

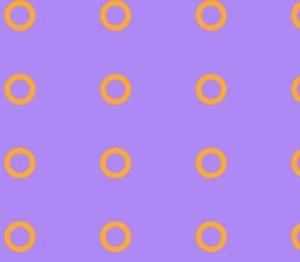
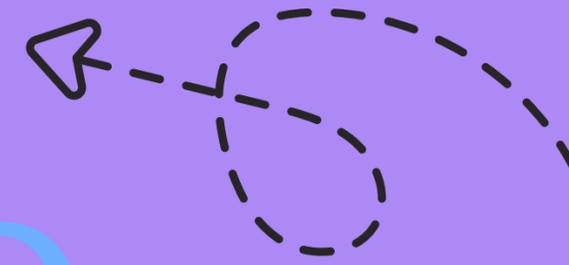
# Love & autism



Building connections  
in affirming ways

Eileen T. Crehan, PhD  
Licensed Clinical Psychologist  
June 25, 2025

# Our plan



1. Big ideas!
2. Lifespan approach
3. Research sampler
4. Resources





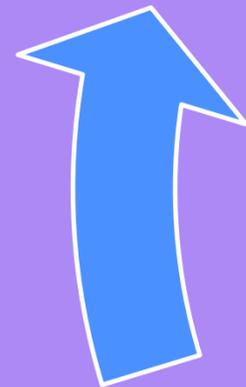


# Ideally...

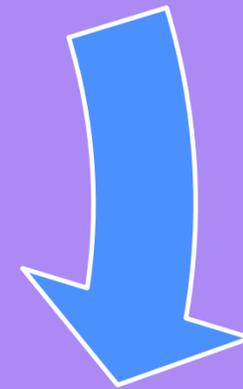
Safety and  
openness



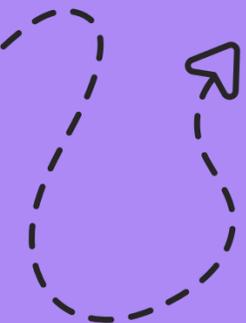
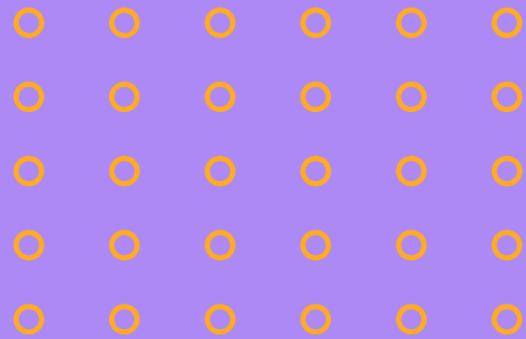
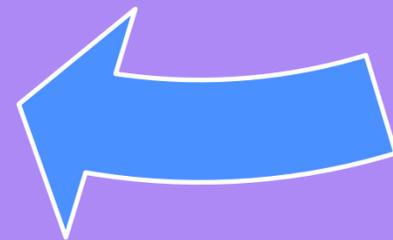
Knowledge  
of trusted  
adults



Knowledge  
and  
comfort of  
child



Comfort of  
trusted  
adults

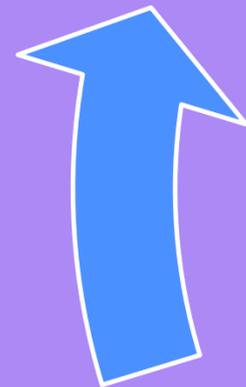


# Ideally...

Safety and  
openness



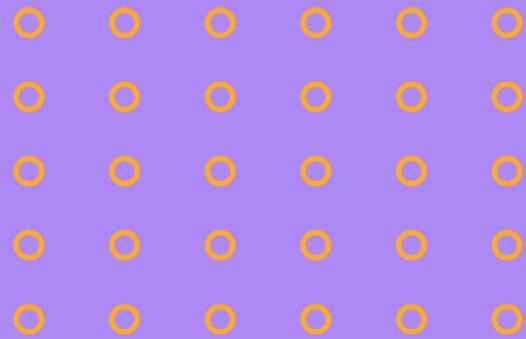
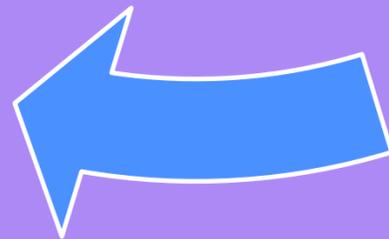
Knowledge  
of trusted  
adults



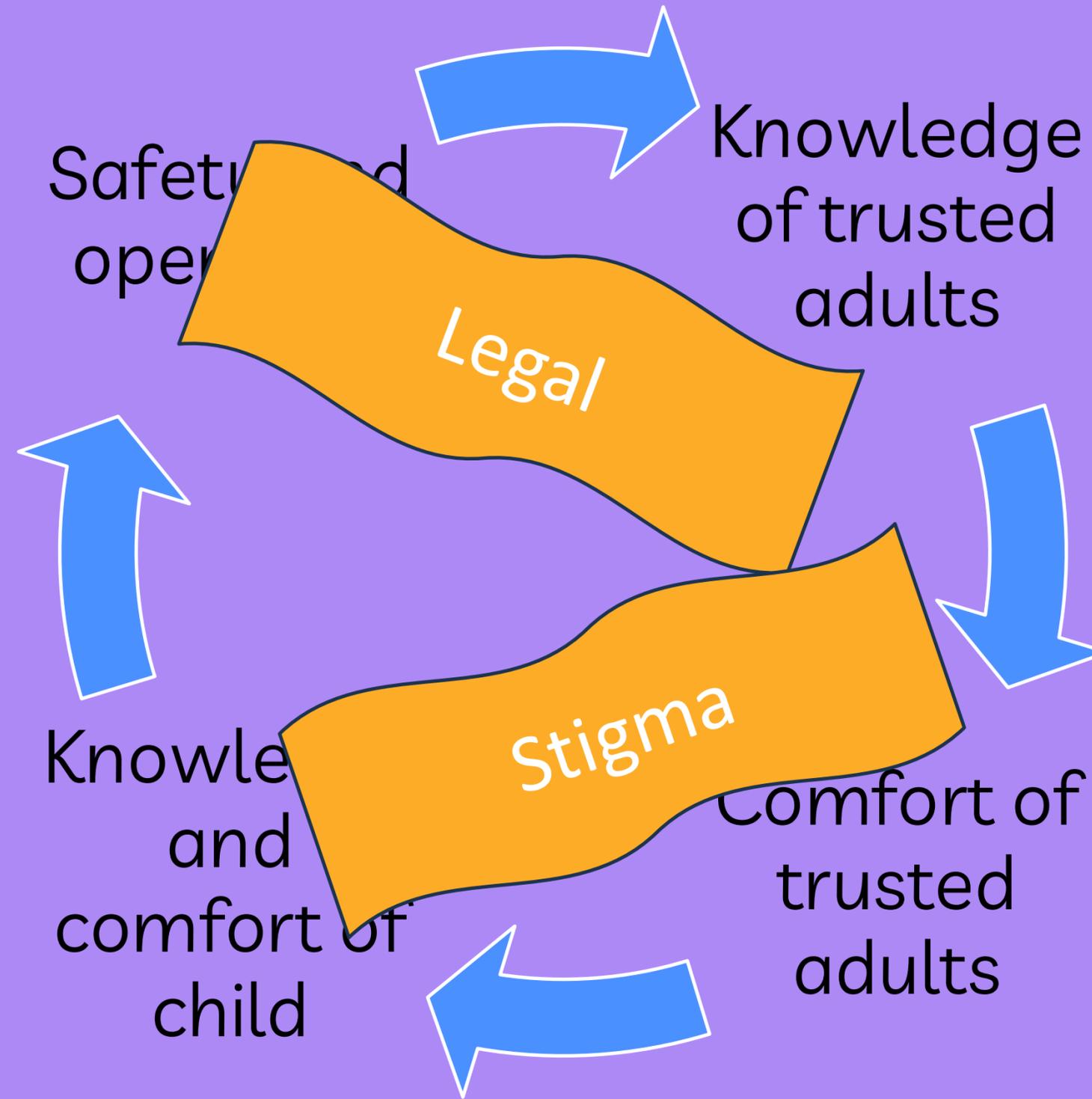
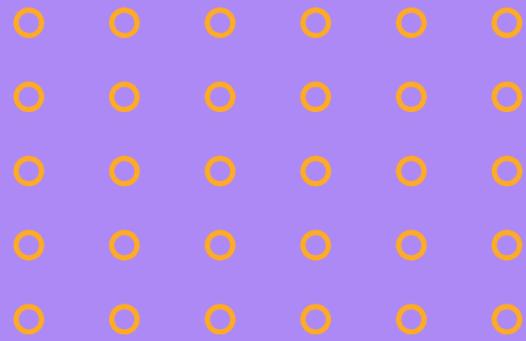
Knowle  
and  
comfot of  
child



Comfot of  
trusted  
adults



# Ideally...



# 2024 United States Sex Education

## REPORT CARD

### Content Requirements Grade

This grade includes sub-criteria such as:

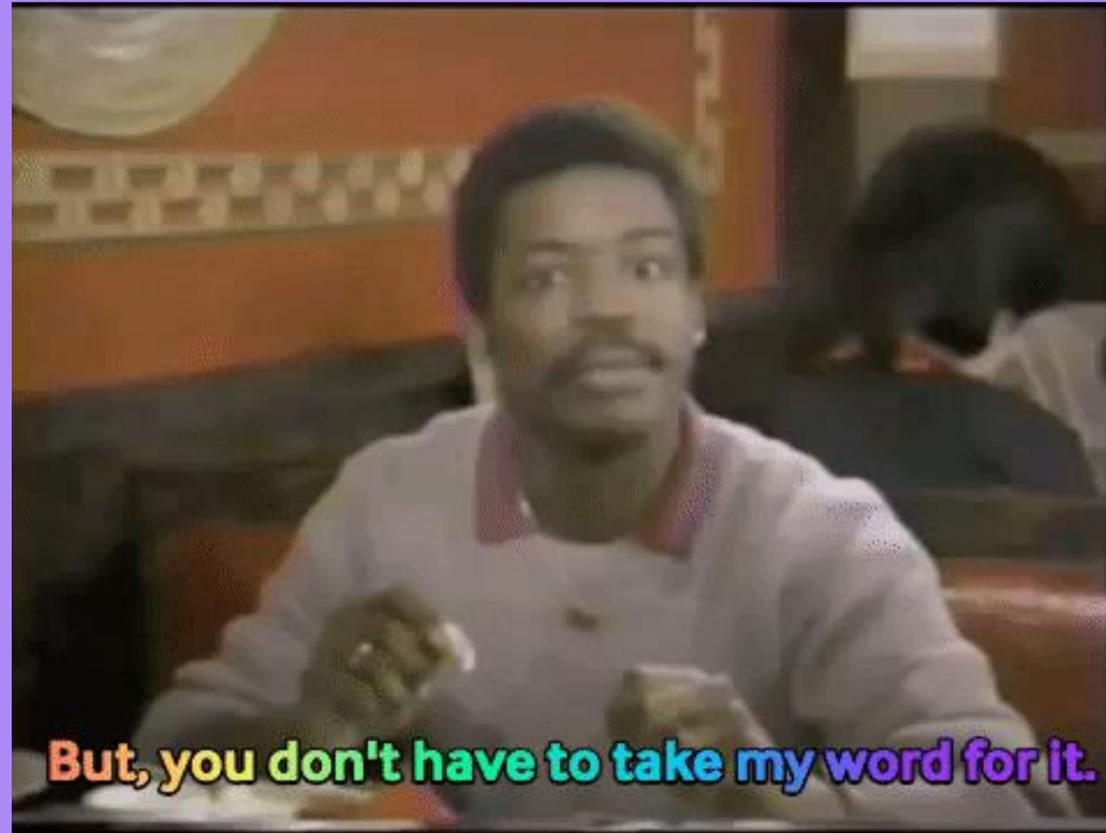
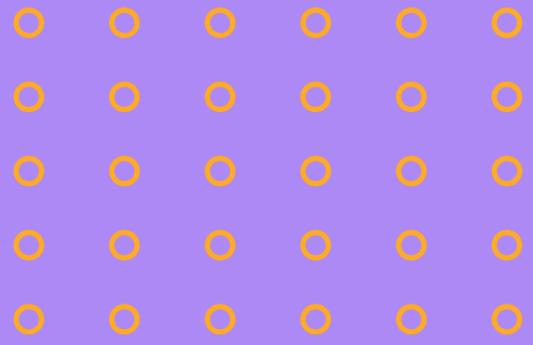
- Is sex education required to be medically accurate by law?
- Is it required to be LGBTQIA+ inclusive by law?
- Is there instruction on contraception?

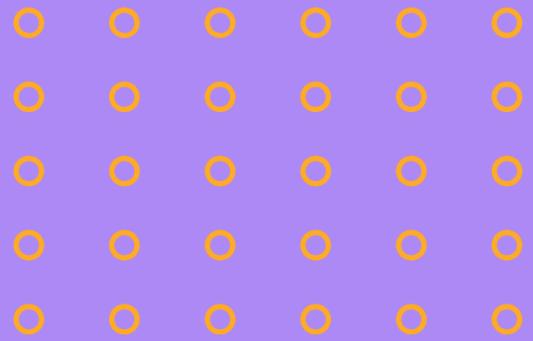
Each sub-criterion is weighted based on legal requirements and the extent of mandated instruction. This category also accounts for states that legally require alignment with the National Sex Education Standards, the benchmark for quality sex education.

### Overall Grade

These two categories combine to form the overall grade, reflecting the state of sex education policy in each state. However, this grade highlights existing laws and policies but does not capture local implementation, which can vary significantly. SIECUS aims to make the state report cards an iterative process, eventually including policy implementation as a category to provide a comprehensive view of sex education across the United States.

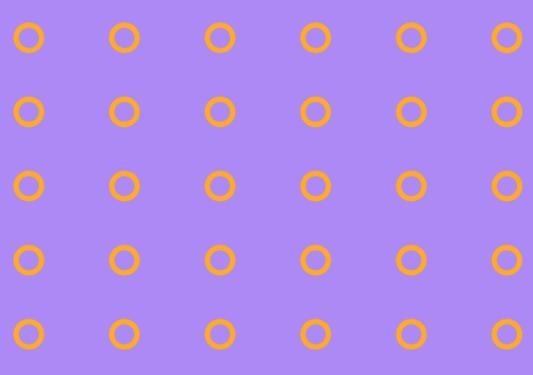
State	SEX ED RQMT. GRADE	CONTENT GRADE	OVERALL GRADE
<a href="#">Georgia</a>	A	F	D+
<a href="#">Hawaii</a>	B	C	C+
<a href="#">Idaho</a>	D	D-	D-
<a href="#">Illinois</a>	C	A+	A-
<a href="#">Indiana</a>	D	F	F
<a href="#">Iowa</a>	A	C-	C+
<a href="#">Kansas</a>	B	D-	D+
<a href="#">Kentucky</a>	D	F	F
<a href="#">Louisiana</a>	B	F	D
<a href="#">Maine</a>	A	C	B-
<a href="#">Maryland</a>	B	B-	B-
<a href="#">Massachusetts</a>	D	D	D
<a href="#">Michigan</a>	C	D-	D
<a href="#">Minnesota</a>	A	F	D+
<a href="#">Mississippi</a>	C	F	F
<a href="#">Missouri</a>	C	C	C
<a href="#">Montana</a>	B	D	C-
<a href="#">Nebraska</a>	D	F	F
<a href="#">Nevada</a>	C	D+	C-
<a href="#">New Hampshire</a>	A	D	C





**World Health  
Organization**





# Dignity of risk



\*Amy Gravino





# Talk to yourself about sexuality & relationships!

- ☀️ What are your own thoughts & beliefs about disability and sexuality?
- ☀️ What hopes and dreams do you have for your child/student/patient?
- ☀️ What hopes and dreams does your child/student/patient have?
- ☀️ What are ways that romantic love and physical intimacy are important to you? How can we advocate for that for everyone?



