Supporting Success and Safety in Relationships

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Autism at-a-Glance is a publication of the Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA)

Autism at-a-Glance is a series of practitioner and family-friendly documents created by the Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA) designed for high school staff members supporting students on the autism spectrum, as well as family members of adolescents with ASD. The purpose of the Autism at-a-Glance series is to provide a current summary of topics relevant to high school students with ASD as well as practical tips and resources for school and community personnel and family members.

This Autism at-a-Glance was designed to support high school staff, family members, and individuals on the autism spectrum in understanding and supporting success and safety in dating relationships.

Like other teens, many teens on the autism spectrum desire friendships and romantic partners. Due to challenges with social communication, some teens with ASD may have limited experience dating and could benefit from explicitly learning skills associated with successful and safe dating experiences. Teens with ASD may benefit from developing skills in the following areas: basic dating readiness skills, safety skills related to dating, and social skills related to dating. School staff and families both play important roles in supporting these skill areas.

BASIC DATING READINESS SKILLS

- **Identify the purpose of dating.** Educators should spend time discussing what dating is. For example, dating is a shared experience between two people and it should involve someone who the teen likes and who likes

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them back.

- **Establish a shared understanding of the dating process.** Teens may need support in understanding a reasonable timeline for dating and how a dating relationship typically develops. For example, a dating relationship usually evolves over time, starting as acquaintances which may develop into a casual friendship over several months, and finally become a romantic relationship.
- **Understand the differences between acquaintances, friendships, and dating.** Teens should be able to demonstrate an understanding of expected behaviors in different relationships including how to behave with strangers, community members/helpers, family, friends, and romantic partners.
- **Demonstrate dating readiness.** Teens with ASD also might benefit from discussing dating readiness including grooming habits, independent skills, and confidence.
- **Be aware of, and develop a plan for, dealing with sensory sensitivities.** Often, teens with ASD have hypo- or hypersensitivities to sensory information such as sound, smell, and touch. These sensory differences can impact social relationships and should be discussed to develop strategies for coping in the context of a dating relationship.

Scenario 1: Possible Challenges Associated with Basic Dating Readiness Skills

Sam was interested in dating girls at his high school. He had talked to his teacher and guidance counselor about his disappointment at not ever having had a date. Sam's teacher and Teens with ASD may benefit from developing basic dating readiness skills, safety skills related to dating, and social skills related to dating.

Safety Skills

- **Identify abusive behavior and illegal sexual behaviors and how to avoid them.** Teens with ASD are vulnerable to being abused by others. Due to immaturities in social understanding, some teens with ASD might be more likely to behave inappropriately themselves. Teaching teens to identify abusive and illegal behaviors, as well as the "grey" areas to consider, protects the teen with ASD and others.
- **Discuss relationship dangers faced on the internet.** Since many teens with ASD have access to the internet and enjoy online communication, it is essential to instruct teens with ASD on ways

to avoid danger on the internet.

- **Discuss the consequences of sexual activity.** Although sex education is typically embedded in middle and high school education, it is important to ensure that teens with ASD have a clear understanding of potential consequences of sexual activity, including STDs and pregnancy.

Scenario 2: Possible Challenges Associated with a Lack of Safety Skills

Lenore is a fan of manga. She spends a lot of time reading manga online and participating in a manga fan website. She and her online friends often discuss their favorite characters. Lenore's parents saw that in a recent conversation, Lenore was asked to send a photo to an online friend. Lenore's parents were alarmed to find that she had shared several photos with a stranger on the fan website. At a team meeting, Lenore's parents discussed their concerns about internet safety with Lenore's special education teacher. The team decided that it was critical that they spend instruction time reviewing behaviors in different relationships including how to behave with strangers, community members/helpers, family, friends, and romantic partners. They wanted to make sure that Lenore understood how to protect herself from people who might want to take advantage of her.

Safety Skills

- Demonstrate perspective taking and social communication skills for dating. Teens with ASD need instruction and practice in the conversation skills associated with dating including how to express interest, give compliments, share appropriate information about themselves, and understand the communication of others.
- Identify social mistakes related to dating. Dating is a complex social interaction for any person, so it is not surprising that teens with ASD might make social mistakes when dating. Educators can help teens to avoid potential dating mistakes by teaching skills such as identifying appropriate places to meet potential dates, evaluating whether a potential partner is interested in dating, choosing where to go on a date, assessing whether a date was successful, and following up on or ending a dating relationship.

