejaculate and release semen into the vagina. Sometimes a sperm joins with an ovum. This is called fertilization. Pregnancy starts when a fertilized egg attaches to the wall of the uterus.

People can tell if they are pregnant by taking a pregnancy test. You can buy pregnancy tests in a store. You can also go to your doctor for a pregnancy test if you think you could be pregnant.



## All About Public or Private

It is important to know the difference between places, conversations, and activities that are public and those that are private.

### Body Parts

“Private parts” are the ones usually covered by a swimsuit or underwear. Breasts, buttocks, penises, and vulvas are all private parts. You should touch your private parts only in private places. No one else should touch your private parts unless you say it is okay.

### Places

Some places are not completely public or private. For example, a public bathroom is not completely public or private because other people can still see and hear you. In a car, only the people in the car with you can hear what you say, but people outside the car can still see you through the windows.

Some private spaces are not completely private all the time. For example, your bedroom may be a private space if you’re alone with the door closed, but if you have friends over in your bedroom then it is no longer private.

Some public places have areas that are a little more private and are meant for certain private activities. For example, a gym or swimming pool usually has a locker room so that you can change clothes. At some doctor’s appointments, you will be asked to take off certain clothes in an exam room so that the doctor can examine you.

PRIVATE



PUBLIC



### **Public Place**

Somewhere anyone can go or a place where other people are around you.

### **Private Place**

Somewhere that you are alone, without other people seeing or hearing you.

### **Examples of Public Activities**

Going on a walk, eating food, and talking to a friend.

### **Examples of Private Activities**

Any activities that involve private parts should happen only in private places.

## **Conversations**

Some conversations are okay to have in public places, where other people can hear you. For example, talking about your math class or your favorite video game are conversations that are okay to have in public.

Conversations about topics that you don't want other people to hear, or that other people may not want to hear about, are best to have in private places with only people that you trust.

For example, it is not polite to talk about private parts in public, where anyone can hear. Instead, it is best to talk about your private parts only with a doctor or a person you trust.

It's also important to know that sending messages or photos over text message or the internet is not private. Even if you only send a message to one person, that message could be sent or shared with many different people.

## **Activities**

Activities are things that you do. Some activities are okay to do in public places. There are some activities that are not okay to do in public places and should only be done in private.

Sometimes people may think it's funny to break the public versus private rules, or to dare someone to do a private thing in a public place. It's important to know that breaking the public versus private rules is not okay, even if someone asks you to or thinks that it is a joke.

Learning the difference between public and private places, topics, and activities can be confusing. If you have questions about public versus private, it can help to talk to a person you trust about any questions that you have.



*For more information and practice activities, go to the All About Public or Private section in the interactive online version of this toolkit referenced on page two.*

## All About Gender, Sex, and Sexuality

<b>Heterosexual</b>	People who are attracted to someone of the opposite gender
<b>Homosexual</b>	People who are attracted to someone of the same gender
<b>Bisexual</b>	People are attracted to people of the same gender and people of different genders
<b>Asexual</b>	People who do not feel sexual attraction or interest

### Gender and Sex

The words gender and sex are sometimes used in the same way, but they actually have different meanings.

**Your Sex:** A label given by a doctor when you are born based on the genitals, chromosomes, and hormones that you are born with. A person's sex is usually male or female and is listed on their birth certificate.

**Your Gender:** Based on how you feel inside and how you want to express your gender. Many people feel like either a man or a woman. Some people do not feel like either. A person's gender is not the same thing as their biological sex or genitals. Some people choose to express their gender through the clothes they wear, how they act, or their appearance. Not all people express their gender the same way.

Some people's sex (male or female) matches with their gender. These people are often called **cisgender**. Other people feel that the biological sex they were assigned at birth doesn't match with their gender. These people are often called **transgender**. Only you can know what gender you feel like and how you want to express your gender.

### Sexuality

**Your Sexuality:** A word that describes who a person is attracted to.

It can be confusing to understand your gender and sexuality and how you want to express these things to others. It is okay if you haven't thought about these things yet or are not sure how you feel. Sometimes it helps to talk to a person you trust about any questions that you have.



