Preparing for Puberty in Children with Autism

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Acknowledgments

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Today’s Focus

• Individuals with developmental disabilities and/or autism spectrum disorder

• Individuals struggling with hygiene, appropriate behaviors, play skills

• Before or early puberty

• Struggling with transitioning to puberty

• Some topics are uncomfortable to discuss
Today’s Presentation

- Before Puberty
- Leisure Life Skills
- Hygiene Issues
- Emotional Changes
- Body Changes in Girls and Boys
- Understanding Public/Private Behavior
- Fostering Appropriate Relationships
Timing of Puberty

• Timing of puberty is the same for individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities

• Presence of developmental delays does not impact physical development

• Precocious puberty may occur in some children

• Ideally, start discussing puberty before it happens (late elementary/early middle school)
Talking about puberty

• Consider the language you use
  • Co-occurring language disorder
  • Use of Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) devices

• Use similar learning strategies that have been effective in the past

• Reach out to therapists, teachers, family members
Talking about puberty

Range of topics to discuss

• Hygiene
• Independence
• Body Changes
• Safety
• Dating/relationships
• Gender and pronouns
• Sexuality
Leisure Life Skills

- Children with disabilities tend to have a more restricted range of leisure activities compared to typical children
  - Tend to engage in passive leisure activities
  - Tend to engage in more solitary leisure activities
  - May become more restricted over time in either expressed interest or actual participation

- Begin encouraging more active/social activities at a young age

- Build off of current interests
Leisure Life Skills

Child’s Current Interests
Leisure Life Skills: Example

- Bowling
- Mini-golf
- Ping pong
- Shuffleboard
- Tetherball

- Balls + One Partner
  - Tennis
  - Racquetball
  - Low Impact + One Partner
  - Walking
  - Kayaking or Canoeing
  - Rock Climbing with Top Rope
  - Dancing

Passing ball back-and-forth

Low Impact

One Partner
Encouraging Good Hygiene

- New hygiene habits
  - New items needed on a daily basis
  - Increased importance of regular washing

- New routine = New Visuals and Structure
  - What do I need to do?
  - When tools do I need?
  - When I am finished?

- Consider sensory sensitivities (fragrances, hair washing)

- Consider motor difficulties
Hygiene Kits

Morning Kit

What do I need? What should I do? How do I know when I’m finished?

Shower Kit

Build in additional structure
Specific schedule
Break down tasks into smaller parts
Moods Changes

Some amount of mood changes is typical

Build emotion words and coping strategies into speech therapy and/or social skills curriculums

Track mood and behavior for red flags
Puberty, School, and Sex Ed

• Is your child exposed part of a sex education curriculum at school?

• Where children learn about sex and puberty:
  • Parents
  • Teachers
  • Peers

• If not here, then where?
Why should we incorporate this?

• May learn less from peers
• May need more practice/repetition for concepts
• Need to adequately address misinformation/misconceptions
• May misinterpret information
Girls & Puberty
Breast Development and Bras

- Development of breast buds is an early sign of puberty
- Consider terminology
- Preparing for bra wearing
  - Practice before a bra is needed (tank tops, training bras)
- Consider preferences and comfort
- Independence – pull over bras, fasteners in front
Menstruation

• Teach before her first period, if possible

• Toileting independence

• Promote comfort, limit pain
  • Communication tools to express pain

• Consider: Visual Impairment, Motor Impairment

• Allow her to access the range of options that other women have
Menstruation

• Consider a menstruation kit tailored to her needs

• Practice with pads, period underwear
  • Tampons are more difficult

• Tools to help track period timings

• Privacy and periods
  • School considerations
Birth Control

• Family values are a part of the conversation

• Birth control may be used to reduce pain, reduce amount of bleeding, improve irregularity, reduce frequency, suppress periods.

• If she is able, involve the child in the decision process.
Birth Control: Questions to talk about

• What are the reasons for/against placing a girl on birth control?
• What methods are available? Can she use these? Is it safe?
• What is the best for quality of life?
Female Health Exams

• Specialty centers for autistic adults
• Practice visits
• Clear communication with the doctor
• Break long visits into shorter visits
• Distractions
Boys & Puberty
Body Changes: Erections

• Typical part of puberty

• Younger boys also experience erections

• May occur multiple times daily, without a clear trigger

• May cause embarrassment
Body Changes: Erections

- Clear expectations regarding public/private behavior
  - Avoiding the conversation may lead to confusion

- Consider tighter brief style underwear

- Provide strategies
Nocturnal Emissions

- Ejaculation that occurs during sleep
- Normal part of puberty and not under his control

Points to teach
- What happened?
- Why did it happen?
- What do I do?
Public and Private Behaviors

• Touching private parts
• Masturbating
• Undressing

• Inappropriate interactions with others
  • Sitting on laps
Public vs. Private Behaviors:

• House rules  
  • Apply to all family members

• Direct teaching  
  • What parts are personal parts?  
  • Where can personal parts be touched or uncovered?  
  • In front of who?

• If behavior has started, use social or story based-interventions

• Redirection when available.
Masturbation

• Generally common among both males and females

• Masturbation behaviors may occur prior to puberty (touching/rubbing of private parts)

• Stay calm

• Punishment can backfire

• Set boundaries on the behavior
Masturbation

• Minimize access

• Minimize attention

• Consider a medical exam
Relationships & Safety
Relationships

• Expect to see desire to form friendships, romantic relationships

• Why should we teach about relationships?
  - Protection
  - Quality of life
  - Understanding different kinds of relationships
  - Understanding appropriate behavior
Different Kinds of Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Acquaintance</th>
<th>Co-worker</th>
<th>Stranger</th>
<th>Boyfriend/Girlfriend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

• Be clear about differences between categories

• May need to use less information for children of different levels

• Appropriate interactions
  • Greetings/Physical Contact – high five, shake hand, hug, kiss, etc.
  • Conversation
Dating

• What is dating? To what extent is it allowed?

• How have we handled any “double standards”?

• If the individuals is allowed to date: What is allowed to happen on the date? Supervision?

• How do you know if someone is your boyfriend/girlfriend?
Unsafe Relationships

- Bruising, particularly on areas that are unexpected (e.g., ears, genitals) or other unexplained injuries
- Pain or itching in genital area
- Changes in behavior
  - Withdrawal
  - Desire to stay home from events previously enjoyed
Unsafe Relationships

• Build in public/private behaviors and private parts into concepts relating to possible abuse

• Stranger danger is not sufficient

• Good secrets v. bad secrets
Internet Protection

• What is appropriate?
  • Pictures of…
  • Invitations to…
  • Stories about…

• What is inappropriate?
  • Pictures of…
  • Personal information
  • Sexual messages

• Be specific and monitor access
Thank you