

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY



**Concerns, Knowledge, Experience and
Attitudes about Sexuality among Adolescents
with Autistic Spectrum Disorders and their
Parents**

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Abstract

Background. There are many studies dealing with the topic of sexual education and sexual knowledge. On the other hand studies regarding the concerns in the sexual field among the atypical population are fewer, especially among individuals with Autism (hereinafter: ASD). Twenty years ago, it was assessed that individuals diagnosed with ASD are not interested in sexual relations or are not mature enough in this respect and therefore do not engage in sexual relations or relationships (Konstantareas & Lunskey, 1997). However, recent studies conducted in this field indicate that many of the individuals with ASD are interested in sexuality, exhibit sexual behaviors and seek romantic relationships with others (Fernandes et al., 2016).

Sexuality is a normal and natural part of adolescence and the physical development as well as the desire for a romantic and sexual relationship, are similar to those experienced by the typically developed population (hereinafter: Typical). However, the difficulties adolescents with ASD face in their daily communication may cause significant difficulties in choosing the acceptable social-sexual conduct as well as to difficulties in forming successful relationships (Pecora, Mesibov, & Stokes, 2016).

These difficulties are expressed by the concerns and attitudes of parents of adolescents with ASD, as can be seen in several studies conducted in this field that will be elaborated further on in this study for instance (Holmes, Himle, & Strassberg, 2016). Whereas, an inquiry in electronic databases, such as the ProQuest, PubMed, PsycNET, APA and others, indicates that the concerns and attitudes of the adolescents with ASD themselves regarding their own sexuality were not examined so far. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on this important topic.

Study goals. The main goal of the current study is to examine the concerns and attitudes of adolescents with high-functioning autism on the topic of sexuality, compared to Typical. The adolescent's concerns will be compared to those of their parents in the same way. In Addition the knowledge, experience and attitudes regarding sexuality among will be examined.

Hypotheses. The current study has a number of hypotheses: we hypothesized that differences would be found between the ASD group and the Typical group in the various study variables: **knowledge:** the sexual knowledge among the Typical would be greater than among the ASD group; **sexual behavior:** actual conduct of sexual behaviors that require interpersonal interaction, will be higher among the Typical group compared to the

ASD group, unlike sexual conduct that does not require this interaction, where there will be similarity among the two groups. **Parent-adult communication:** the topics discussed by parents and Typical adolescents will be greater than those discussed by parents and adolescents with ASD. **Parents' concerns toward their children:** the concerns among the parental group of adolescents with ASD will be greater than the parental group of Typical adolescents. **Adolescents' concerns:** differences would be found between the concerns of the Typical group and the group of adolescents with ASD. **Reasons to marry and a desire for marriage:** differences would be found between the Typical group and the ASD group in the reasons and the desire to marry. We further hypothesized that differences would be found in the parental groups between parents who grew up in an open and welcoming atmosphere and discussed sexual topics with their parents and are therefore more open with their children, and parents who did not grow up in an open atmosphere and did not discuss sexual topics with their parents. We also hypothesized the following: correlations will be found between: A. the level of concerns among parents on sexuality concerning their children and the quantity of sexual behavior. B. the quantity of conversation topics concerning sexuality and their children's active sexual behavior. C. Parental and adolescents' concerns in the aspect of sexuality. D. Adolescents' concerns in the aspect of sexuality and their actual sexual conduct. E. Adolescents' concerns in the aspect of sexuality and their reasons for marriage as well as their desire or non-desire to marry.

Method. In the current study 40 high school students participated as well as their parents. The students who took part in this study were divided into two study groups. 20 adolescents with high functioning autism and 20 typically developed adolescents. The ages of the subjects ranged between 16 and 19.5. The males and females with ASD were sampled from communicative classes in high school, based on the diagnosis in their personal records, as well as students with ASD who are integrated in regular classes. The subjects were asked questions regarding their gender, country of birth, level of religiousness, the existence of a diagnosis or of ADHD, other members of the family on the spectrum, do they have their own room, their parents' family status, the frequency of afternoon activities with friends and with the opposite sex. After receiving the approval of the Chief Scientist for the study and the approval of the parents for their children's' participation in the study and an explanation on the study, the students completed a series of tests lasting between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours and included two main sections that were given in the usual order: in the first section, an intelligence test (Raven's Progressive Matrices; Raven, Court, & Raven, 1977) and language test (Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test: PPVT-III; Dunn & Dunn, 1997) were given. The second part of the section included the following tests: sexual knowledge test,

sexual conduct measure questionnaire, a questionnaire on concerns regarding their sexuality and a “Why to marriage” questionnaire. The parents of the adolescents answered the following questionnaires: a sexual education measure questionnaire, a questionnaire on their concerns regarding their children’s sexuality. The parents of adolescents with ASD also filled out the SCQ questionnaire (Rutter & Lord, 2003) concerning their children’s social behavior.