# Let's set the stage a bit

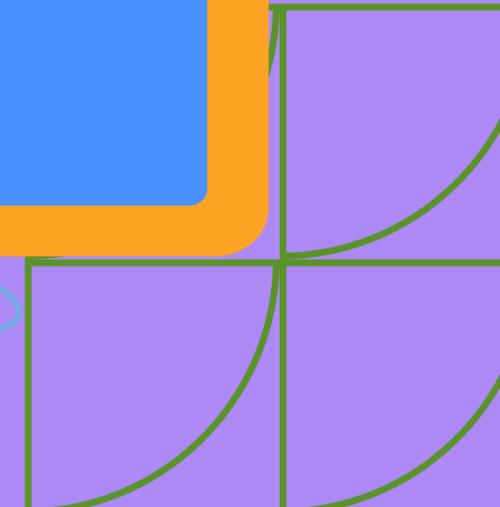
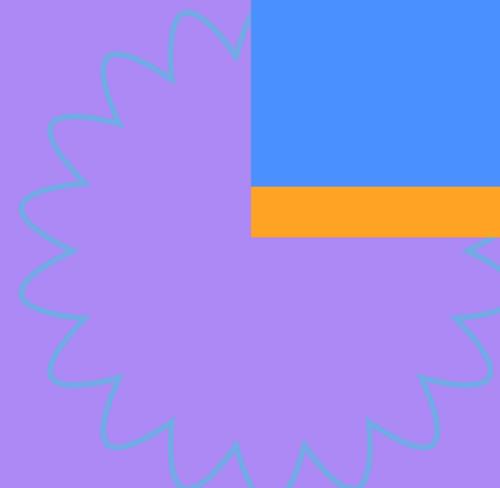
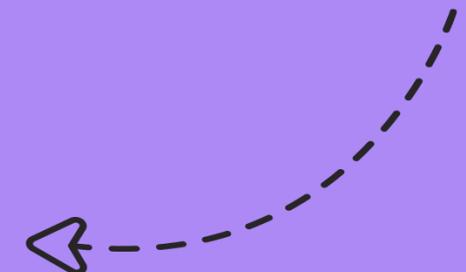
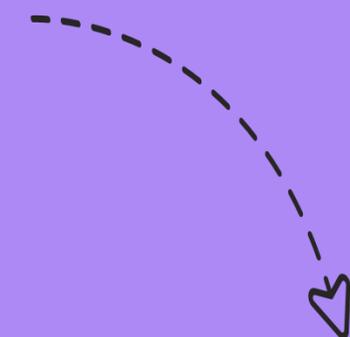
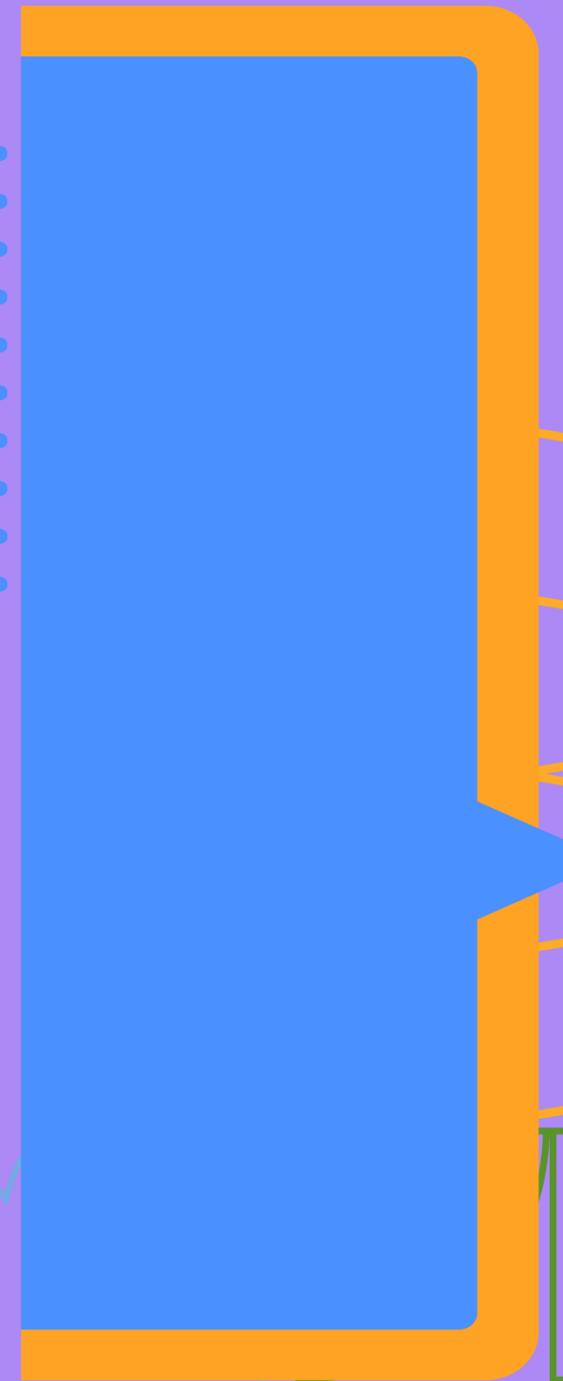
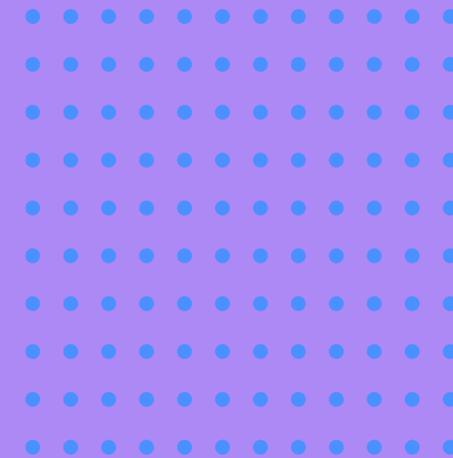
**Prevalence of romantic relationships & intimacy**

**Safety**

**Access to information**

**Identity & autism**

**Preparedness**



When do I start?

# Right now!

## You want to be the go-to

You don't need to study first.

## Use direct and clear language at any age

Visuals can help!

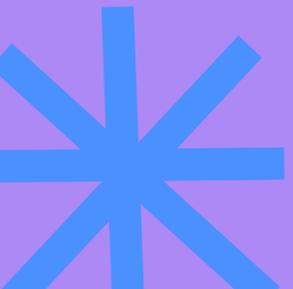
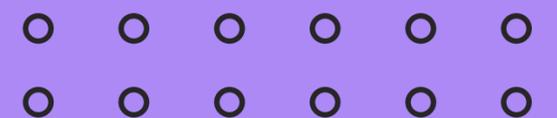
## Create some support

Whose values align with yours?

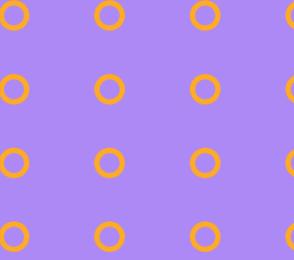
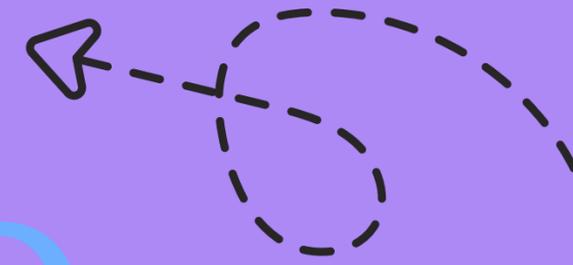
Who already is in your circle?

Anatomy and Physiology  
Puberty and Adolescent Sexual  
Development  
Gender Identity and Expression  
Sexual Orientation and Identity  
Sexual Health  
Consent and Healthy Relationships  
Interpersonal Violence

<https://siecus.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/NSES-2020-2.pdf>



# Our plan



1. Big ideas!
2. Lifespan approach
3. Research sampler
4. Resources

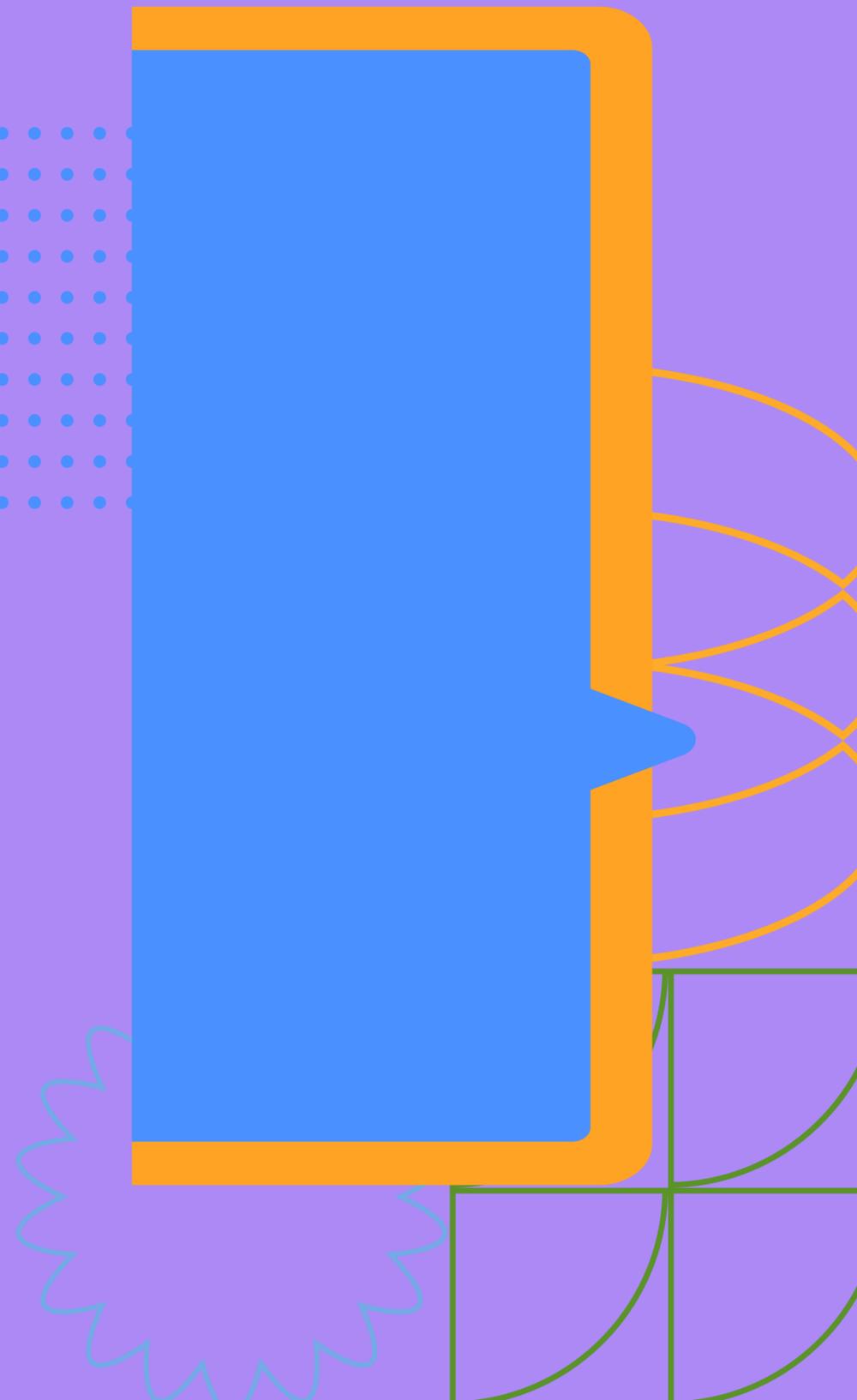
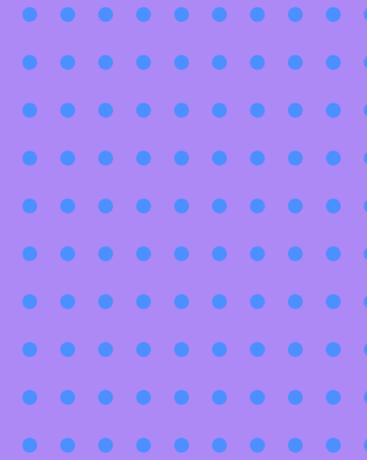
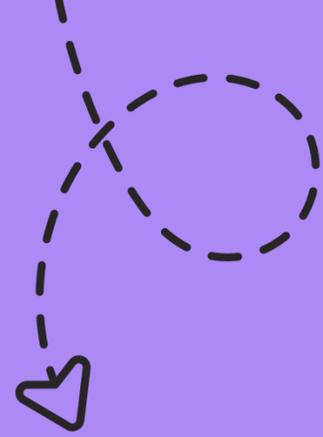