*For more information go to the All About Gender, Sex, and Sexuality section in the interactive online version of this toolkit referenced on page two.*

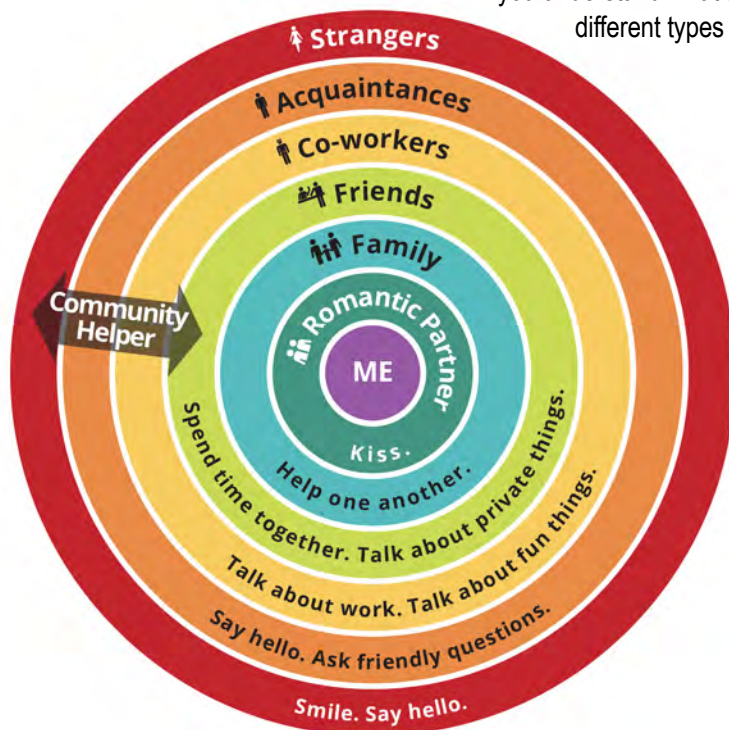


## All About Types of Relationships

“Relationship” is the word we use to talk about the type of connection between two people. There are many different kinds of relationships. The type of relationship that two people have helps to explain how they interact and communicate with one another. Below are some examples of different types of relationships that you may have now or in the future.

- **Stranger:** Someone you do not know and have never met.
- **Community Helper:** Someone whose job it is to help people. Some community helpers are police officers, doctors, nurses, therapists, and teachers. In the picture below, the gray arrow shows that some community helpers are closer to the center of the relationship circle and are more personal, and some are at the outside and are less personal.
- **Acquaintance:** Someone you have met, have interacted with several times, and whose name you know.
- **Co-worker:** Someone you work with.
- **Friend:** A relationship between two people who enjoy one another’s company, like some of the same things, and both agree that they are friends.
- **Family:** A relationship is between family members, such as parents and children, siblings, or other family members.
- **Romantic Partner:** A relationship is between people who agree they are in a romantic relationship and are physically or sexually attracted to one another. Family members, such as siblings, or parents and children, do not have romantic relationships with each other. Adults do not have romantic relationships with children who are under age 18, and it is illegal to do this.

The types of relationships people have sometimes change as they get older. Sometimes different types of relationships can happen with the same person. It can be helpful to talk to a person you trust if you have questions about the types of relationships in your life. The picture below can help you understand what types of behaviors are okay in different types of relationships.



### MORE INFO



For more information, go to the All About Types of Relationships section in the interactive online version of this toolkit referenced on page two.

## All About Sexual Attraction

Having good information about sex will help you to be prepared, make informed decisions, know what questions to ask, and stay safe.

### Age of Consent

Sex is not for children. The law says that you have to be a certain age before you are old enough to have sex. This age is called *the age of consent*. Until you have reached this age, you are considered too young to give consent to have sex. While the age of consent is usually around 16, it can vary in many states. You can ask a doctor or a person you trust what the law says in your state about the age of consent.