Scenario 3: Possible Challenges Associated with Lack of Social Skills

Ren wanted to go out on a date with a girl he knew from his physics class. He remembered from his social skills class that it was important to maintain eye contact with people to indicate that you are interested in what they are saying.

Ren was careful to remember to look at Stacy when he was in class with her. He frequently asked her questions about herself and about classwork. The third week of class, Stacy complained to the science teacher that Ren talked to her too much and was staring at her all the time. She considered his behavior creepy and wanted to switch classes. Ren's science teacher met with Ren and his special education teacher to discuss Ren's behavior. The special education teacher realized that he needed to help Ren understand the social mistake he made with Stacy and find ways to help him evaluate whether a girl is interested in dating him. The special education teacher also helped Ren to work on his social skills, sharing the importance of reading social cues (e.g., facial expressions, body language) and discussing the fact that too much eye contact can also be uncomfortable.

4 KEY STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING SUCCESS AND SAFETY IN RELATIONSHIPS AND DATING

1. Visual supports: visual examples of concepts you intend to teach to support comprehension of target skills.

- Use photos to provide practice in identifying people's emotions.
- Use visual scripts to rehearse key dating concepts like asking someone on a date.

2. Video Models: video examples to demonstrate appropriate relationship and dating behaviors.

- Use video examples to reinforce social skill development such as correct body language used in initiating conversations or flirting.
- Use video models to demonstrate and reinforce the steps of a complete hygiene routine.

3. Social Narratives: stories that can provide insight into social situations.

Narratives emphasize the important social cues in the targeted social situation. The story provides teens with examples of appropriate social responses.

- Use social narratives to explain the importance of skills like good grooming, being independent, and showing confidence and how these skills can relate to successful dating.
- Use social narratives to discuss the idea of the "hidden curriculum" to emphasize important dating rules that everyone knows, but no one is taught. This includes assumed rules and social expectations. For example: "When you ask someone on a date and they SAY that they are busy, they often MEAN that they do not want to go out on a date with you, not that you should pick a different time to ask them again. If someone tells

you that they are busy, you should not ask them on a date again."

4. Role Play: practicing key social communication behaviors associated with safety and relationships.

- Use role play to demonstrate and practice nonverbal communication behaviors.
- Use "social autopsy" to analyze social errors committed and choose alternative solutions to correct the errors in the future.

IMPORTANT REMINDERS

Don't forget to reinforce correct behaviors!

Make a point of catching teens doing things well. Specific feedback will help teens remember the skills you are working on.

- "Great job giving your friends enough space. Other people like it when you stand an arm's length away when you talk to them."
- "I noticed that you listened to Kayla when she talked about her weekend and you were able to ask her what her favorite part of the movie was. You showed her that you were interested in what she had to say."

Check in regularly with teens with ASD and the people that support them.

Developing relationships in high school is a complex process which takes practice.

- Use errors as opportunities to teach new skills.
- Open communication with families can help identify student needs and reinforce the skills you are trying to teach.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Baker, J. (2006). Social Skills Picture Book for High School and Beyond. Future Horizons.

Davies, C., Dubie, M., Mesibov, G. B. (2012). Intimate relationships and sexual health: A curriculum for teaching adolescents/adults with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders and other social challenges. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing.

Hafner, D., (2005). Healthy and Ready to Work: A Series of Materials Supporting Youth with Special Health Care Needs, S.A.F.E. Safety Awareness for Empowerment. A Training Guide for Safety at Home, at Work, and in Public. http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/cedd/pdfs/products/health/SAFE.pdf

Laugeson, E. A. (2014). The PEERS Curriculum for School-Based Professionals Social Skills Training for Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder. http://www.taylorandfrancis.com/books/details/9780415626965

Myles, B. S., Trautman, M. L., & Schelvan, R. L. (2004). The hidden curriculum: Practical solutions for understanding unstated rules in social situations. Shawnee Missions, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing.

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