# Younger kids

**Body parts**

**Boundaries**

**Different family constellations**



**SELF-CARE**

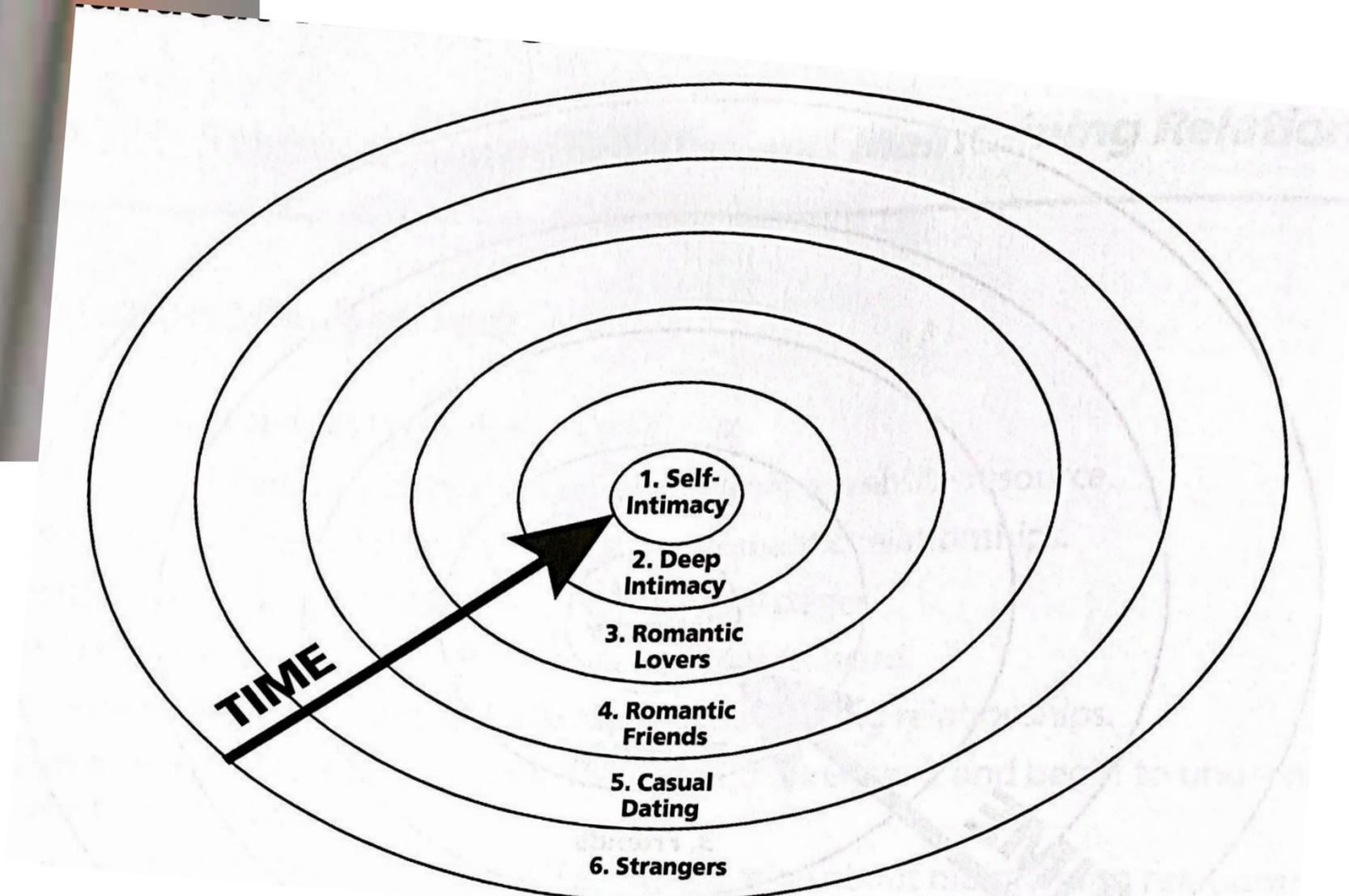


Tackling Teenage Training

# BOUNDARIES



**BOUNDARIES**

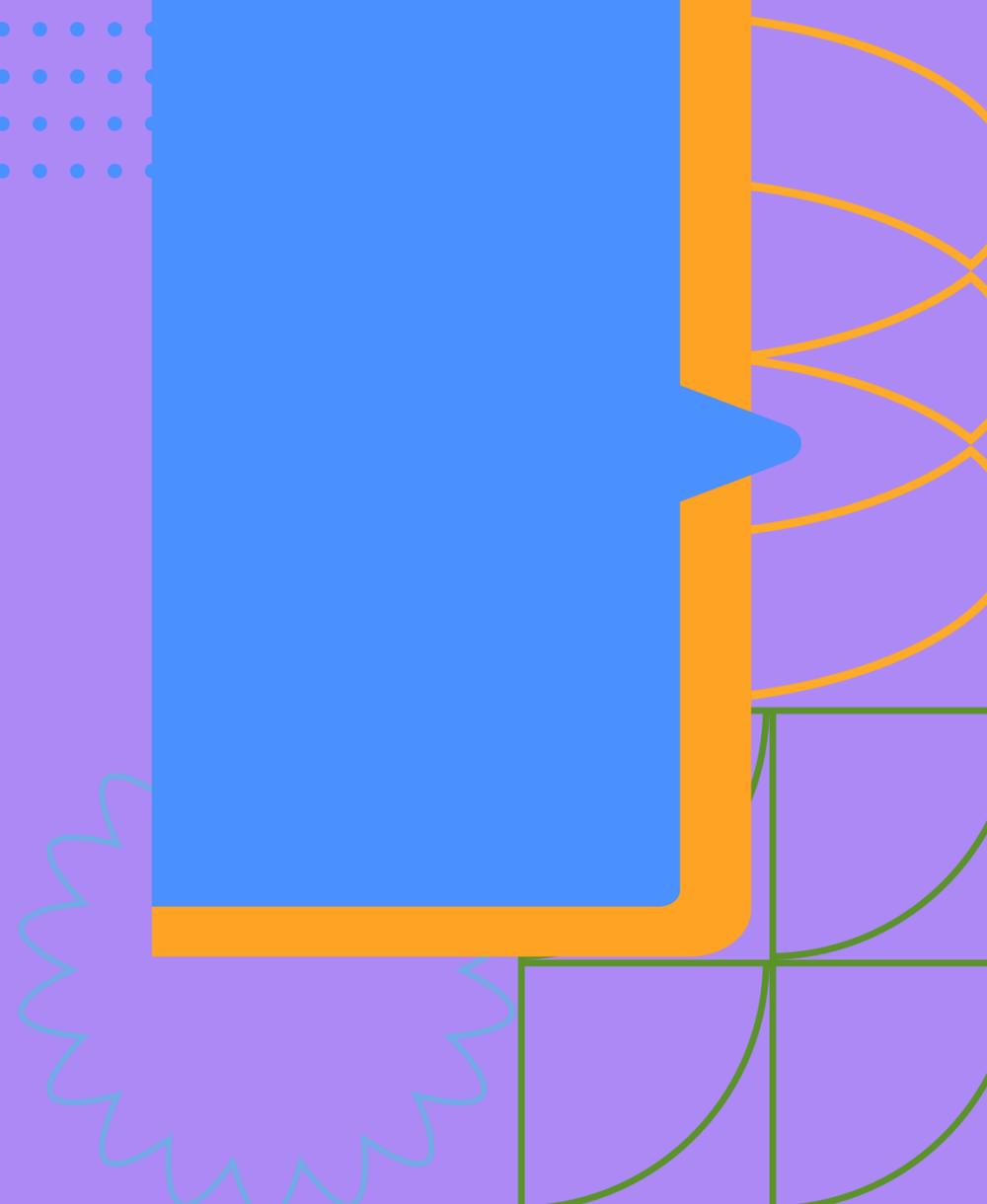
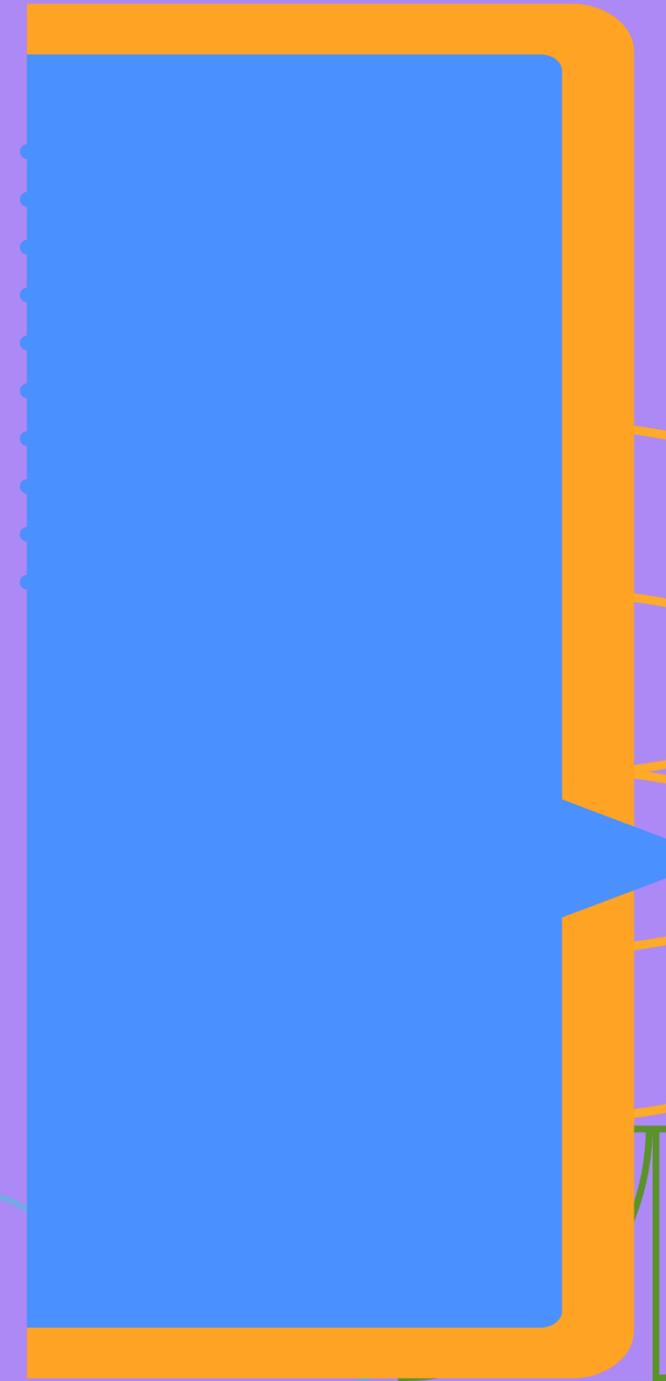
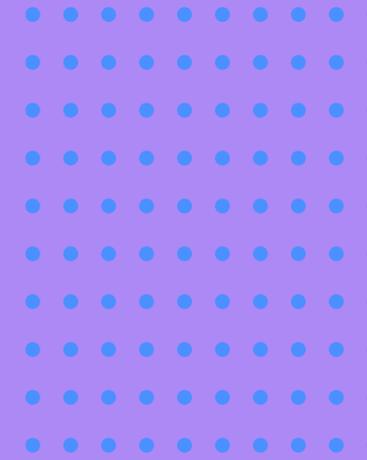
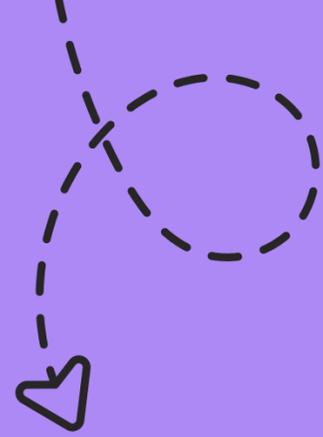


# Younger kids

**Body parts**

**Boundaries**

**Different family constellations**



# Younger kids

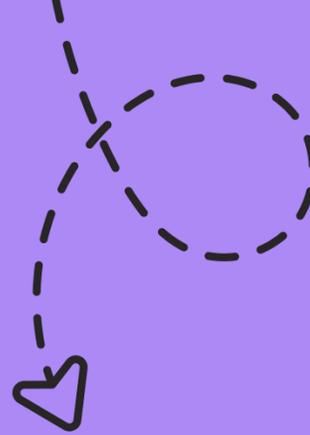
**Body parts**

**Boundaries**

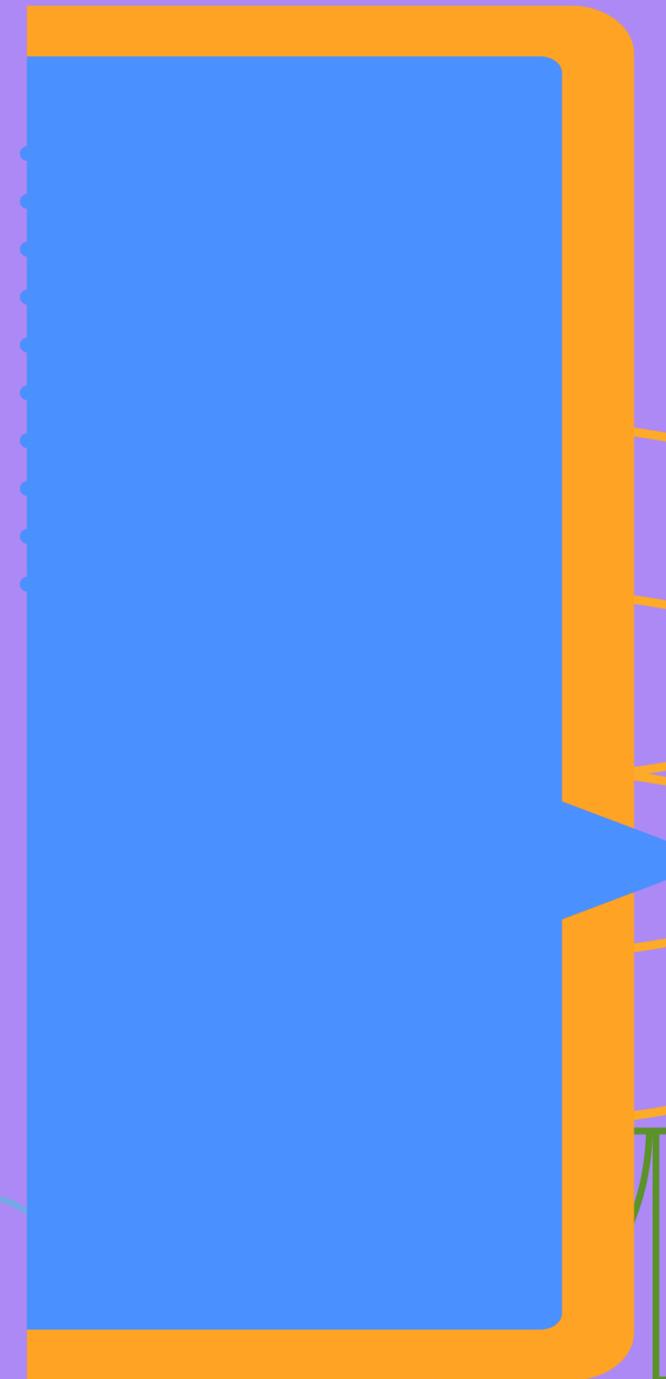
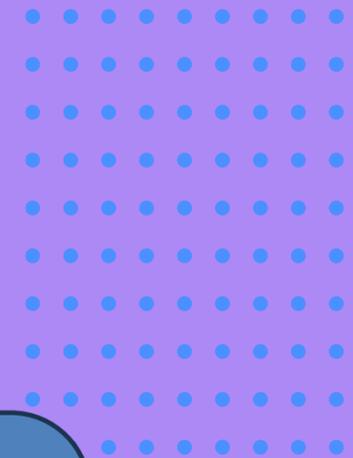
**Different family constellations**

## Reading suggestions:

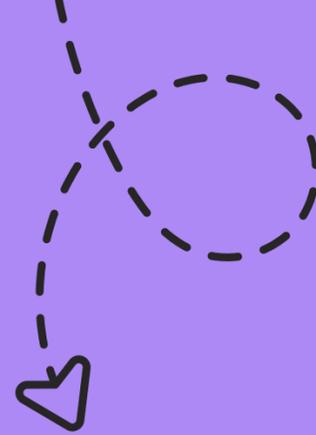
- Sincerely, Your Autistic Child
- Teaching Children with Down Syndrome about Their Bodies, Boundaries, and Sexuality
- <https://www.amightygirl.com/blog?p=11069>



Pro tip: use the word “some” when you can



# Almost puberty!

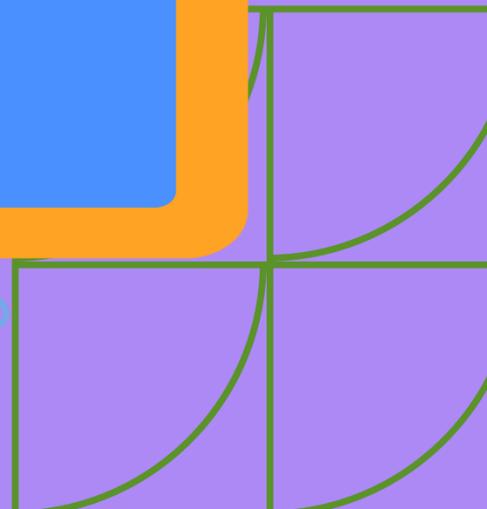
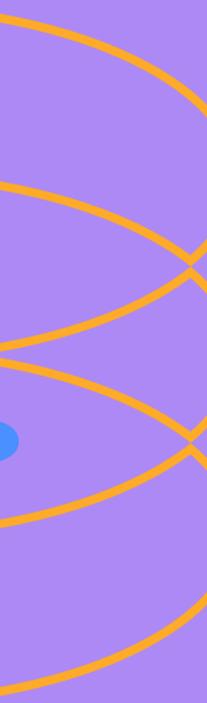
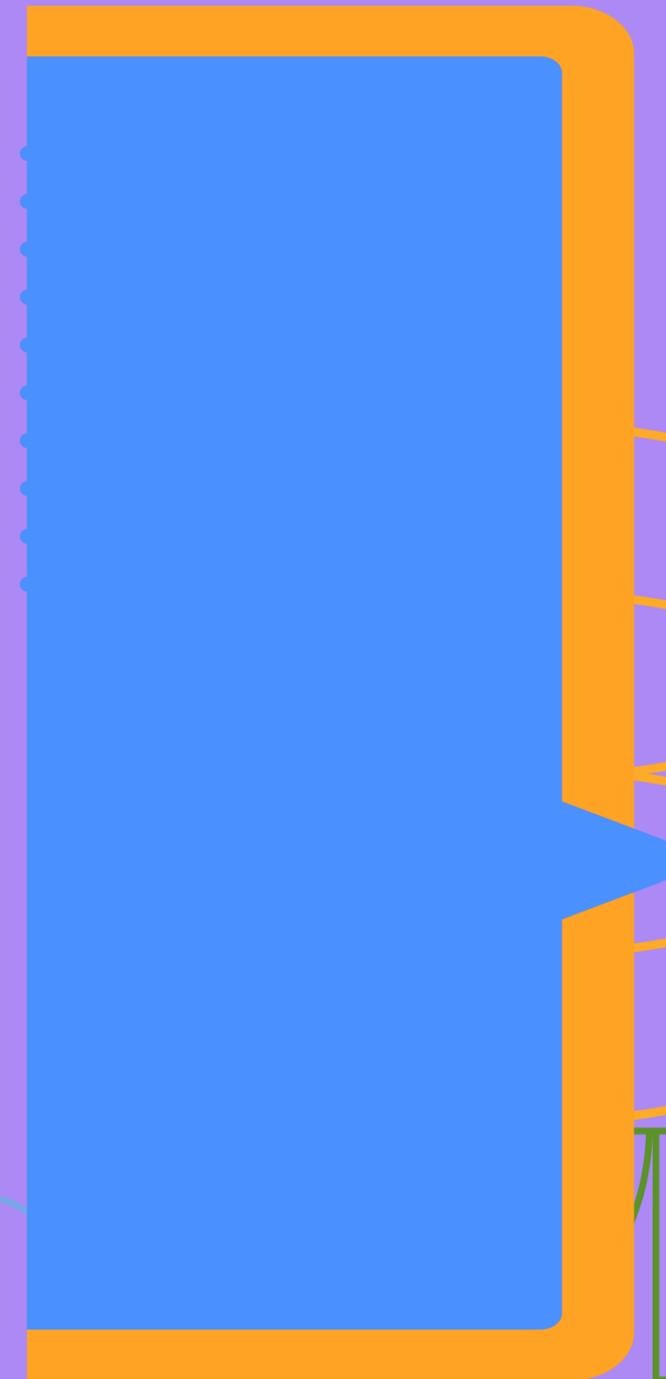
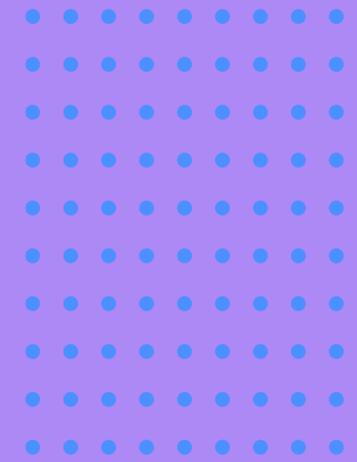


