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AUTISM LEARNS

Teaching autistic teenagers about puberty and sex

Lynne Moxon *Independent Psychologist, Trainer and Speaker*



- Why is it crucial to prepare an autistic teenager for the changes that will happen in puberty?
- What should we tell them about sex and when?
- How to have successful conversations about embarrassing topics

We are going
to have to talk
about 'Private
Parts'



- Sexual development and curiosity are normal developmental processes
- Building social relationships by making friends and establishing intimate partners is a key developmental life stage for young adults.

We are not talking about people *having* sex, but rather, talking about sexuality as a defining and human characteristic of all of us. Sexuality and sexual feelings are so basic, so important, and yet, there is only now literature and research as to how to teach autistic people **how to behave appropriately** in terms of their own bodies and other people's as well. This is not a talk on how to or whether to... but rather, what every human being, on the Spectrum or not, should know about safe behaviour.

It has not been established that children under nine years old have the capacity to engage with the internet in a safe and beneficial manner in all circumstances, especially when it comes to this age group socialising online, either within age appropriate virtual worlds or as underaged participants in sites intended for teenagers and adults (Facebook, You Tube etc.).

Goals of sex and relationship education

- SRE allows young people to develop in their understanding of sex and relationships to the point where they are ready for more information.
This is not a one off experience, it needs repeating as the young person gets older and is ready for more information.
- In the long term young people will understand interpersonal relationships better and be able to engage in appropriate behaviours.
- SRE in schools from September 2019

- Building social relationships by making friends and establishing intimate partners is a key developmental life stage for young adults.
- But the NSPCC reports that secondary school pupils, especially boys, are viewing porn to learn about sex and they are developing very skewed views.
- There is no link between *knowledge* via SRE about sexuality and (inappropriate) interest or behaviours. Henault (2006)

- **Sex is not compulsory**

- Parents and teachers need to realise that their child needs to be very aware of body changes, privacy rules, personal space and distance, relationships and permission.
- Boundaries of body (private parts), of space (private places), and of topic (private subjects) need to be emphasised, and adult forms of affection and closeness need to be developed.

- Always think ahead to what we will need to have in place five years from now. If the 5-year-old is running around the beach naked, we want to be sure s/he doesn't do that at 10. If an 8-year-old is touching himself in the classroom, we want to make sure he understands that he cannot do that now and especially when he is 13. Or 15. We may have to start teaching him time and place now, if he is on the Spectrum, because the longer difficult behaviours go on, the harder they are to redirect.

- Keeping the autistic child's future in mind, we need to also think about *how* to teach what they need to know, given their particular learning style. If you have a person who is a concrete learner, a black-and-white thinker, then you'd better be sure that you are being clear and literal. Do not put a condom on a banana and expect someone to be able to generalize this to their own bodies. Use realistic photos, real words. Keep the message simple and repetitive.

- Autistic people need a completely different approach. As an example, they need a specific set of rules for each type of risk; otherwise they often don't have the social interpretation skills to deal with slightly different situations. This explains why you may have repeat instances of inappropriate behaviour with different media, such as mobile phones, Skype, Facebook and direct physical contact, despite the many hours of generic counselling.

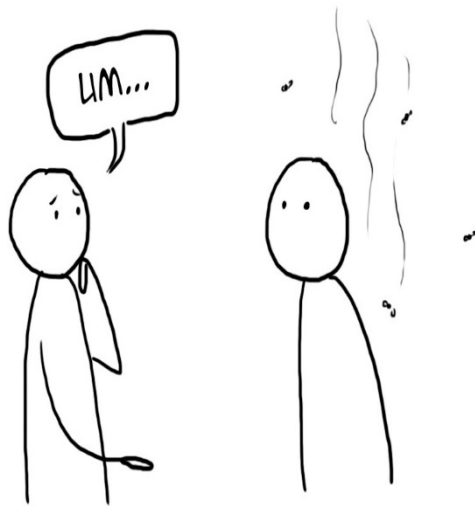
Robyn Steward, *The Independent Woman's handbook to super safe living on the Autistic Spectrum*.