Results. According to the study hypotheses, it was found that sexual knowledge among those with ASD was lower than the sexual knowledge among Typical. The sub-fields found that the sexual knowledge regarding diseases is significantly higher among the typically developed subjects compared to the subjects with ASD. Furthermore, the knowledge on anatomy and physiology is much higher among Typical compared to the subjects with ASD. Regarding the degree of sexual experience of adolescents with ASD is significantly lower than that of Typical adolescents. Regarding parents-adolescent’s communication, contrary to our hypothesis, no significant differences were found between the study groups in the degree of communication on sexual topics. On one topic, sexual health, the communication was greater among parents of Typical adolescents compared to parents of adolescents with ASD. Regarding the differences between parents who grew up in homes where sexuality was discussed openly compared to homes where it was not, it was found that in homes that sexuality was discussed openly, the parents were more open with their children.

Regarding the concerns, a comparison between the concerns of parents of adolescents with ASD and those of parents of Typical adolescents, similarly to our hypothesis, it was found that the degree of concern of parents of adolescents with ASD concerning sexual topics was significantly greater than the concern of parents of Typical adolescents. In comparing the concerns of adolescents with ASD and Typical adolescents, similarly to our hypothesis, it was also found that the degree of concerns of adolescents with ASD regarding sexual topics is significantly greater compared to the degree of concern regarding sexual topics among Typical adolescents.

In comparing the concerns of parents and adolescents with ASD, with the concerns of parents and Typical adolescents, significant differences were found among the ASD group in the degree of concerns between parents and their children in the following components: degree of concerns regarding relationships, degree of concerns regarding practical aspects and expectation and the degree of concerns regarding the manner in which the autism will affect sexuality. In these three areas it was found that the level of concerns among parents is higher than the level of concerns among their children. Nevertheless, no

significant differences were found between the parents and their children in the levels of concerns regarding negative outcomes, sexual deviance, lack of knowledge and the general measure of the concern's questionnaire.

However, among the Typical group, contrary to the subjects with ASD, no significant differences were found in the degree of concerns between parents and their children, as both parents and children demonstrated a low degree of concerns.

Regarding the correlation between the parents' concerns of sexual topics toward their children and the degree of communication on this topic with them, it was found that with Typical adolescents a positive and significant correlation was found between the degree of concerns (general measure), the degree of concerns regarding negative outcome and the degree of concerns regarding relationships, and the communication measure on sexual abuse. Thus, as the degree of parental concern overall and specifically regarding a negative outcome or relationships increases, the degree of communication between the parents and their children on sexual abuse, increases, respectively. However, among parents of adolescents with ASD, a significant and negative correlation was found between the degree of concerns regarding expectations and sexual health. Thus, as the degree of concerns regarding expectations increases, the degree of communication on sexual health decreases, respectively. Furthermore, as their degree of concerns regarding relationships and expectations increases, the level of communication with the adolescents on the topics of sexual and romantic relationship, decreases, respectively. An additional result among parents of adolescents with ASD is that a positive significant correlation exists between the degree of concerns of parents of adolescents with ASD regarding negative outcome, sexual deviance and relationships, and the level of their child's concern regarding the manner in which autism will affect his/her sexuality. Thus, as the degree of the parents' concerns regarding negative outcome, sexual deviance and relationships increases, the degree of their child's concerns regarding the manner in which autism will affect his/her sexuality, increases, respectively. Contrary to the parents and adolescents with ASD, no correlation was found among parents of Typical adolescents between the degree of parental concern and the degree of their children's concern on the topics on sexuality. In regarding with the adolescents' concerns and their actual sexual experiences, and the correlation between their concerns and the reasons for marriage, no significant correlations were found among both study groups.

Regarding the importance of marriage, contrary to our hypothesis, there were no differences between the groups. The regression analyses conducted, indicated that as the social activity with friends of the adolescents with ASD and their sexual knowledge

increase, the level of his sexual experience, increases respectively. On the other hand, among Typical adolescents, it was found that the male gender, the importance of emotional reasons for marriage and low degree of concerns among parents, affects the adolescents' sexual experiences.

Conclusions. The current study poses an additional layer in our understanding of the population with ASD and their parents in general, and specifically of adolescents with high functioning autism and their parents, regarding their attitudes and concerns in sexuality. This study indicated that despite the lowered sexual knowledge, their fewer sexual experiences and greater concerns in the sexual aspect compared to the typically developed population, it was found high functioning adolescents demonstrate a desire for a romantic and sexual relationship and even a desire to marry. Based on these findings, it is our duty to advance and encourage sexual education among the special education classes .In Addition, we must accompany and professionally support romantic and sexual relationships among individuals with disabilities and specifically among individuals with ASD.