**Body parts → Puberty & understanding yourself**

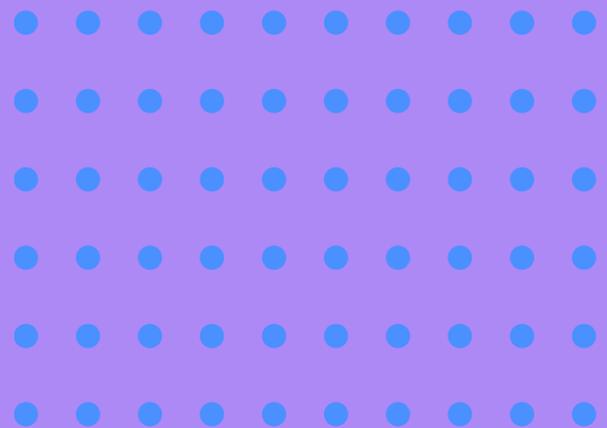
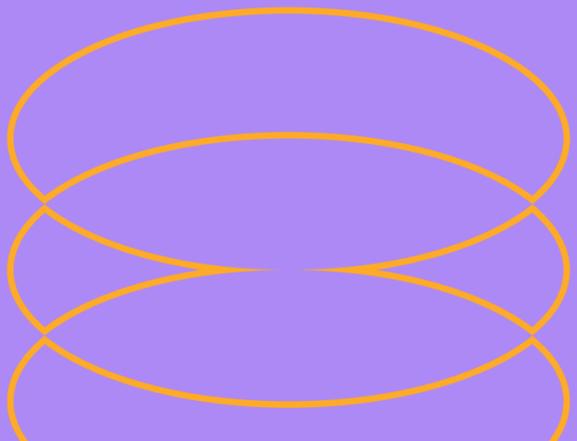
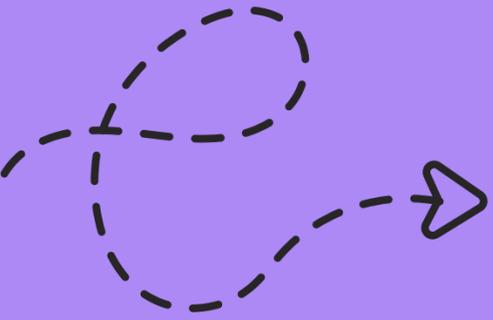
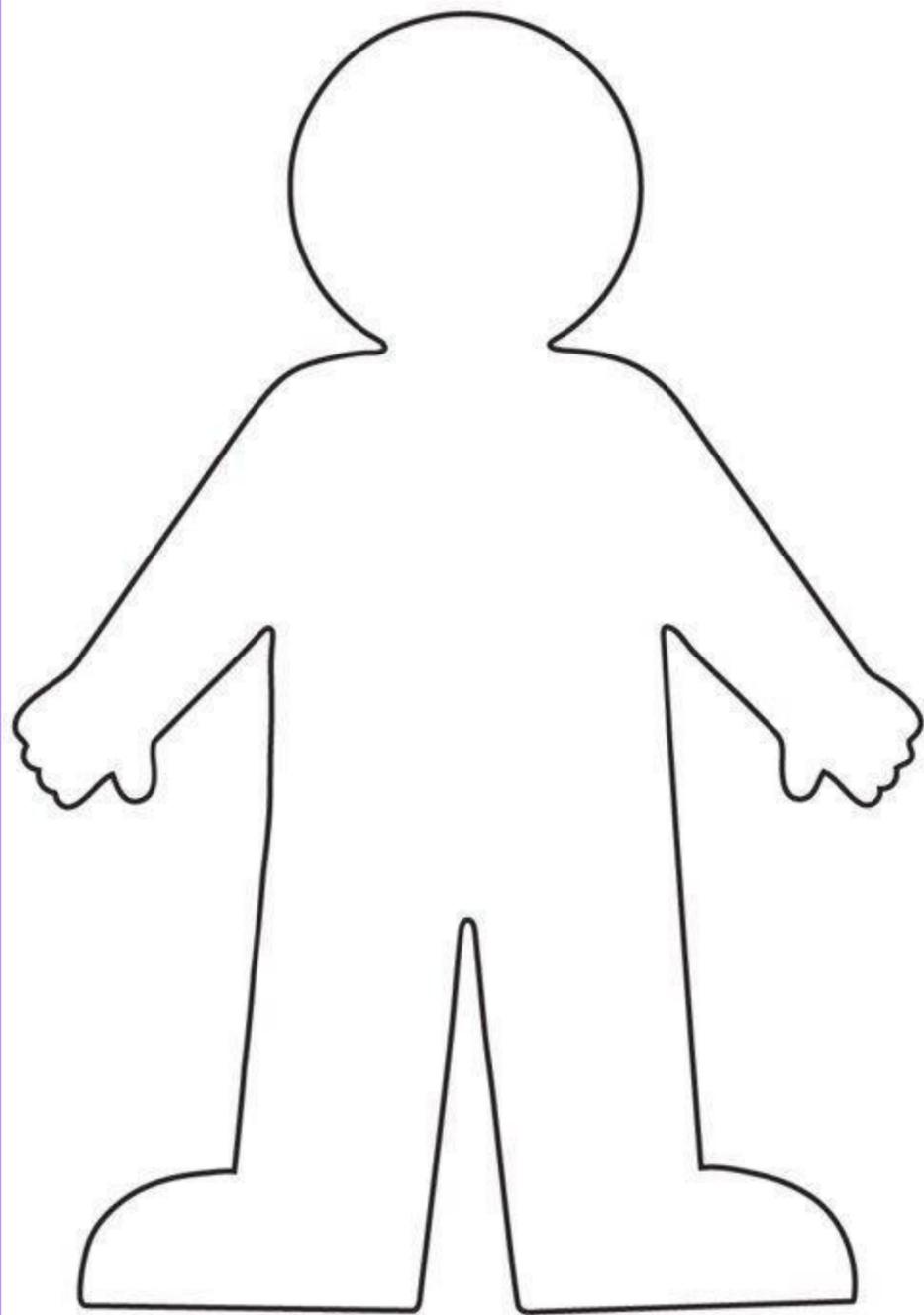
**Boundaries → More detailed Circles**

**Different family constellations → healthy relationships**

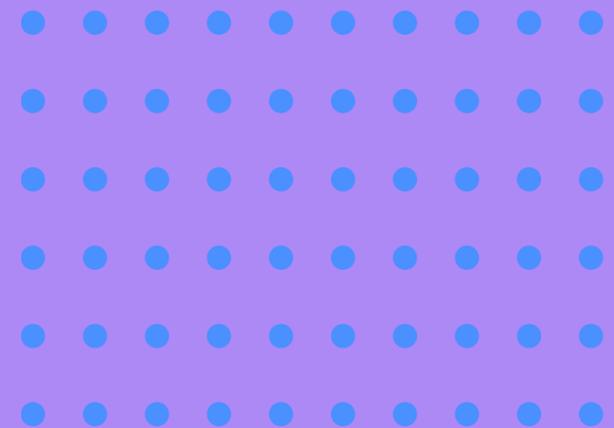
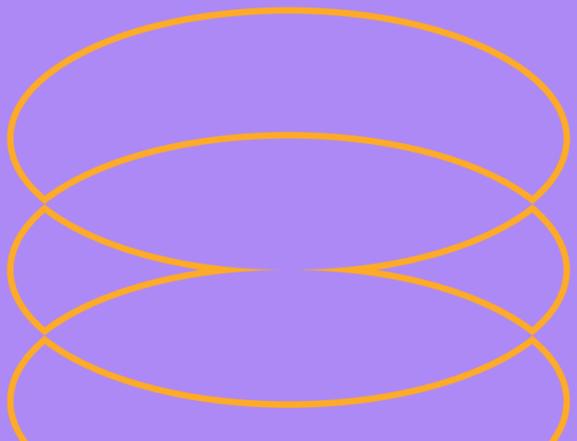
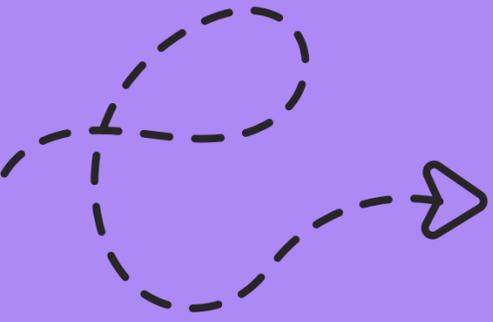
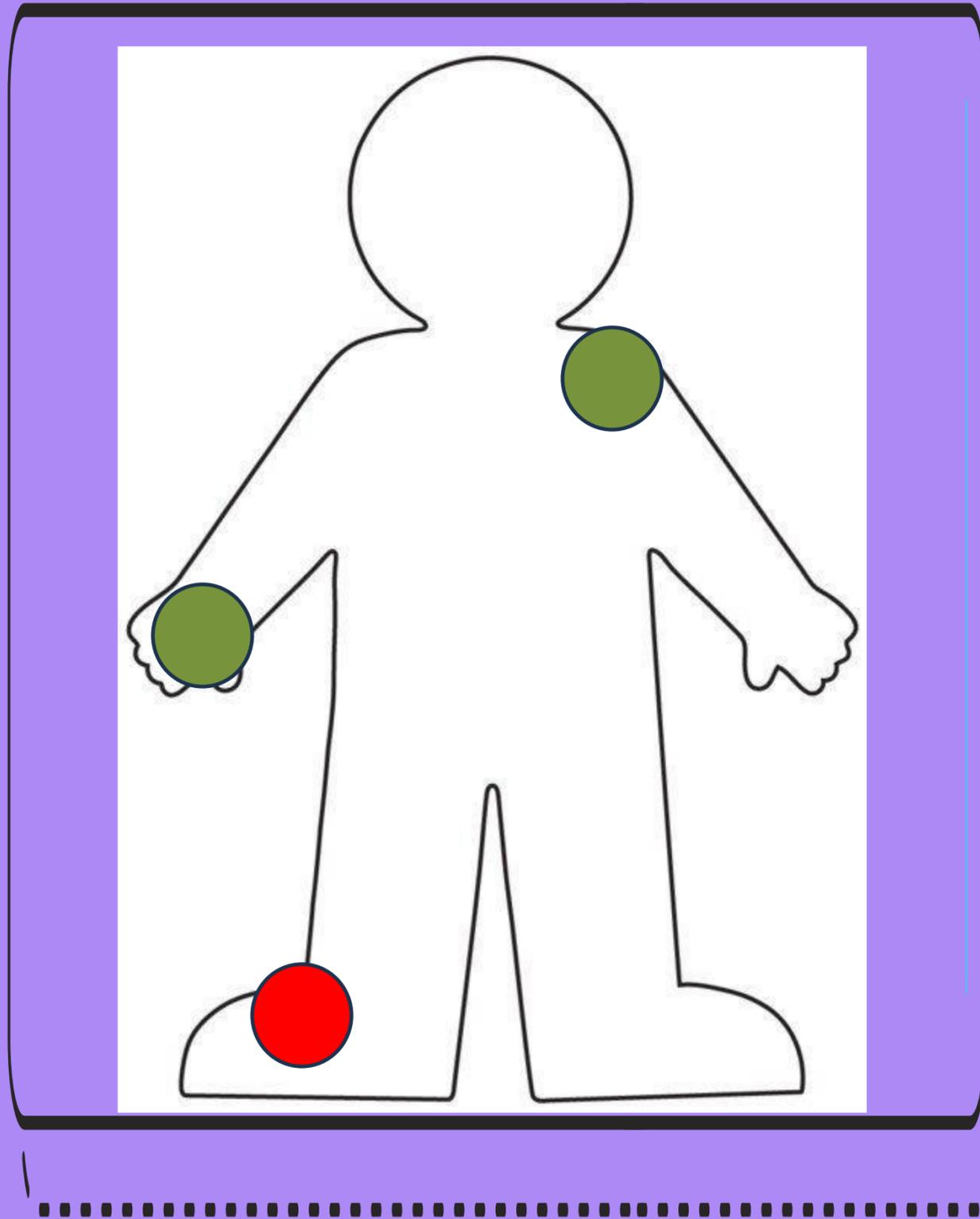
**Media reflections**



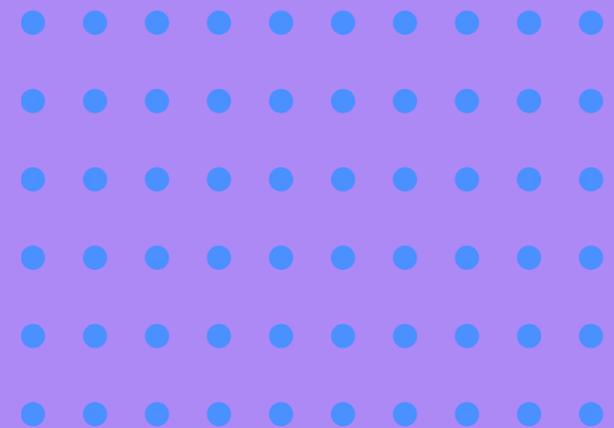
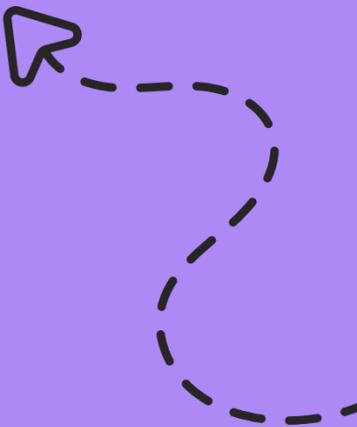
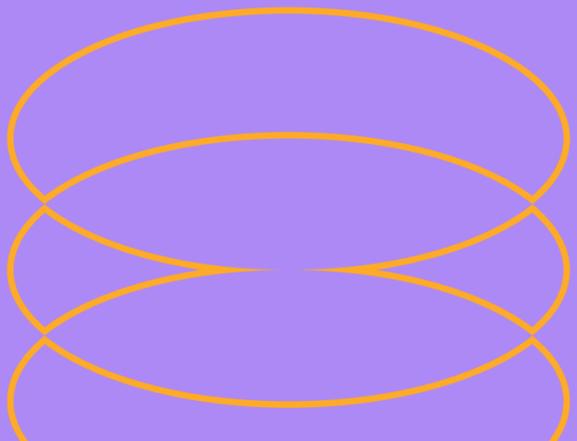
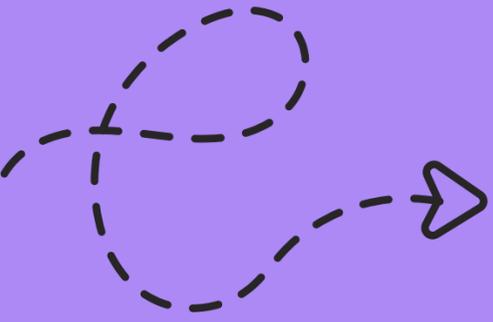
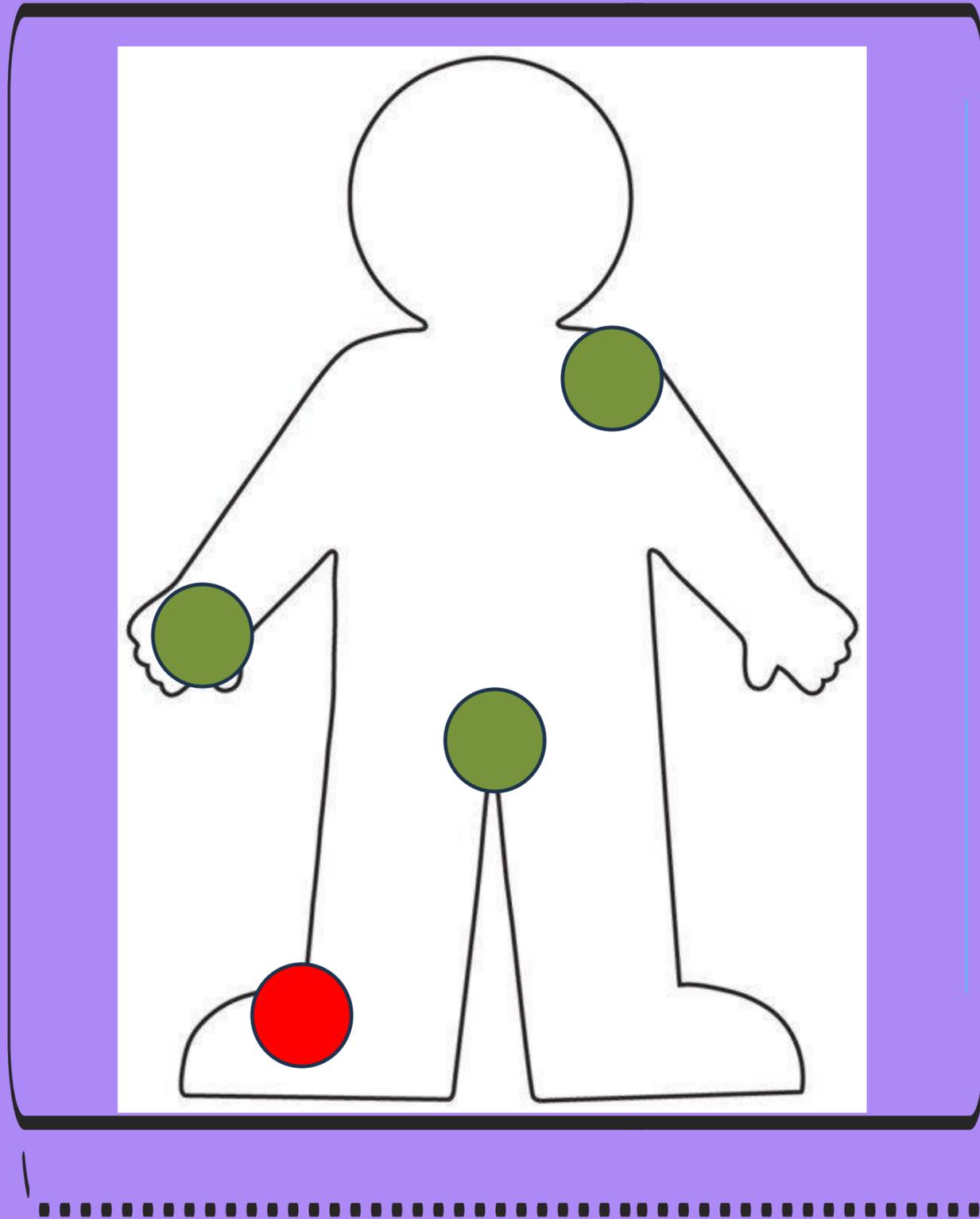
# What feels good