There is no “right age” for sex, as long as both people are above the age of consent. A lot of people don’t feel ready to have sex until they are much older than the age of consent. Other people may decide to wait to have sex until they are married because of religious, spiritual, or personal beliefs.

### Sexual Feelings

Many people start to think about having sex when they have sexual feelings for another person. While sometimes sexual feelings alone can lead to people wanting to have sex, often sexual feelings first lead to two people wanting to spend more time together and wanting to get to know one another better. Not all sexual feelings lead to sex.

Usually, sexual feelings are described as a tingly, throbbing, warm feeling in the abdomen or around the genitals. Often there is also a feeling of excitement. These feelings are okay, but it is not okay to stare at, move very close to, or touch other people unless you are in a romantic relationship with them and they have said it is okay. Sexual feelings are private and should only be talked about with a person you trust in a private place.

### When You Are Ready to Have Sex

Before you are ready to have sex, it is important to understand and be prepared for the possible consequences of having sex by doing the following things:

#### Prepare for the Consequences of Having Sex

Use protection to avoid unwanted pregnancy

Use protection to avoid sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

Communicate about consent and safety

Another important part of knowing if you’re ready to have sex is thinking about how you *feel*. Just because two people are in a relationship and feel attracted to one another doesn’t mean that they should have sex. If you don’t feel ready to have sex, that’s okay!

No one else can decide how you feel about having sex or if you feel like you are ready. If someone pressures you to have sex before you are ready, that is not okay. You should only agree to have sex when you want to have sex.



## All About Sex

When people have sexual feelings, their bodies may respond to these feelings. The penis may become erect or the vagina may produce a fluid that makes it wet. This means that your body is getting ready to have sex. It does not mean that you have to have sex if you don't want to.

Sex often starts by exploring your partner's body through touching and kissing and allowing your partner to touch and kiss your body. There are certain parts of the body that can feel good to be touched and kissed, such as the breasts, thighs, and genitals. However, every body is different, and what feels good to one person may not feel good to another.

When the body is ready for sex, the penis becomes erect and the vagina becomes wet and slippery. One way to have sex is for the penis to move in and out of the vagina, which can feel good for both people. This is called vaginal sex or sexual intercourse. There are other ways to have sex too.

During sex, sexual feelings often become very strong and can result in an orgasm for one or both partners. An orgasm for a person with a penis usually includes ejaculating semen from the end of the penis. For a person with a vagina, an orgasm includes tensing of the muscles of the vagina. Orgasms usually feel good and enjoyable. Sometimes people don't have an orgasm during sex, and this is okay. It is important to talk with your partner about what feels good for you, and to ask your partner about what feels good for them when you have sex. This will help sex to feel good and be safe for both you and your partner.

**Masturbation Is:**

- When people choose to touch their own bodies and genitals for sexual pleasure
- Safe and normal
- Private and should only be done in a private place

**Pornography Is:**

- Any picture, drawing, film, or writing made specifically to make people have sexual feelings
- Staged (not real) and does not show typical, healthy, or even real sexual relationships and situations
- For adults, not for children, and it shouldn't be used until someone turns 18 years old.
- Illegal when it is of children or shown to children, because children are too young to give their consent for sex
- Private and should only be viewed or read in a private place

It can be a good idea to talk with a person you trust about masturbation and pornography to help make sure what you are watching and doing is safe and healthy.



*For more information go to the All About Sex section in the interactive online version of this toolkit referenced on page two.*

## All About Protected Sex

In this section you'll learn about the things that might happen because you have sex, which are called consequences. For sex to be a good experience for everyone, it is important to understand the consequences of sex and protect yourself from the consequences that you and your partner do not want.

Consequences of Sex	
<b>Pregnancy</b>	If you do not want sex to result in pregnancy, or if you and your partner have not talked together about trying to get pregnant, it is important to use one of the methods described on the following page to try to prevent pregnancy.
<b>Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI)</b>	An STI is an illness that you can get from having vaginal, oral, or anal sex. It is important to protect yourself and your partner from spreading STIs to keep everyone safe.