<http://www.paceuk.info/supporting-risk-children-aspergers-syndrome/>

SEX - SOCIAL ASPECTS

- What does sex mean?
- Why do people do it?
- How do we learn about sex?
- Who can/can't we have sex with and why?
- Consent
- Right times and places – public and private
- Keeping safe, socio-sexual rules, norms and values,
- Discrimination skills (which behaviour is appropriate in which situation, place, and time?)

Social relationship skills are broad and *everything* needs to be taught



HOW DO YOU POLITELY TELL
SOMEONE THAT THEY SMELL?

WWW.VOICESINHERHEAD.COM

- What age is the youngest person you can date?
- How many times can you shake the drops from your penis before it is judged as masturbation?
- How many times can you ask someone for a date before it is harassment?

Teach the 'hidden curriculum'

- The set of unwritten rules that no one has been directly taught, but everyone knows.
- Violations of these rules can make an individual a social outcast and increases vulnerability.

Phrases associated with hidden curriculum:

- “I shouldn’t have to tell you but ... “
- “Everyone knows that ... “
- “It’s obvious ... “
- “But its common sense

When do we start?

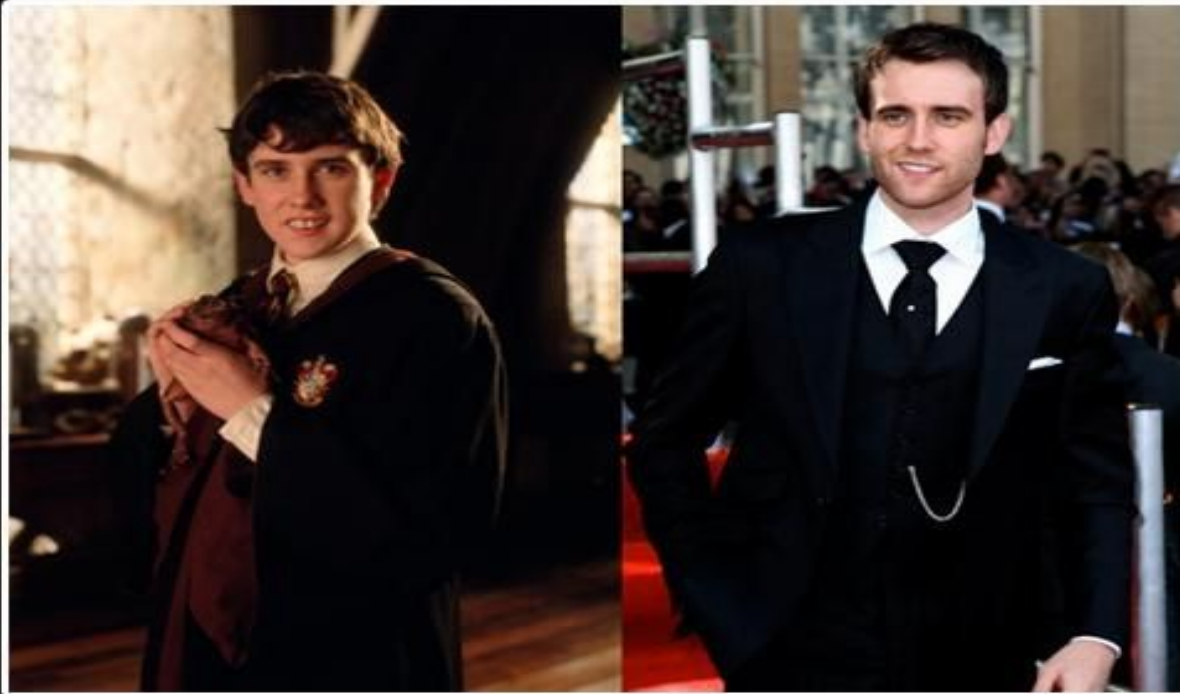
- With toilet training:
public/private, parts of
the body, touch, undressing

If your child shows an awareness of how older people are physically different to them, this is a good starting point for discussion.

Noticing a beard, breasts or underarm hair is a very tangible visual sign for an autistic person about difference to themselves.