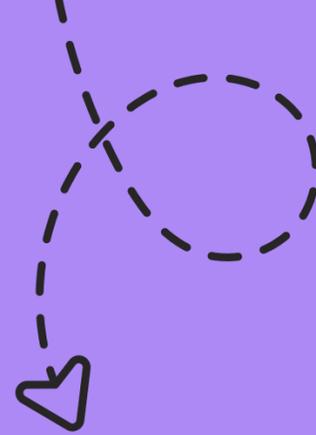
# What feels good



# What feels good



# Almost puberty!

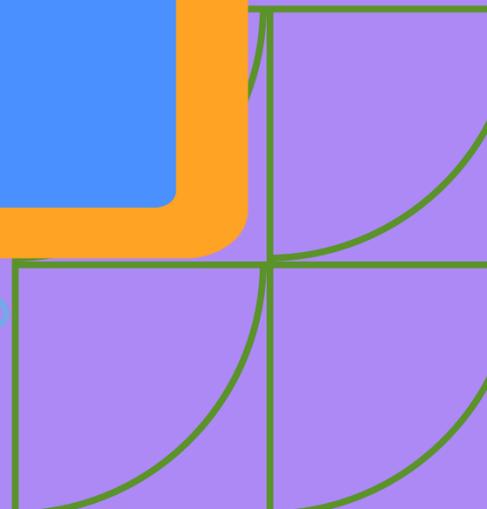
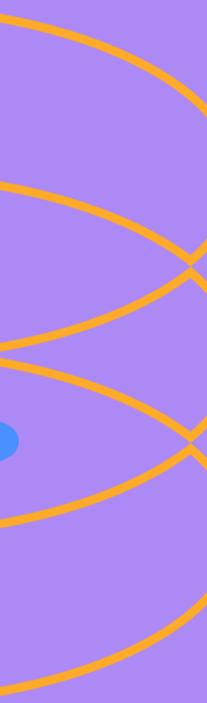
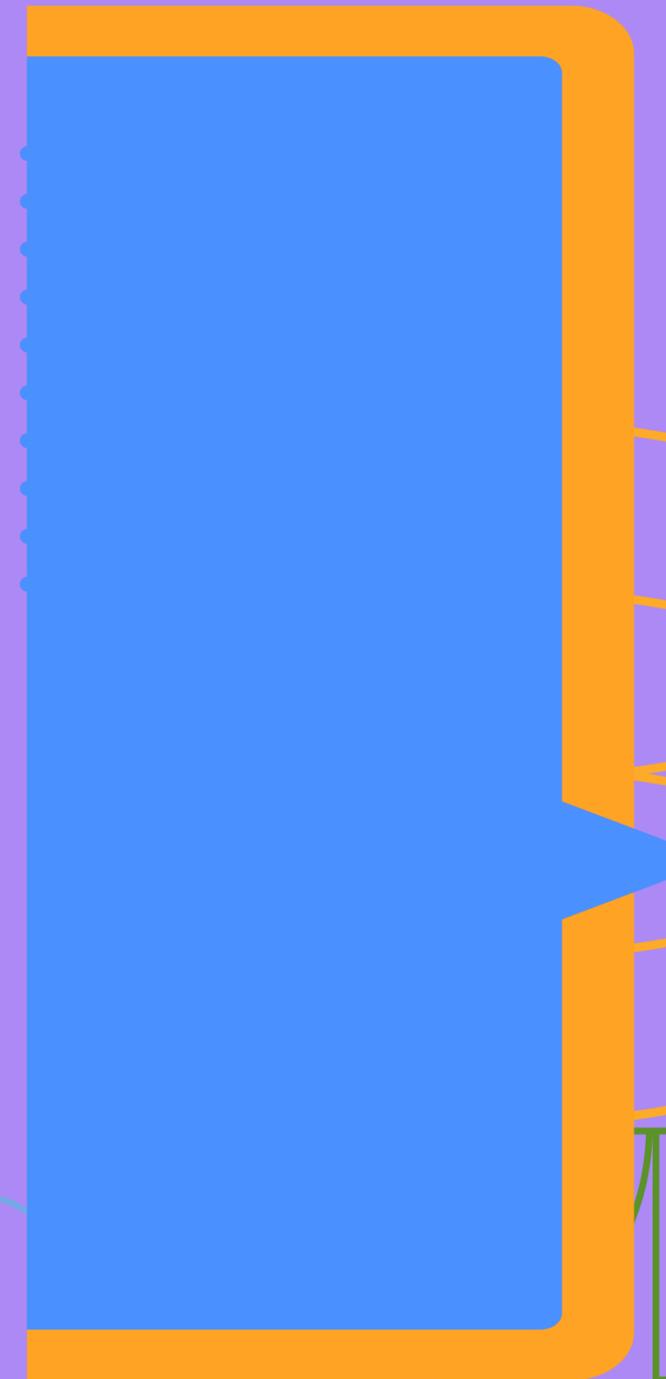
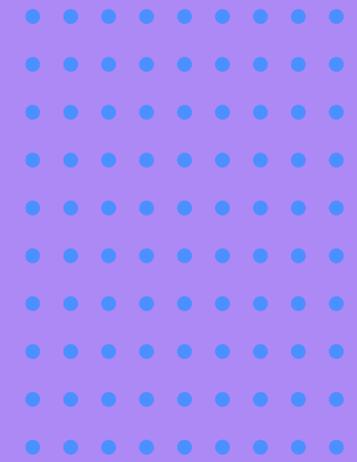


**Body parts → Puberty & understanding yourself**

**Boundaries → More detailed Circles**

**Different family constellations → healthy relationships**

**Media reflections**

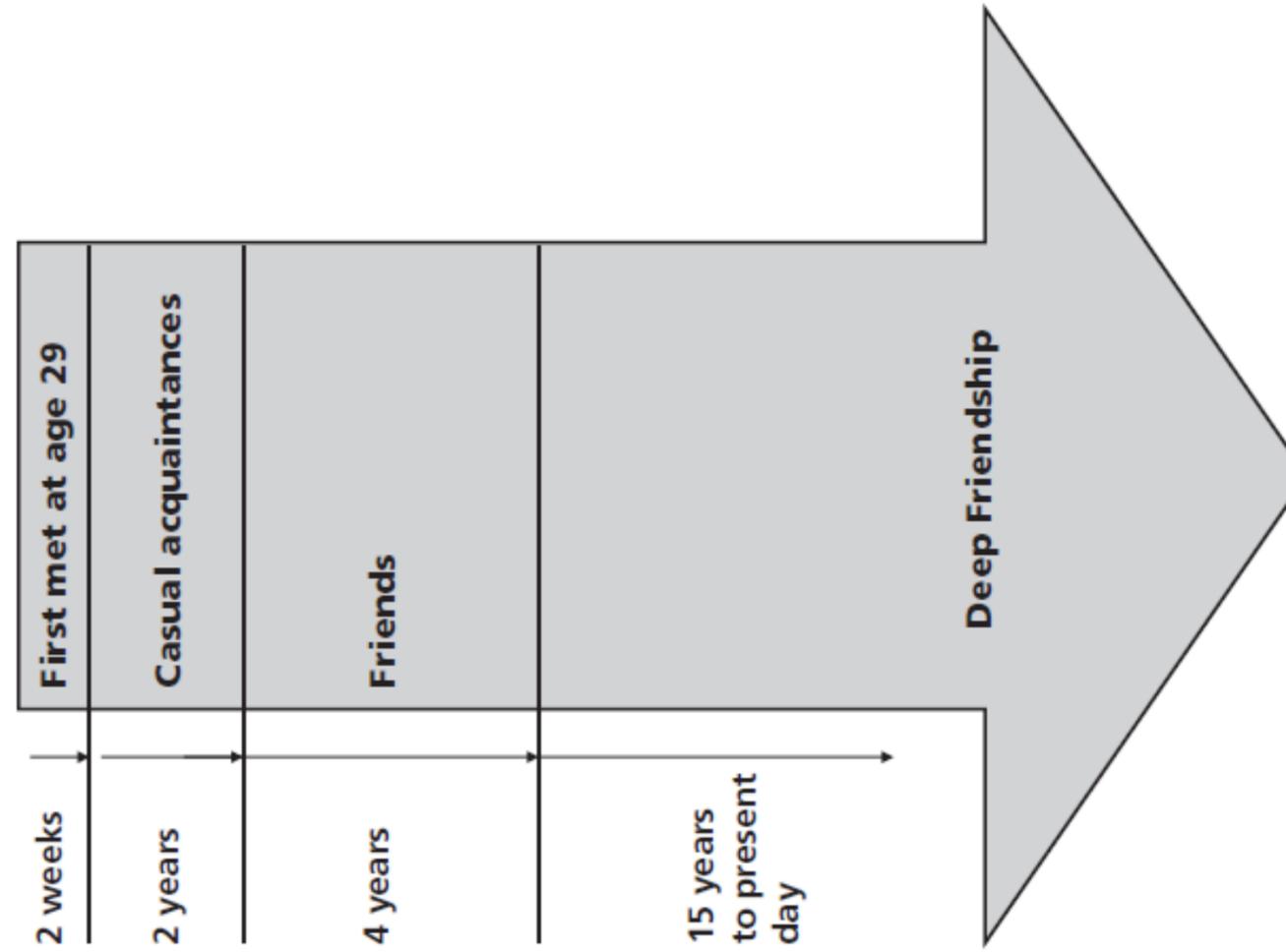




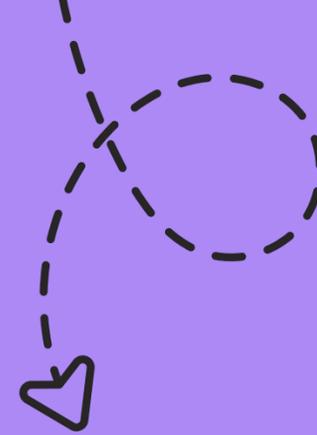
## Handout VIII-6: Timeline Example 2

### Real-Life Examples

*Wendy and Mary*



# Almost puberty!



**Body parts → Puberty & understanding yourself**

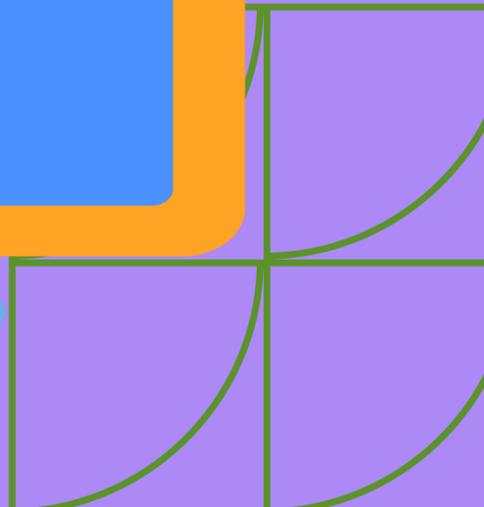
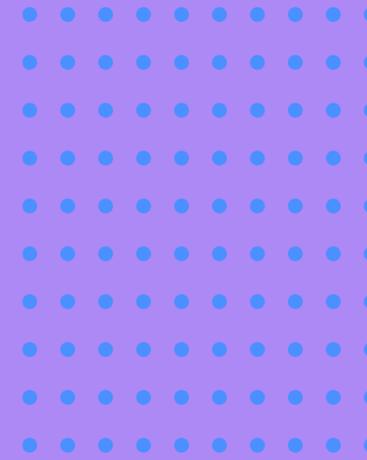
**Boundaries → More detailed Circles**

