



Introduction

The number of children and teens diagnosed with autism or related conditions has significantly increased in recent years. Parents, mental health professionals, educators, researchers, and behavior specialists are scrambling to gain a better understanding of these conditions. We all want to know how to help these individuals and their families. As increasing numbers of individuals with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are identified, there is a greater awareness of the uniqueness associated with these conditions.

This book is intended to be an introduction to topics of Autism Spectrum Disorders, sexual behaviors, and therapeutic interventions. It is an attempt to bring together this important information in a way that is practical for clinicians and others who are not as familiar with the literature on ASD conditions.

This volume focuses on three Autism Spectrum Disorders. These conditions present a continuum of symptoms that carry varying degrees of impairment. Although there are similarities among individuals with the same diagnosis, not every affected individual will have the same characteristics. Autism Spectrum Disorders are also referred to as Pervasive Developmental Disorders. They are indeed pervasive and have an impact on the child's development in many ways. Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) are listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). With more detail in later chapters, the primary areas of concern for parents, educators, and mental health professionals involve the following:

- delays in speech and language development
- challenges with socio-emotional and relational skills development
- repetitive behaviors or a restricted range of interests that interfere with daily functioning

ASD conditions are caused by neurodevelopmental problems. Their origins begin extremely early in a child's life, i.e., prenatally or perinatally. The heritability estimates for autism are over 90 percent (Strock, 2004; Tager-Flusberg & Joseph, 2003). The genetic causes of autism are much stronger than those for schizophrenia. Twenty to fifty genes independently contribute to the development of autism (Geschwind, 2005; Rivera, 2005).

Researchers in several areas of neuroscientific study are investigating these disorders and providing highly technical, scientific information about autism. Some findings indicate that many people who eventually are diagnosed with these conditions experienced disruptions of brain development in their early months of life. Those disruptions were undetectable until social or communication delays could be observed. We will look at how these conditions interfere with development of social, emotional, and behavioral abilities, including how they may affect sexual behaviors.

It is not enough to know the causes or impairments related to these conditions. In decades past, families with a child with an ASD condition were essentially helped to find an institution in which to place their child. Little hope was offered. Clearly, the old psychodynamic paradigm about “refrigerator moms” causing autism was grossly inaccurate (Schreibman, 2005). One can only imagine the insult and agony those families went through with such misguided professional input.

Unfortunately some of those old ideas continue to affect families. They created a legacy of mistrust of mental health professionals who had participated in promoting bad advice. It is now well established that, despite the neurobiological causes of these disorders, the parents themselves are often the best positioned to provide helpful interventions that make dramatic positive changes in these children's lives! Recent decades of research have brought useful guidance, sound interventions, and hope to these families.

Another significant area of concern, and the focus of this book, is related to sexual development and sexual behavior problems. People are apprehensive about the possible disturbance of sexual development among individuals who have an ASD condition. As the number of children being diagnosed with an ASD condition increases, so do the numbers of these children and adolescents being identified with problematic sexual behaviors. We will explore social and sexual development among people with ASD conditions. We will attempt to make sense of the impairments caused by the ASD condition as they may well undermine some individual's ability to develop healthy social, romantic, and sexual relationships.

Therapists trained in traditional treatment strategies for adolescents with sexual behavior problems are more frequently being called upon to work with these youth. Assumptions and methods that work well with other clients often fail with children who have ASD conditions. Working with children and families with an ASD condition, and possibly an additional intellectual disability or other mental health problem, brings many unique challenges. Cognitive impairments, social delays, self-regulation skills deficits, and many other challenges affect the course of therapeutic intervention and education.

Our goals in treating children and adolescents with ASD conditions and problem sexual behaviors are three. First, treatment professionals aim to ensure the safety of the ASD-affected child or adolescent and of other children, adolescents, and adults around him or her. Second, the clinician's goal is to decrease the child's or adolescent's behaviors that create harm and/or opportunities for social and sexual rejection. That goal would also include increasing the frequency of behaviors that create opportunities for appropriate and safe social and/or sexual interactions that will help enrich the child or adolescent's quality of life. To get to those goals, clinicians will need to help parents, siblings, and other caregivers to come to terms with - and even facilitate - the ASD-affected child's or adolescent's appropriate sexual development, knowledge, and interactions. That last goal is difficult to attain even for parents of neurotypical children.

This book explores a variety of scientifically sound, well-researched, and practical approaches for intervention for children and teens that are "on the Spectrum." There are several proven approaches for treating the ASD condition itself. There are also theory-driven approaches that appear helpful as well. Therapeutic interventions for sex education and/or addressing sexual behavior problems are also discussed.

The book is laid out in three sections. Chapters one through five focus on defining the conditions known as Autism Spectrum Disorders and on sexual development and disturbances among children and adolescents who have ASD conditions. Chapters six through nine focus on evidence-based treatment approaches for ASD conditions that will also be considered during the course of treatment for sexual behavior problems. Chapter 10 focuses on sex education and therapeutic interventions for ASD-diagnosed youth with sexual behavior problems.

One last thought before delving into the task at hand. It is important to recognize that the people affected by one of these Autism Spectrum Disorders are people affected by a disorder. They are not the disorder; they are affected by the disorder. It is important to be thoughtful of the potential effects of labeling and creating unhelpful mindsets. It actually may be more helpful for us to recognize that these individuals have many similarities with the typical population. We all have quirks and idiosyncrasies. There are really intelligent people who have terrible social skills. There are many people with intellectual disabilities who are wonderful, kind, and get along with just about everyone. Perhaps we need to think of ourselves as being fellow members of the human spectrum.