- Puberty, or the start of adolescence, is now taking place earlier than in previous generations, and is earlier in girls than boys.
- By the end of primary school, many girls in a class will probably have begun menstruation. This is triggered by weight not age.
- You will need to introduce the topic at 8 years (average age now 10)

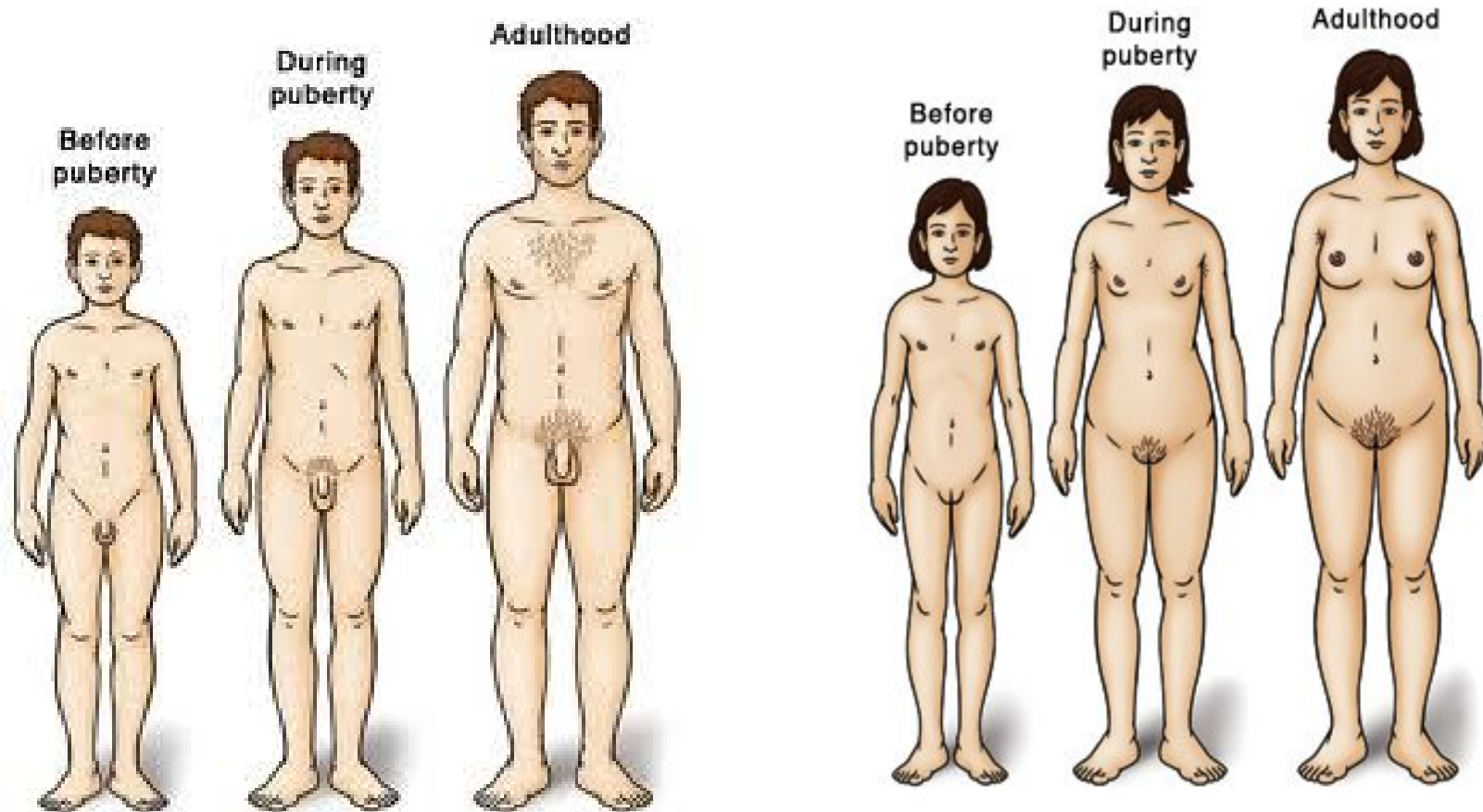


Puberty

**average age for girls now
10, when she weighs 7.5
stone**



Given the strength in visual skills for individuals with ASD, the information about body changes in puberty is best given in a visual way.