**Different family constellations → healthy relationships**

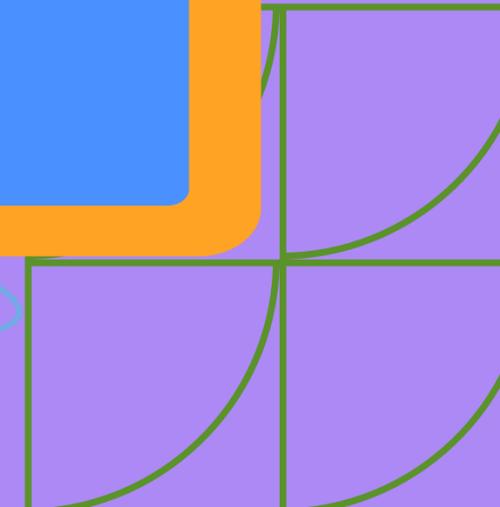
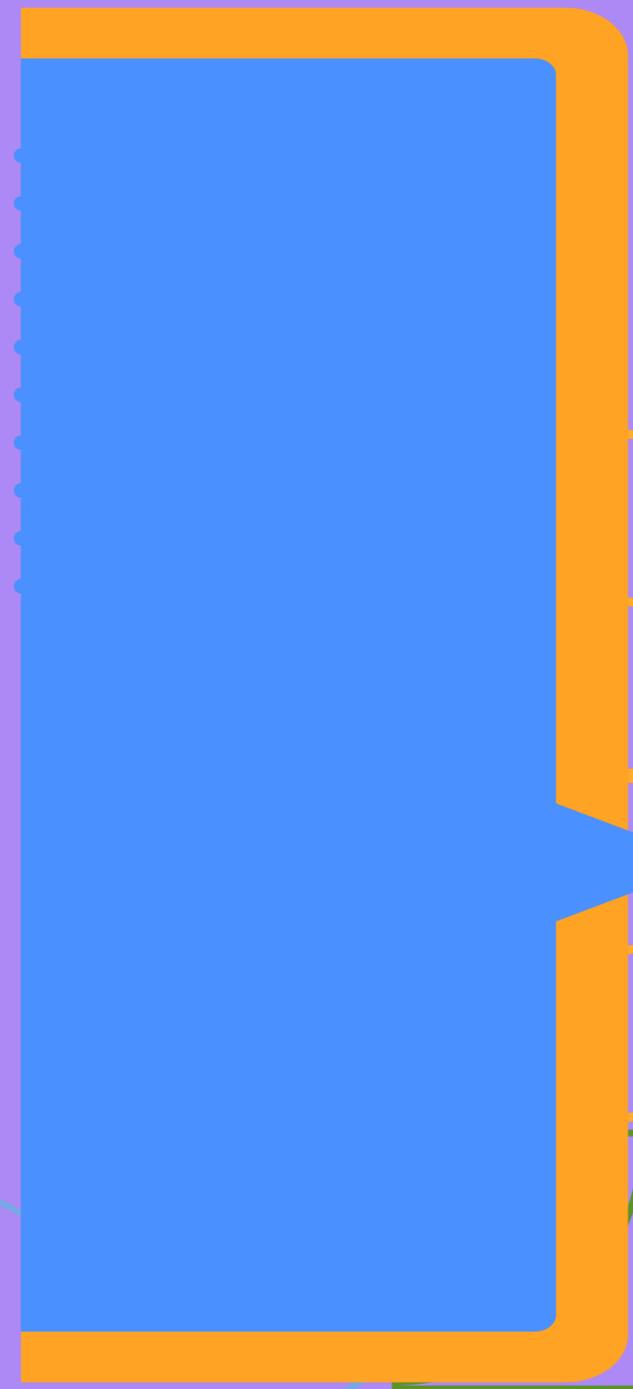
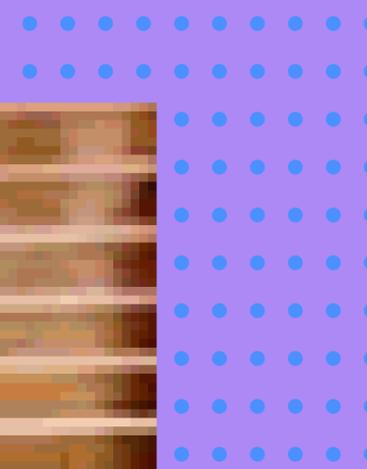
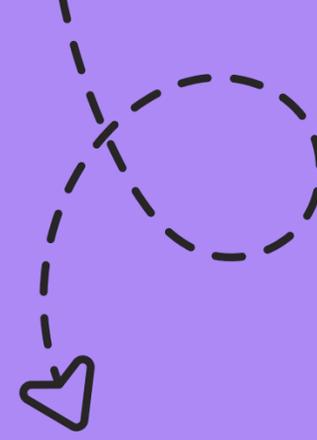
**Media reflections**

## Reading suggestions:

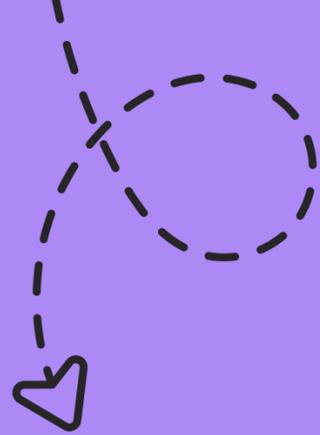
- The Facts of Life and More
- S.E.X. The All-You-Need-To-Know Sexuality Guide to get you Through Your Teens & Twenties
- Amaze.org



# Adolescence



# Adolescence



**Body parts → Puberty → Safe sex**

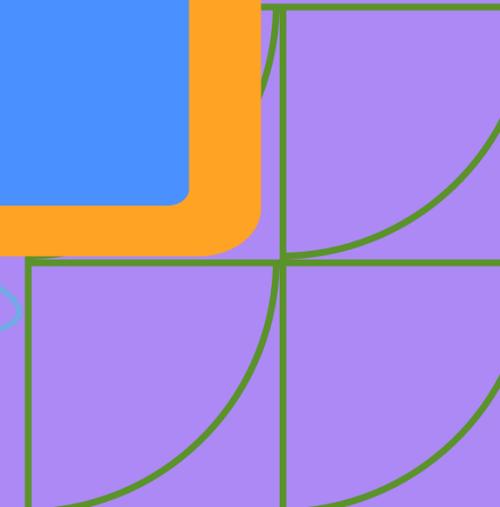
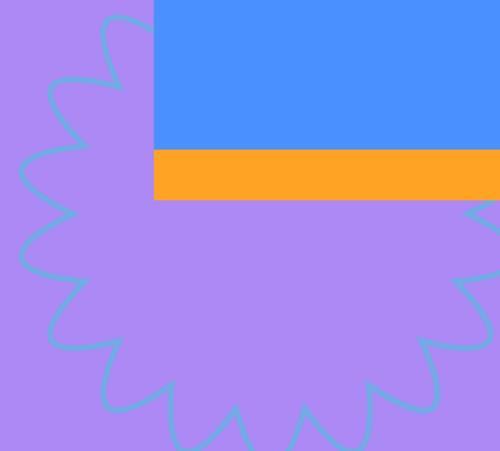
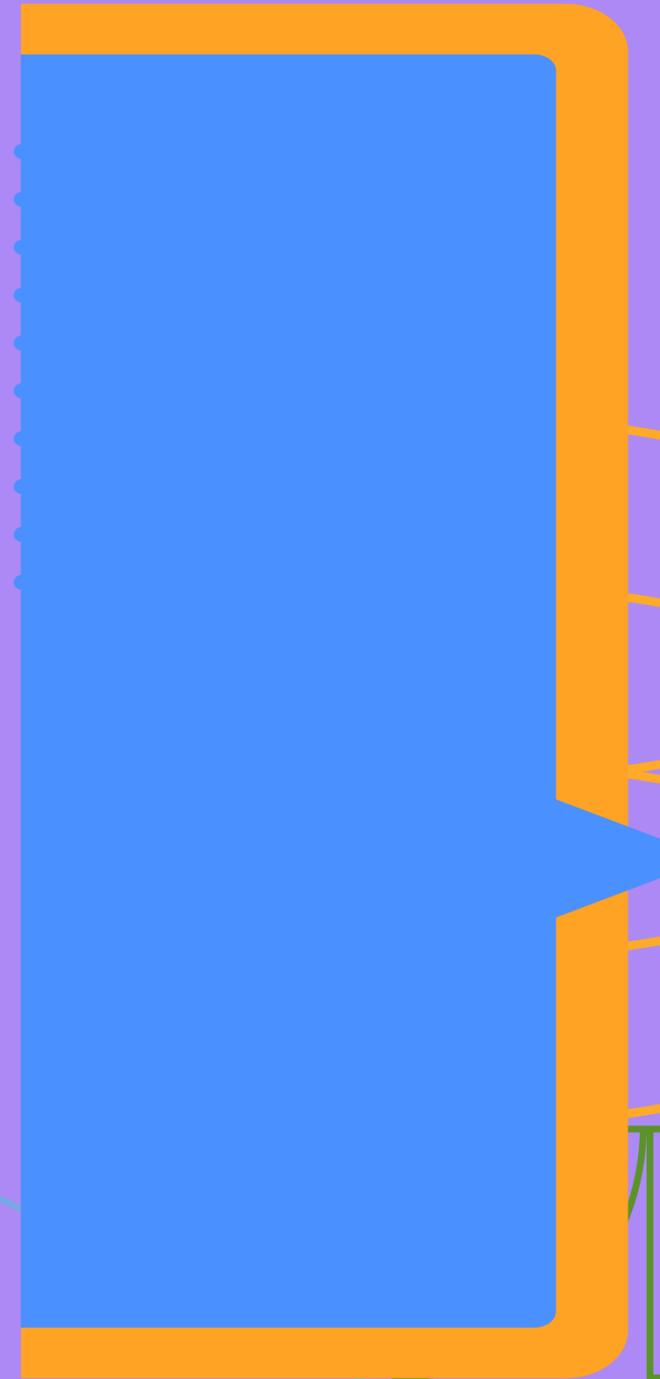
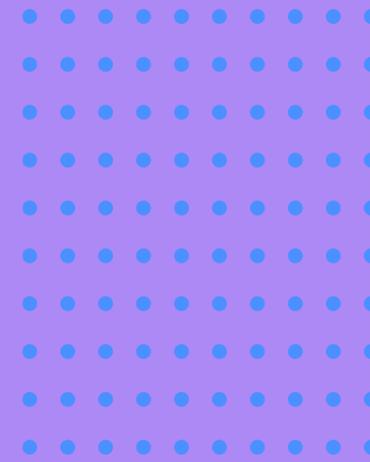
**Boundaries → More detailed Circles  
+ Consent & assertiveness**

**Different family  
constellations → healthy  
relationships**

**Virtual safety/porn**

**Identity**

**Dating**



More info, please!

---

Sexual orientation

---

Gender identity

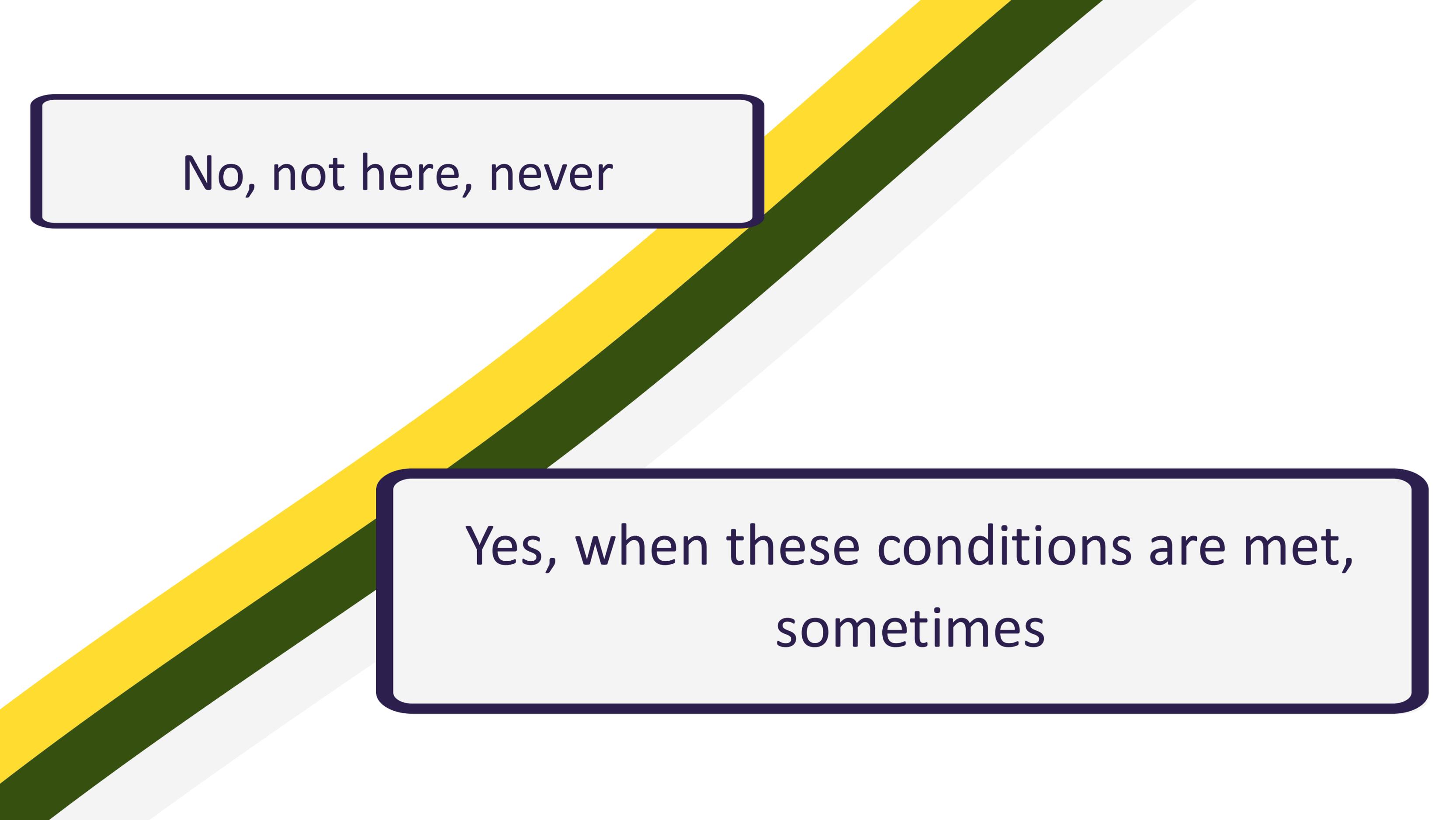
---

Consent

---

Assertiveness

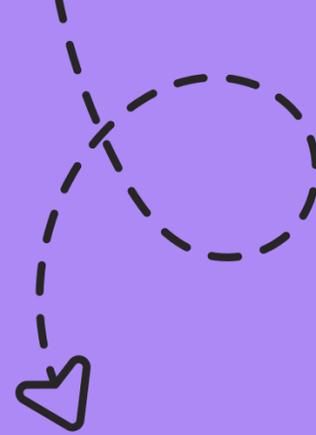
(Crehan et al., 2022)



No, not here, never

Yes, when these conditions are met,  
sometimes

# Adolescence



**Body parts → Puberty → Safe sex**

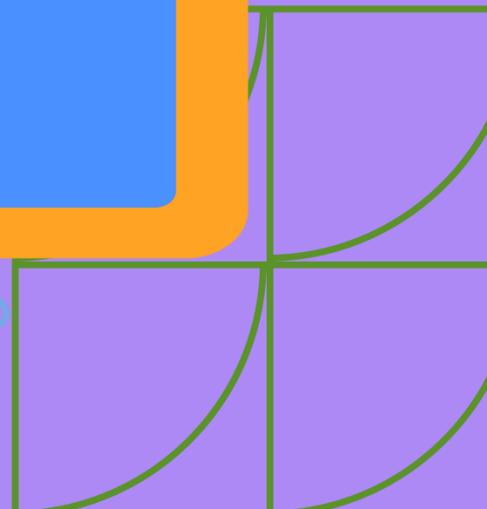
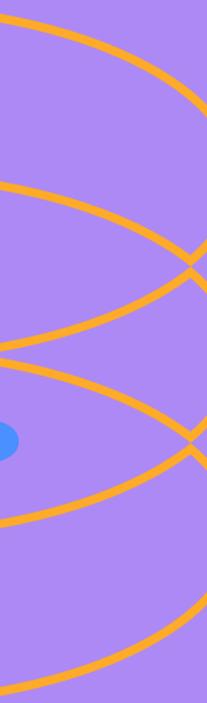
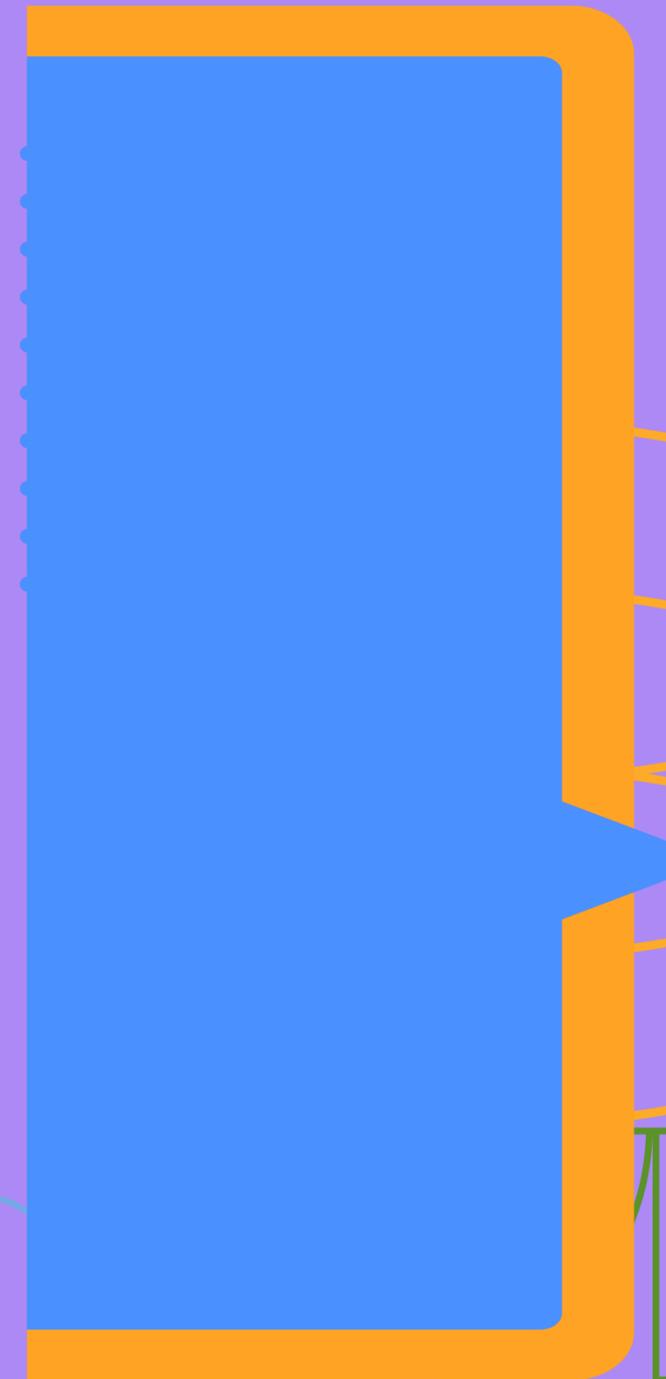
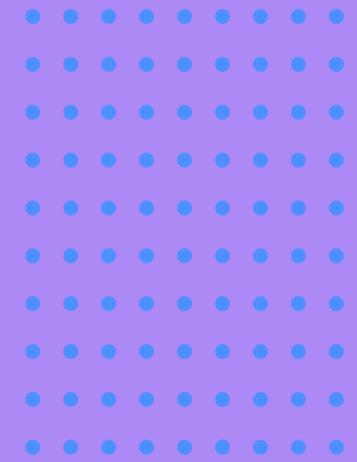
**Boundaries → More detailed Circles  
+ Consent & assertiveness**

