

ASC Girls and Puberty



Key points from ASC research

Most adults with ASC wish they had understood themselves better when they were younger; they wish they had known about their ASC and learnt about its impact and how people without ASC are different.

They particularly would like to have been taught something about relationships and how they worked.

Our initial advice is that any communication regarding puberty needs to be open, frank and unambiguous – be direct. Make contextualised rules of conduct and reinforce these visually. You can use a 5-point scale to indicate things that are 'ok' and things that are 'not', or 'things that are uncomfortable' and things that are 'ok', etc. ASC students are most likely to not have other peers to bounce information from to make sense of this period of transition. Talk through any new situations that may occur, using scenarios to discuss what should happen next, or what should be said, etc.

Some students with ASC find the changes that are happening to their bodies very difficult to cope with and menstruation adds to this dilemma. Using a calendar and visual reminders about changing pads can help with this – plan and prepare is the key. The author Kate Reynolds has a series of books, including one about puberty, which might be useful for them to read.

Make the implicit explicit when it comes to sex and relationships – students with ASC find non-verbal cues/communication difficult to read or to even be aware of. There is also a lot of misunderstanding and misinterpretation of teenage social rules and these may need to be spelt out, with the help of scenarios or drawing Comic Strip Conversations (Carol Gray) using thought and speech bubbles to break down issues/misunderstandings and discuss how to resolve them.

Consent is also an issue – we find that our girls with ASC will give their consent (even when they do not want to do something) because they believe that this is what neurotypical teenagers do:

- *'I thought to get a boyfriend you had to agree to have sex with them and so I told the first boyfriend I had that I knew about this and would have sex.'*
- *'I wish I had learnt to keep myself safe and what is meant if someone asks you to go for a walk and then they want to touch you – I did not understand.'*

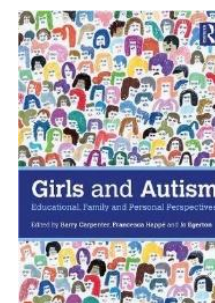
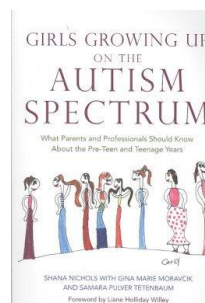
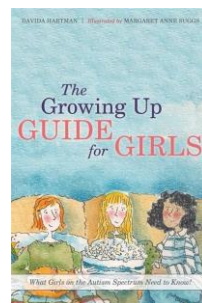
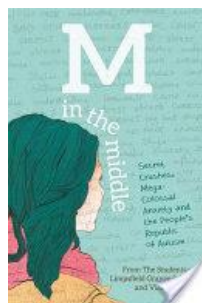
Open communication may be facilitated by reading a selection of books together and discussing them. Our books 'M is for Autism' and 'M in the Middle' which we wrote with our students, both available from Amazon, might be a good place to start.

Also recommended:

'The Growing Up Guide for Girls: What Girls on the Autistic Spectrum Need to Know!'

'Girls Growing up on the Autistic Spectrum'

'Girls and Autism Educational, Family and Personal Perspectives'



There are many issues for girls with ASC at puberty:

- Feeling totally out of control – mood swings and how to understand these
- Not being prepared for the intensity of emotions
- Help with practicalities – wearing black knickers when menstruating
- Help and advice about personal hygiene - acne, antiperspirants
- What to do with body hair
- Dealing with any sensory issues or hyper-sensitivities.

Parents/Carers need to try to be one step ahead through the teenage years, so that they can help to plan and prepare their teenager for that 'next step'. Reading some of the literature that has been written by women with autism may also help to avoid pitfalls. Be ready to set the boundaries and social 'rules' for each context – e.g. visual reminders, as laminated cards.

Sarah Hendrick's book, 'Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Understanding Life Experiences from Early Childhood to Old Age' is a useful read. Rudy Simone's book, 'Aspergirls: Empowering Females with Asperger Syndrome', is also good.

We have also used Robyn Steward for staff training. Her website and book both offer detailed advice about life as an adult with Autism which they may be able to start to relate to: <http://www.robysteward.com/>

We have made a short film about teenage girls with autism, which can be accessed from our website at Limpsfield Grange School. This short film is being used in training up and down the country when talking about girls with autism. This may offer some insight too.

Parents/Carers will also need to monitor the ongoing use of the internet, going in to puberty, as we find that there are many different (sometimes very serious) issues and problems which particularly result from students with ASC having unsupervised access of social media sites, gaming etc.

- It is known that ASC girls and women are extremely vulnerable to abuse because their perception of romance/love is not necessarily balanced.
- She may not learn from bad or difficult associations which would help her avoid future similar situations, as her autism means that she is unable to transfer learning into unfamiliar or new contexts.
- She may mis-understand social situations/cues in real life, in the media, or on social media, and therefore be mimicking what she thinks all girls her age are doing.
- She may lack 'big picture' thinking e.g. reacting in the moment but not being able to foresee the implications and danger she may be putting herself in.
- Autistic girls are very often at risk of CSE.

The NAS website is a valuable tool and has lots of information about sex education and puberty. See link below. <https://www.autism.org.uk/sexeducation>

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