Topics for puberty social stories for boys:

- growth acceleration (title 'I will get taller')
- pubic, underarm, and facial hair development (title 'extra hair will grow')
- testicular and penile enlargement (title 'my body will look different')
- spontaneous erections, sperm production, wet dreams (title 'my body will do new things', or use simplified versions of these terms as titles)
- voice deepening (title 'my voice will sound different')

Wet Dreams

- Your son might find that he has a 'sexy' dream at night and wakes up to discover that some liquid (sperm) has leaked out of the end of his penis. This is referred to as **wet dreams in puberty** and is quite normal and natural.
- There is no reason to ever feel guilty about having a wet dream, they are subconscious and can not be easily controlled or manipulated.

Erections

- Erections are a perfectly normal function of the male body, especially in males who are going through puberty.
- Although many erections are caused by sexual arousal, such as watching a sexy film or girl you like, many erections seem to happen for no particular reason.
- So if you have an erection in an odd or embarrassing situation — like right in the middle of a history lesson — there's no reason to worry that something is wrong with you. Your body is just acting naturally for your age.

Topics for puberty social stories for girls:

- breast development and widening of the hips (could be titled 'the shape of my body will change')
- pubic and underarm hair development (title 'extra hair will grow')
- onset of menstruation (title 'I will begin to have my period')
- growth acceleration (title 'I will get taller')

Breasts and Bras

- Girls have them so that her breasts can provide the milk for her baby in the future.
- Breasts can start growing as early as age 8 or as late as 13.
- Once a girl has breasts, a bra is a good idea, especially when the girl is exercising and playing sports. Bras can protect breast tissue and keep the breasts supported. Some girls may also like that bras smooth out their silhouettes and make them feel more comfortable.

Periods

- Your daughter will start her periods. It is important to prepare her in advance for this before it starts. Explain to her what is happening to her body, that it is normal and natural and shows that she is healthy and growing into a woman.
- Periods start when a girl reaches $7\frac{1}{2}$ stone
- To catch the blood and prevent stains on her clothes, a girl can wear a pad, which sticks to her underwear, or a tampon, which is inserted into the vagina.

Sensory difficulties (coping with odours, sensation of blood running, using public toilets, using sanitary towels/tampons).

Difficulties coping with change in the body and change with periods. A person's first period can differ from forthcoming periods; each period can be different and may change due to age, stress and after child birth for example. Difficulties coping with menstruation for those who do not identify as female.

Confusion arising from lack of detailed, clear information.

- Steward, R., et al (2018). "Life is Much More Difficult to Manage During Periods": Autistic Experiences of Menstruation. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3664-0>

Sexualisation

- Sexual content in mainstream media has increased, and become more explicit in recent years, and sexual imagery has become more widely circulated within society more broadly.
- 70% of children, 12 to 15 report unintended exposure to porn websites
- 58% of teenagers view porn regularly
- Boys may be pressurised into having sex
- 60% of 13-17s think Sex and Relationships Education should start from age 8 at the latest.
- There is a dangerous lack of knowledge about STIs

- Sexualisation is the imposition of adult sexuality on to children and young people before they are capable of dealing with it, mentally, emotionally or physically.



(Papadopoulos 2010, 6).
(Buckingham et al 2010)

'We spent £1,000 on my daughter's primary school prom'



Debenhams has brought out a range of prom dresses, starting at age four

Some examples:

Type of media / entertainment	Examples of sexual content	How might this lead to sexualisation ?
Music - videos / lyrics	Sexual content / style – dancing, nakedness!, sexual lyrics	Young children copy and aspire to be pop stars then acting in sexual way
Internet / Social Networking (S.N)	Free, unrestricted, uncensored access to pornography . S.N profiles - sexual posing, web cams	Pornography may distort views and expectations of sex if seen as source of sex education. Vulnerability of sexual posing on S.N.
Mobile phones	Sexual advertising / spam, 'sexting'. Access to pornography	Spam content may evoke curiosity. 'Sexting' could leave to blackmail
Computer Games	Can show sexual violence and aggression GFA 4	Gives viewer less empathy and more accepting of violence and aggression



**SOMETIMES
FOUR FINGERS
JUST ISN'T
ENOUGH!**



Social Life

- Realistic expectations of acquaintances and friends
- Joining groups related to special interest
- Support groups for others with AS
- Mentoring, befriending and counselling
- Social skills training
- Internet chat-rooms and social network contacts – know the rules

What is normal in a relationship

- The average age of losing virginity in England is 16
- Healthy, long lasting relationships are based on trust and kindness, not just sex/physical activity
- Relationships are private, the intimacy of which should not be shared with mates or on phones or networking sites

What does a 'normal' body look like?