**Different family  
constellations → healthy  
relationships**

**Virtual safety/porn**

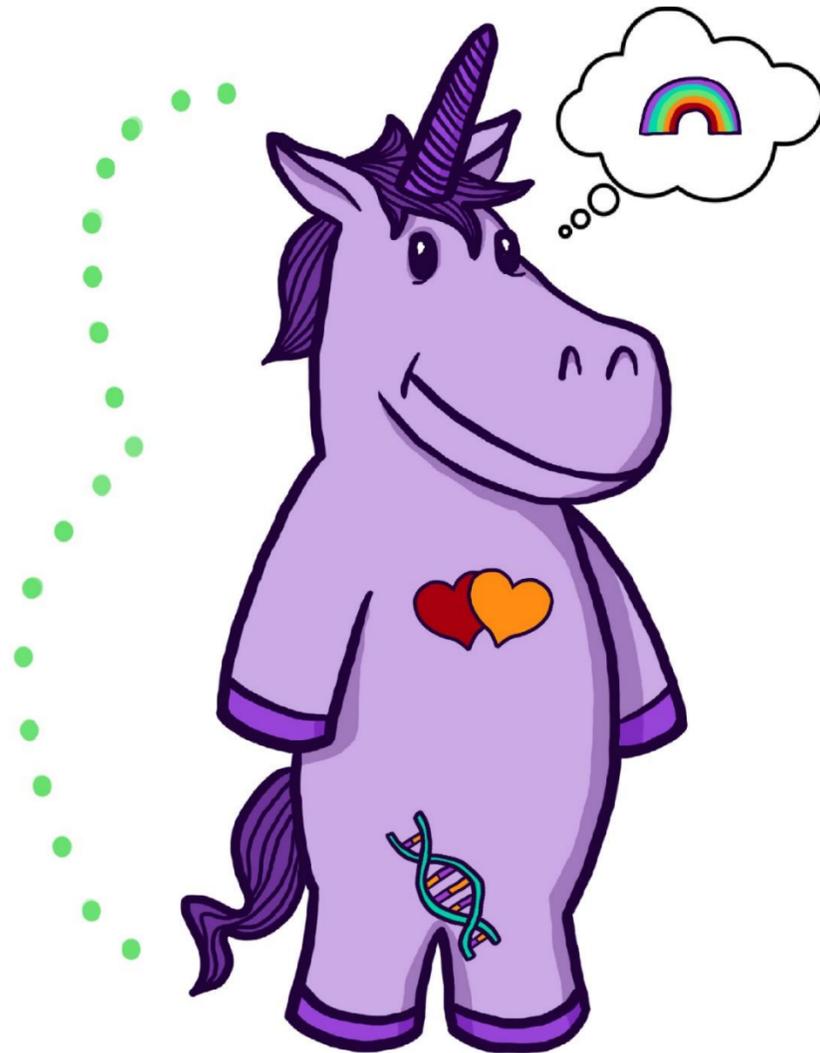
**Identity**

**Dating**



# The Gender Unicorn

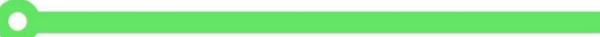
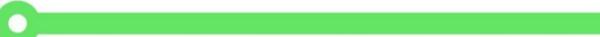
Graphic by:  
**TSER**  
Trans Student Educational Resources



## Gender Identity

-  Female / Woman / Girl
-  Male / Man / Boy
-  Other Gender(s)

## Gender Expression

-  Feminine
-  Masculine
-  Other

## Sex Assigned at Birth

-  Female
-  Male
-  Other / Intersex

## Physically Attracted to

-  Women
-  Men
-  Other Gender(s)

## Emotionally Attracted to

-  Women
-  Men
-  Other Gender(s)

To learn more, go to:  
[www.transstudent.org/gender](http://www.transstudent.org/gender)

Design by Landyn Pan and Anna Moore

Is a friend

Partner has shared interest

Partner has shared interest

Holding hands

Partner likes to ...

Partner likes to ...

A partner who is funny

Cuddling

Partner likes to ...

Kissing

A partner who likes to stay in

A partner who is quiet

A partner who is talkative

Having sex

A partner who likes to go out

“The 5 (Neurodivergent) Love Languages are:

Info dumping- [sharing a lot of details about one topic]

Parallel play/Body Doubling - sharing space together whilst doing different activities

Spoon Sharing/Support Swapping- sharing our energy

Please Crush My Soul Back Into My Body (deep pressure)

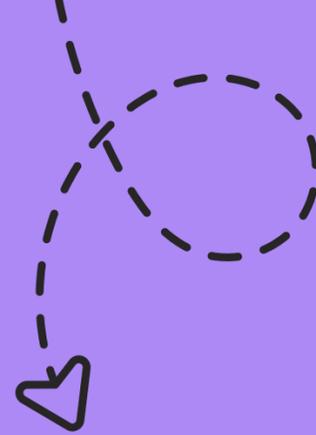
Penguin Pebbling - sharing small gifts or memes with neurodivergent friends/family (usually related to dedicated interests)”

-Ausomely Autistic (2023) on <https://community.autism.org.uk/f/adults-on-the-autistic-spectrum/31397/neurodivergent-love-languages>

More details:

<https://stimpunks.org/2022/01/22/the-five-neurodivergent-love-languages-2/>

# Adolescence



**Body parts → Puberty → Safe sex**

**Boundaries → More detailed Circles  
+ Consent & assertiveness**

**Different family  
constellations → healthy  
relationships**

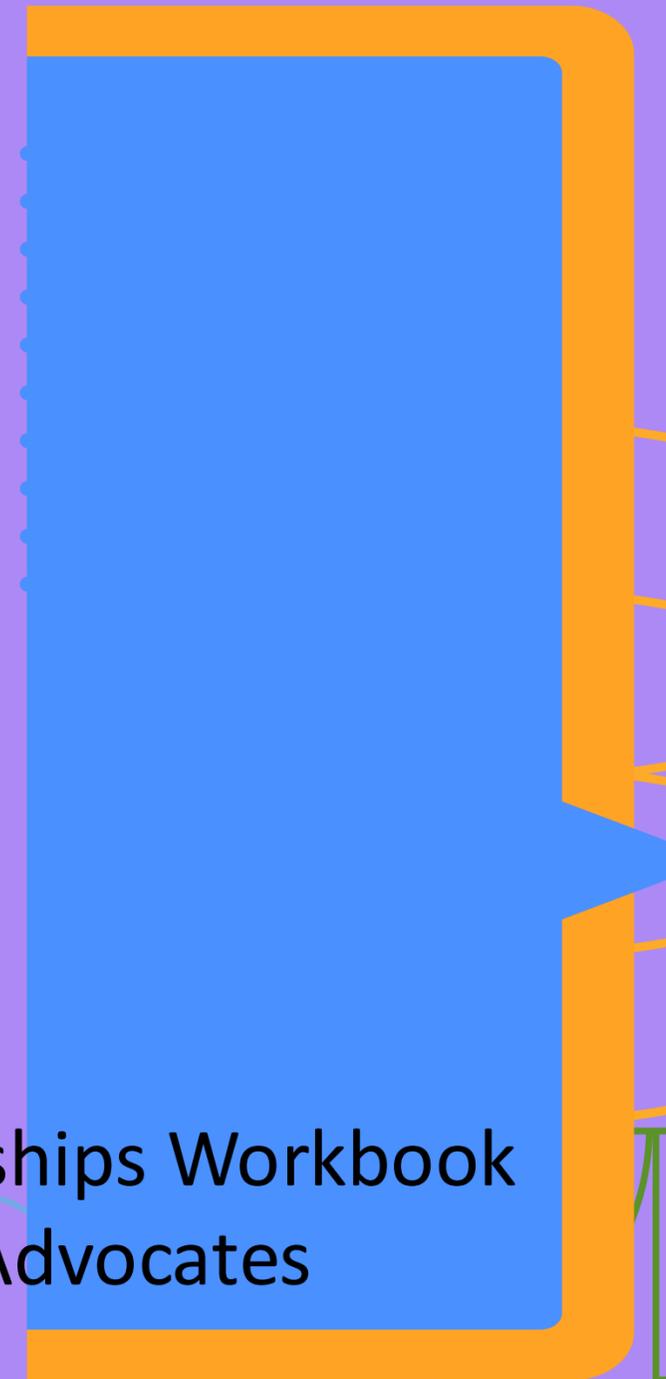
**Virtual safety/porn**

**Identity**

**Dating**

## Reading suggestions:

- The Autism Relationships Workbook
- OAR Sex Ed for Self-Advocates
- Preparing for Life
- Queerly Autistic – Erin Ekins
- Spectrums – Maxfield Sparrow

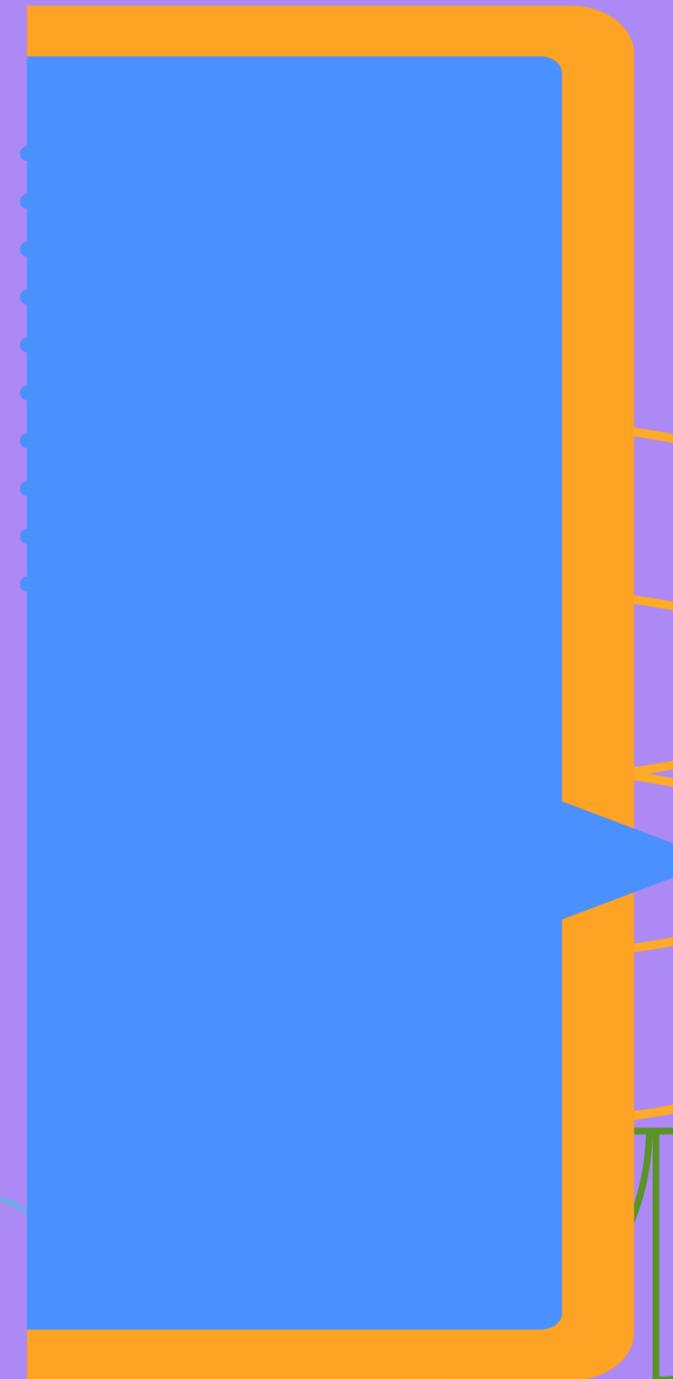
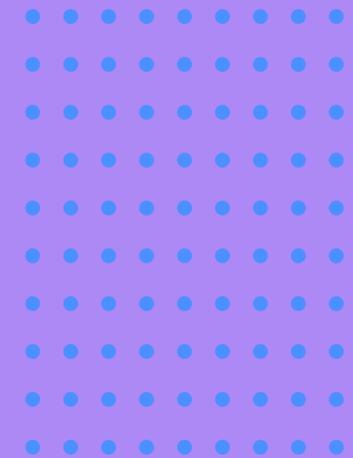


# Young adulthood and beyond!

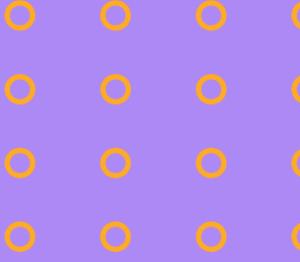
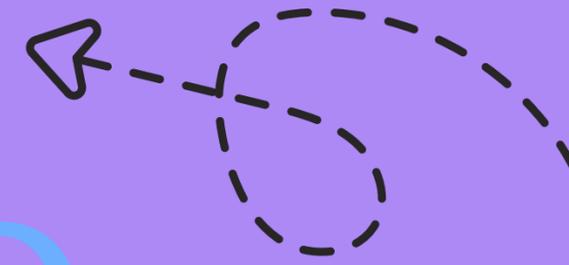
**Meeting other people with  
romantic opportunities\***

**Online dating tips**

**Pregnancy, parenting,  
menopause**



# Our plan



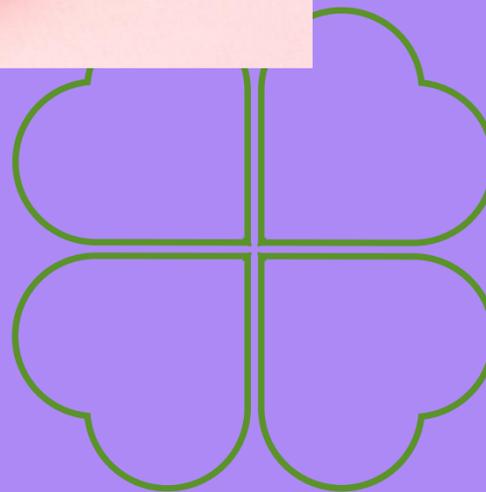
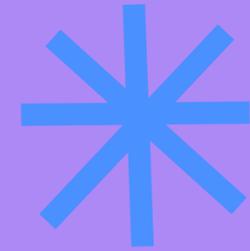
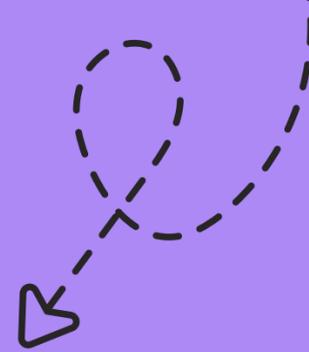
1. Big ideas!
2. Lifespan approach
3. Research sampler
4. Resources



# Research sampler

Let's Make a Match  
Project KISS  
Gender and autism  
@crehanlab

Sexuality statement  
Healthy Relationships



# Research sampler

Let's Make a Match  
Project KISS  
Gender and autism  
@crehanlab

Sexuality statement  
Healthy Relationships



## Identity in Autistic Youth

We're looking for autistic children ages 9-12 with average or above average IQ and their caregiver/parent.