You can protect yourself from pregnancy and STIs by not having sex. You can also protect yourself by using the protected sex methods below:

**Birth Control:** Helps people having sex avoid pregnancy. Birth control does not protect against STIs. There are many different kinds of birth control, including:

- Pills
- Patches
- Intrauterine devices (IUDs)

**Condoms:** A thin, stretchy pouch that is worn on the penis during sex. Condoms protect against pregnancy and protect against STIs.

While protected sex methods help to prevent pregnancy, it's important to know that they don't always work all the time. You should talk to your doctor about the what kind of birth control might be right for you. If you are unsure whether you or a sexual partner has an STI, there are medical tests that you can get from your doctor or a clinic that will tell you if you have an STI. If you choose to have sex, always talk with your partner about STIs, birth control, and condoms.



## All About Safety and Consent

In this section you'll learn what consent is and why it's important, as well as what sexual abuse is and steps that you can take to keep yourself safe. To make sure that sex is a positive and safe experience, there are some rules and guidelines that should be followed:

### Rules About Sex

- A person must be old enough to have sex
- Sex must take place in a private place
- Sex must never be forced
- Sex between family members is not okay

**What is Consent:** When a person tells another person that it is okay to do something.

- If a person says they want to do something, then they consent.
- If a person says no or that they do not want something, they do not consent.

Consent goes both ways! People need to get your consent before touching you in any way. You need to get someone else's consent before touching them in any way. Consent is always important, no matter how long you know someone, how you know someone, or how old you are.

**Sexual Abuse:** Doing something sexual to someone without their consent. Sexual abuse is illegal.

**If someone is touching you sexually without your consent, tell an adult person that you trust. If the person you tell doesn't believe you, find someone else until someone does something to help you. It is never your fault if someone does something sexual to you without your consent, even if that person is someone that you know.**

#### MORE INFO

*For more information and practice activities go to the All About Safety and Consent section in the interactive online version of this toolkit referenced on page two.*

## Final Thoughts

Learning about yourself, your body, your gender, your health, and your sexuality will take time and practice because sexuality is different for everyone. Look at the resource list below for places to go for additional reading and information. We wish you success on your journey of development and self-discovery!

If you are interested in learning more about puberty, sex, and sexuality, please see the full online *Puberty, Sex, and Sexuality: An Introduction for Autistic Teens and Adults* toolkit by visiting [triad.vkclearning.org](http://triad.vkclearning.org).

## Places to Go for More Information

### Online Resources:

- ❑ Autistic Self-Advocacy Network: [autisticadvocacy.org/resources/](http://autisticadvocacy.org/resources/)
- ❑ National Council on Independent Living: [ncil.org/sex-ed-for-individuals-with-i-dd/](http://ncil.org/sex-ed-for-individuals-with-i-dd/)

### Books:

- ❑ Attwood, S. (2008). *Making Sense of Sex: A Forthright Guide to Puberty, Sex and Relationships for People with Asperger's Syndrome*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- ❑ Davies, C. & Dubie, M. (2011). *Intimate Relationships and Sexual Health: A Curriculum for Teaching Adolescents/Adults with High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder and Other Social Challenges*. AAPC Publishing.
- ❑ Goodall et al. (2016). *The Autism Spectrum Guide to Sexuality and Relationships*. [amazon.com/Autism-Spectrum-Guide-Sexuality-Relationships/dp/1849057052](http://amazon.com/Autism-Spectrum-Guide-Sexuality-Relationships/dp/1849057052)
- ❑ Hartman, D. (2013). *Sexuality and Relationship Education for Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders*. [amazon.com/Sexuality-Relationship-Education-Adolescents-Disorders/dp/1849053855](http://amazon.com/Sexuality-Relationship-Education-Adolescents-Disorders/dp/1849053855)
- ❑ Henault, I. (2005). *Asperger's Syndrome and Sexuality: From Adolescence through Adulthood*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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