Average male bodies from
left to right: The United
States, Japan, Netherlands
and France



Why do we need sex and relationship education?

- There are building blocks to being able to have relationships and without them as a foundation for adult life, the relationships do not happen or they falter.
- Hatton and Tector (2010) interviewed young people at school when devising an SRE curriculum
- *All of them wished they had understood themselves better when they were younger; they wished they had known about their ASD and learnt about its impact and how people without ASD are different.*
- *They particularly would like to have been taught something about relationships and how they worked.*

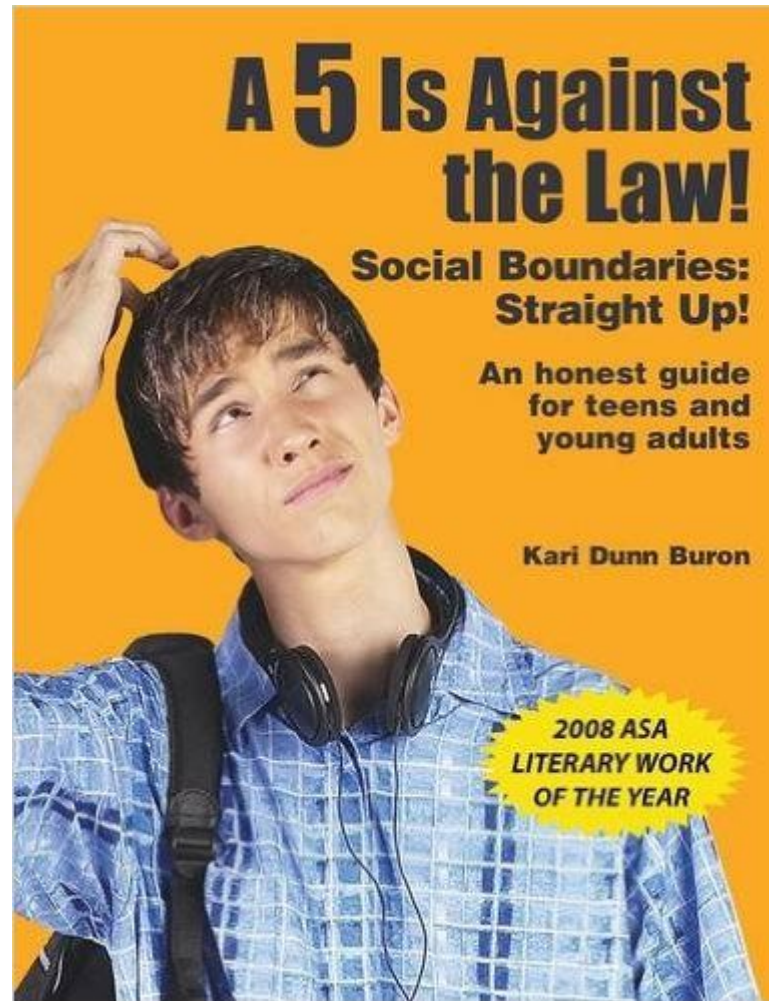
- *‘I thought to get a boyfriend you had to agree to have sex with them and so I told the first boyfriend I had that I knew about this and would have sex.’*
- *‘I like things to be my way, I am not able to know what someone else is going to do so it seems better if I just masturbate on my own.’*
- *‘I 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.’*

- Hatton, S., and Tector, A., (2010) The building blocks to social competency for an effective SRE curriculum for pupils with ASD. BJSE Volume 37 · Number 2