### What You Will Do:

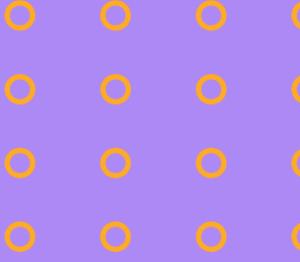
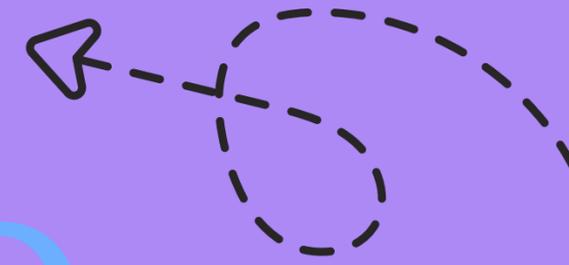
- Parents take a survey about their child
- Kids will sort some toys and talk to a Tufts student about their friends, playing, and gender
- The interview will last under an hour
- Participants receive one \$40 gift card



### To Participate:

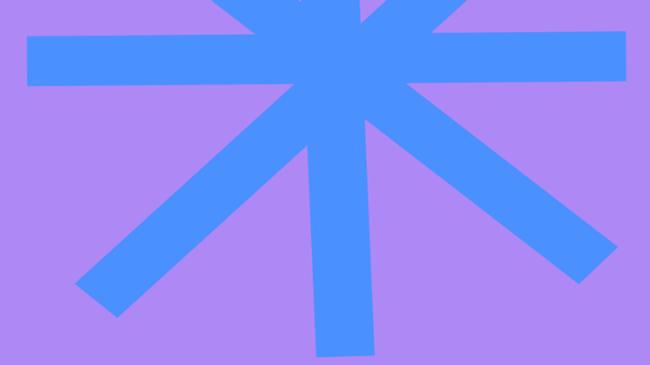
- Contact [crehanlab@tufts.edu](mailto:crehanlab@tufts.edu)
- Scan the QR code

# Our plan

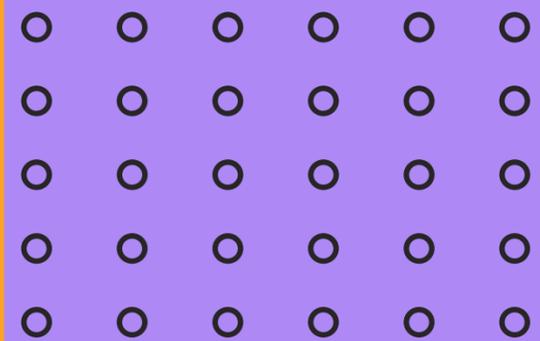


1. Big ideas!
2. Lifespan approach
3. Research sampler
4. Resources





# Building a care team



- A lot of variability, individualized plans are likely
- Identify what resources you/the school/church/community has available.
- Make a plan for who, how and when to approach the topics
- Set a reminder to follow up!

### Creating a team

Who would you like to cover the topics listed below? Who can you share this list with?

Consent      Menstruation      Reproduction      Hygiene      Social/relationship skills      Anatomy  
 Personal beliefs/values      Puberty      Identity      STIs      Internet safety      Masturbation  
 Addressing problematic behavior      Promoting positive sexual health and behavior      Communication skills around sexuality

*\*Add your own!*

Parents/family+	Teachers	Pediatrician	_____	_____	_____

+may be helpful to list specific family members

## **Sexual health, relationship, and education programs or resources**

- [Sex ed for self-advocates](#)

*Written materials and videos on sex education for autistic individuals ages 15+, by autistic individuals*

- [Sexual self-advocacy training program](#)

*Sexual self-advocacy training to explore, identify, and communicate their preferences. Encourages safe, sexual exploration and promotes self-advocacy skills to set boundaries and request privacy.*

- [SHEIDD Review of Sexual Health and Education Curricula Designed for People with Disabilities](#)

*Summary of sex ed program for DD with target populations, strengths, and adaptations*

- [FLASH Special education lesson plans](#)

- [Lessons plans by grade or for “Differing Abilities” from Canada](#)

*Individual lesson plans for various ages/learning abilities*

- [Tackling Teenage Training program](#)

*Sexuality and relationship education program for autistic teens, RCT results were positive*

## **Menstruation**

- [An article for parents](#)

- [Resource guide with ideas for activities](#)

- [Thinx](#) and [Ruby Love](#) (and others)

*Absorbent underwear designed for periods, can be good for girls who have a sensory aversion to pads or who remove pads*

## **Resources to consult for adaptations**

- [National Sexual Violence Resource Center 2013 Chart on Healthy Childhood Sexual Development](#)



# THAT TIME OF THE MONTH



SELF-CARE

## What to do and not to do

Skill	Do	Don't
Dress, hygiene and grooming	Clean your hair, teeth and body. Wear clean clothes appropriate to where you are going.	Forget to wash. Wear dirty, torn clothes that tell the other person you do not care enough to look good for them.
Listening	Listen carefully to your date. Ask about their interests and their life.	Do all the talking. Tell about your life without ever asking about theirs.
Show caring for others' feelings	Show that you care if they are talking about something that upset them. Say you understand, share a similar experience or offer to help (See Skill #42 and 43).	Ignore signs of upset. Tell them that what upset them does not matter.
Compliment	Compliment them.	Insult or criticize them.
Arriving to the date	Be on time and offer to pick them up.	Be late and tell them to go way out of their way to get you.
Paying for things	Offer to pay for your date.	Tell them you have no money and expect them to pay.
Compromise	Find out what they want to do and offer to do some of what they like.	Insist on doing only what you want to do on the date.
Expectations (about activities, topics of discussions, and sex).	Follow their lead so they can feel some level of control.	Expect and demand that your date follow what you want to do when you want to do it.

From Jed Baker's Preparing for Life

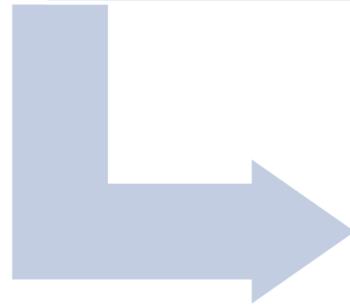
Your brother's friend always gives you a big hug when they visit your house. You don't really like hugging but you're afraid it will hurt their feelings if you tell them to stop. What could you do?

You could say "I'd rather not hug!" A real friend won't get mad and will respect your boundaries.

You could suggest an alternative "Hey, could we high five or fist bump instead?"

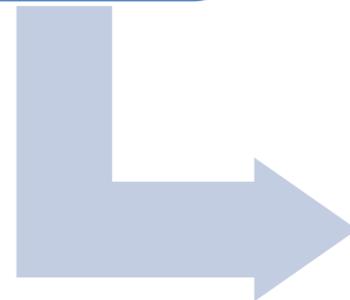
Do they talk to you?  
Return your  
calls/texts/messages?

- Read their body language in person
- Use 2 message rule



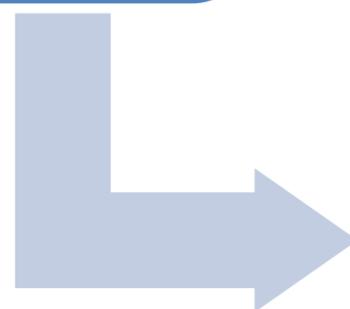
Do they initiate  
contact with  
you?

- Do they call/text/message you first?
- Have they suggested spending time together?



Are you attracted  
to them?

- \*Use previous activity to answer this questions
- Physically?
- Emotionally?
- Overlapping interests?

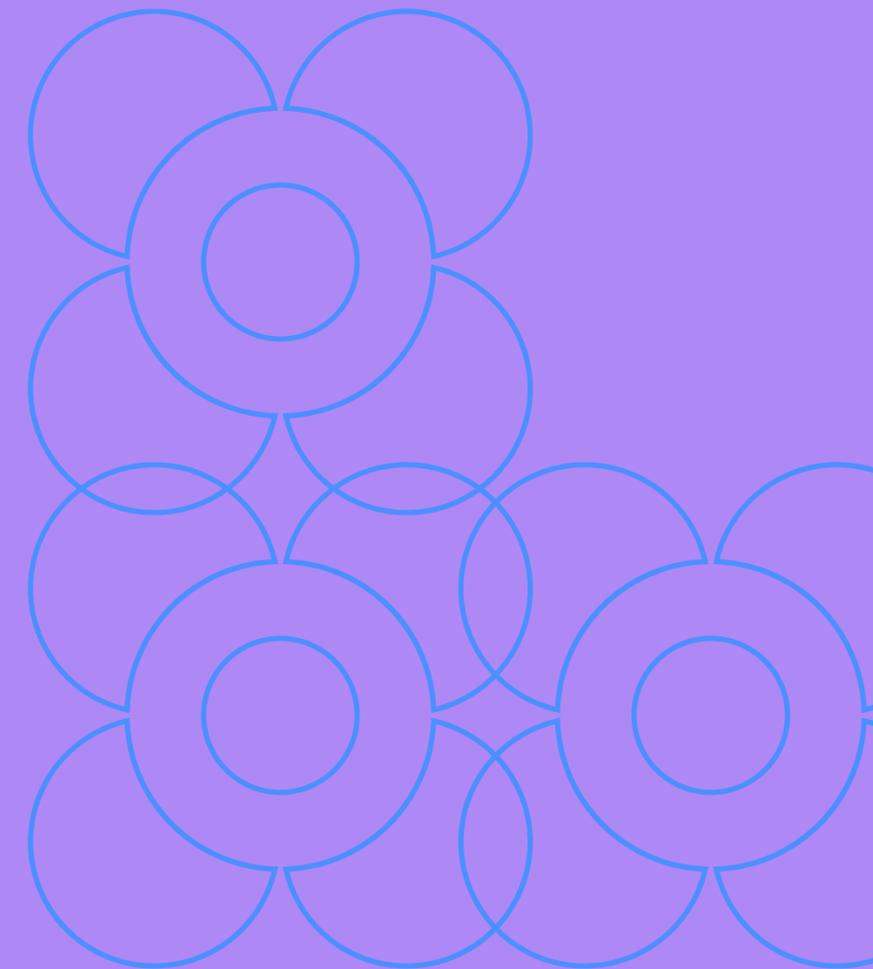


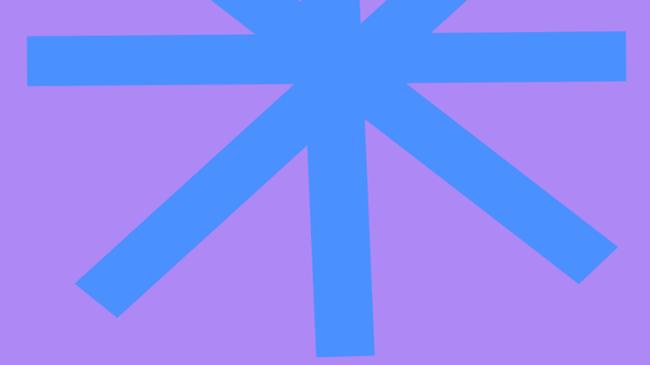
If you asked  
them on a  
date, did they  
say yes?

- If they said no, probably not a good romantic partner
- If they said they were busy then, you can ask one more time.
- If they said yes but after two messages, they don't respond, they meant no

# Evidence-based teaching tools

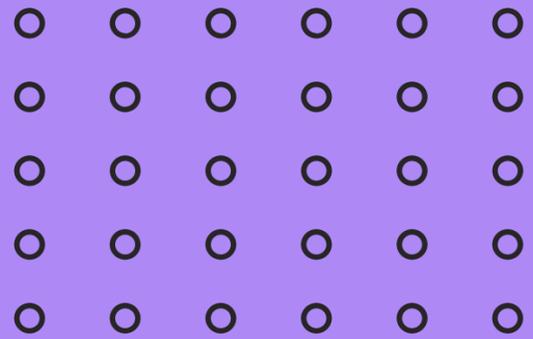
- Role of peers (e.g., leaders and consultation)
- Using educational supports or tools from other disciplines
- Visual strategies, video modeling
- Role play
- Review



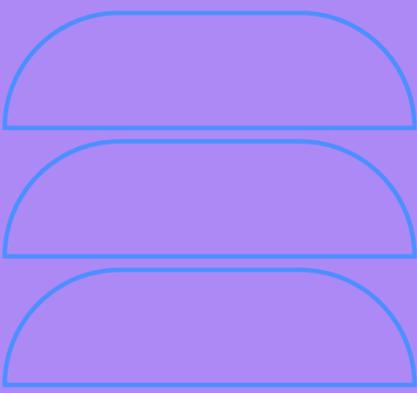


Oh ya, and!

# A positive frame



# How can we approach this using a positive and affirming framework?



## ➤ Revisit how you define relationships

Do this together!

## ➤ Discuss the benefits of romantic relationships

Use media, personal examples

## ➤ Find ways to facilitate connections

Many work places have rules against dating... are there other places your child is interacting with others?

## ➤ Connect with others who support your vision

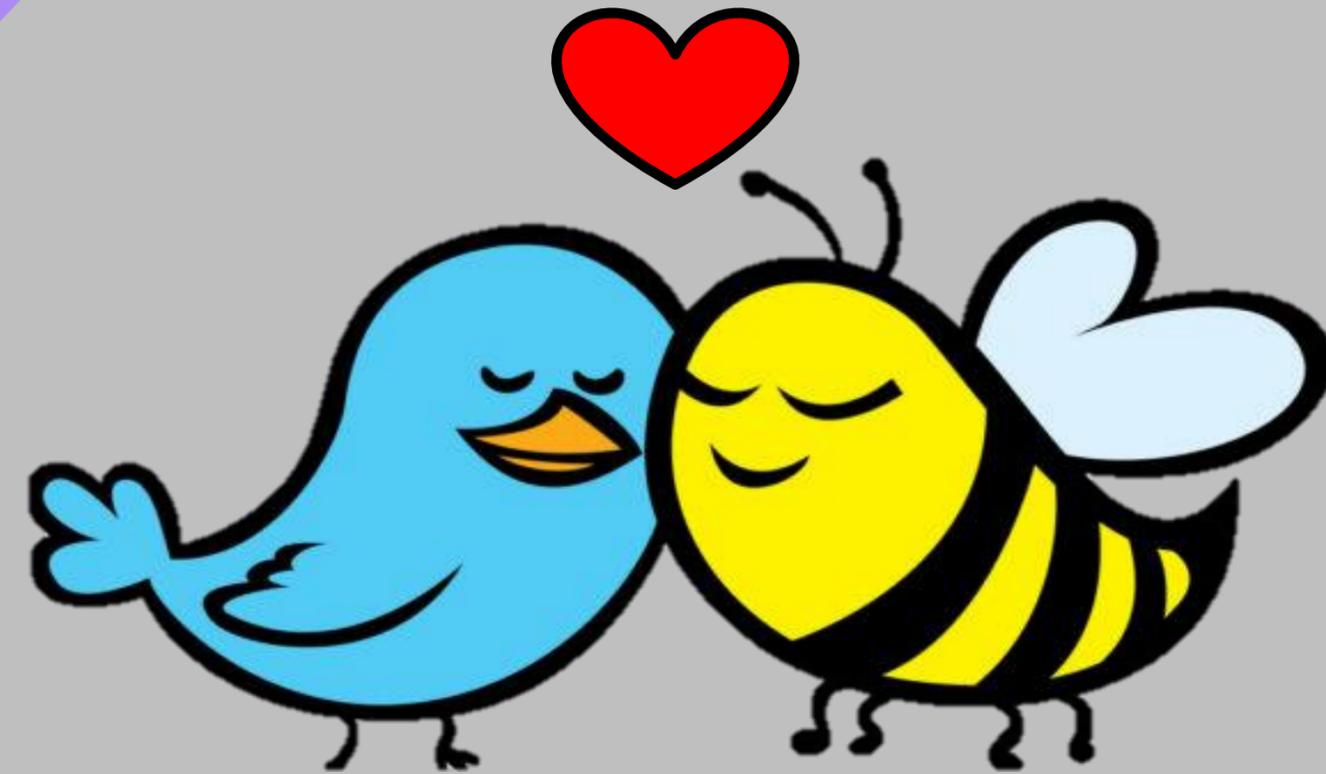
Get other trusted adults involved!  
Self-advocates!!



# Thank you for listening!

**Big thanks to our Community Advisory Board,  
Research Team, and participants!**

- Study announcements
  - CrehanLab on Facebook and Instagram
- Training opportunities and parent groups
  - PegasusCAPS on Facebook and Instagram
  - [www.pegasuscaps.com](http://www.pegasuscaps.com)



**Thank you for listening!**

