

## **CARSON AIM Model 2016**

### **Guidance on a Continuum of Sexual Behaviours for Children & Adolescents with Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC)**

This guidance has not been produced in the checklist format for several reasons

- The limitations of research and practice experience combining an understanding of sexually harmful behaviours / autistic spectrum conditions (Brown et al 2016, Carson 2016)
- The wide range of problematic and harmful sexual behaviours
- The very wide range of children / adolescents on the autistic spectrum and the consequently wide range of behaviours displayed

Because the autistic spectrum covers a wide range of ability levels and needs, the guidance in the adolescent checklist, may be more appropriate for some functioning adolescents with Asperger's. The following information is intended to be a broad guide, a starting point for education staff, to try to provide some perspective on the features of healthy, problematic or harmful behaviours. It is based primarily on Isabelle Hénault's work (2003, 2005, 2014 and Brown et al 2016).

#### **Healthy Sexual Development**

The physical sexual development processes of children / adolescents with ASC are exactly the same as the wider population. Their bodies physically develop and mature, and they have an interest in sex and have sexual needs like everyone else. "The human sexual drive is a primary drive; it is not optional" (Newton 2016).

Puberty and adolescence is a confusing, exciting and frightening time for any teenager: adolescence with ASC, many who have difficulties adapting to change, may struggle with the changes happening to their bodies. They may not have the normative coping skills and impulse control to deal with the rise in sexual urges they are experiencing. (Brown-Lavoie, Vecili & Weiss 2014)

They often need a longer period of time to adjust and understand any changes in their lives, "and to develop and explore their gender and sexual identity. Early evidence suggests a higher proportion of young people with ASC identify as trans or non gender-binary than the mainstream population" (Dorer 2016, deVries et al 2013)

Early preparation with them of the changes to come, is therefore important. (National Autistic Society 2003). They also need appropriate support to express themselves sexually and information about appropriate boundaries. "Just as children learn to eat, drink, sleep, and deal with fear, they can learn to express their sexuality" (Newton 2016)

Those with more severe autism may never desire to engage in sexual behaviours with another person, but they are likely to engage in self-masturbation. They may also have difficulty understanding their own body functions, for example when they are sexually aroused. This confusion could lead to them becoming frustrated or attributing sexual feelings to those of

discomfort and pain, which can be confusing and frightening for them. Impulsive reactions frequently become the only vehicle by which internal tensions are released. (Hénault 2005)

Those with less severe autism are likely to have desires to make relationships and to engage in sexual behaviours with others. They face four main difficulties in doing this.

- Children / adolescents often experience social difficulties, such as problems with communication, challenges in recognising boundaries and difficulties in being able to understand that other people think and feel differently to them. (Brown et al 2016) This can mean that they do not know how to approach or engage with other people, with whom they may wish to have a healthy romantic or sexual relationship. “Knowing that you want to relate to other people is not the same as knowing how to relate” (Sexuality Resource Centre for Parents 2016) They may be unclear as to concepts on consent and whether or not others are receptive to their sexual propositions. (Seviever, Roth & Gillis 2013)
- Flirting and sexual relationships contain many complex multi-layered meanings, for example innuendo and flirtatious body language. They have difficulty decoding the messages and understanding what is being said or asked. “Sexuality is filled with subtleties and small gestures and intentions that must be decoded in a second (non-verbal) level” (Hénault 2005; Atwood, Hénault, Dublin 2014)
- Sexual behaviours may be perceived by the child / adolescent just like any other behaviour, free of social rules and convention. “Gradually, the child with Asperger Syndrome learns the codes of social conduct, more by intellectual analysis and instruction than natural intuition. They have to think hard what to do”. (Hénault 2005). Once the codes of conduct are learned they often rigorously enforce them. (Attwood 2001)
- Lack of opportunity is a problem. Most adolescents diagnosed on the autistic are male and finding an understanding female peer can be difficult. Parental concerns about their emerging sexuality may mean their access both to information and potential partners may be restricted. For those who are cared for away from home, in predominately male environments, they have few opportunities for heterosexual relationships and may also experience repression of their natural development.