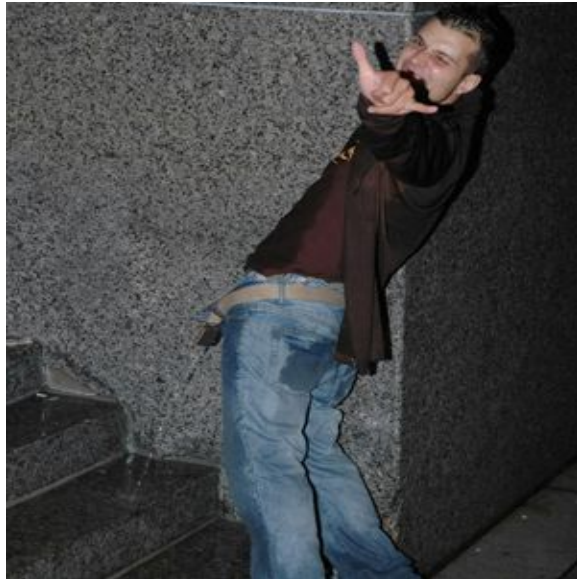
- You can lay the basic building blocks for your child's online life really early such as the fact that what we see on screen is not real. A non-autistic 5 year old knows that Maggie Smith is a witch in Harry Potter and a nun in Sister Act - and in the real world, she's neither of those people. The distinction between reality and fantasy can be blurred in autism.
- Although, for example, there is a correlation between aggression and playing violent computer games for children with autism (Mazurek 2013), there is also a benefit from playing social co-operative games.

- By not recognising that a child is growing toward adulthood, parents may not feel ready to begin teaching boundaries.
- Most of the incidents which lead to trouble for young people with communication difficulties, autism or learning difficulties are "boundary violations" brought on by the impulse of a moment.

Sex and the Law



Will I get into trouble?



Behaviour Towards Other People

Rating	A good word for the behaviour	People might think this about you	Examples of this level
5	Threatening	He is dangerous. I should call the police or report him to the boss/principal	Bringing a weapon to work/college. Telling people that you want to kill them or others.
4	Scary	I don't want to work near this person he seems scary	Asking people if they would be afraid if he brought a gun to work. Repeatedly telling women that he would like to have sex with them. Screaming when things seem wrong.
3	Strange	I don't understand this person. I feel I should keep away from them.	Repeating lines from films/games. Grabbing someone's arm unexpectedly
2	OK	I might want to get to know him/her, be a friend	Saying 'good morning'. Smiling at people when they smile at you.
1	Great	I really like this person. I want to work alongside/sit next to him/her . I feel happy when they are around.	Giving compliments, sharing materials, worksheets, ideas. Offering to help someone.

Experiences of Sex Education and Sexual Awareness in Young Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Laura A. Hannah, Steven D. Stagg. J Autism Dev Disord (2016) 46:3678–3687

This report suggest that it is difficult and confusing for a young person with ASD to experience and learn about sex and relationships. Further, avenues of potential knowledge, such as peer groups, tend to be an inaccessible option for young people with ASD. The participants in our study presented as vulnerable to the manipulation of others and in danger of breaking the law due to inappropriate behaviour.

- In one school a 12-year-old had taken “a photo of his bits” and sent it to two girls (he said he was hedging his bets). Clearly, no adult had explained: “This is not how you ask someone out.”
- A 2013 study *Basically . . . Porn is Everywhere*, Middlesex University, found that porn negatively influenced young people, creating unrealistic beliefs about sex. We can offset this by conveying to our boys (and girls) early on that porn is fantasy.

Consent

Consent is active and willing participation in sexual activity. It means that both parties had the freedom and capacity to make choice.



You can talk to very young children about consent too. Just because your daughter likes being tickled one day does not mean she'd like it today. She can say 'no'.

A child is allowed to say 'no' if they do not want to be kissed by grandma etc.



Kissing

Kissing is in many ways the height of intimacy and is an important developmental step, marking the beginning of a young person's sexuality (Strong et al., 2005).



Sexual assault

Sexual assault is a crime. It includes unwanted touching, kissing, grabbing and rape.

Stay safe. If someone is treating you badly, leave.



Autistic teenager groped carers

- An autistic teenager, 18, who groped two care workers has been sent to a mental health hospital indefinitely.



Warning Signs That Someone May Become Abusive Within a Relationship

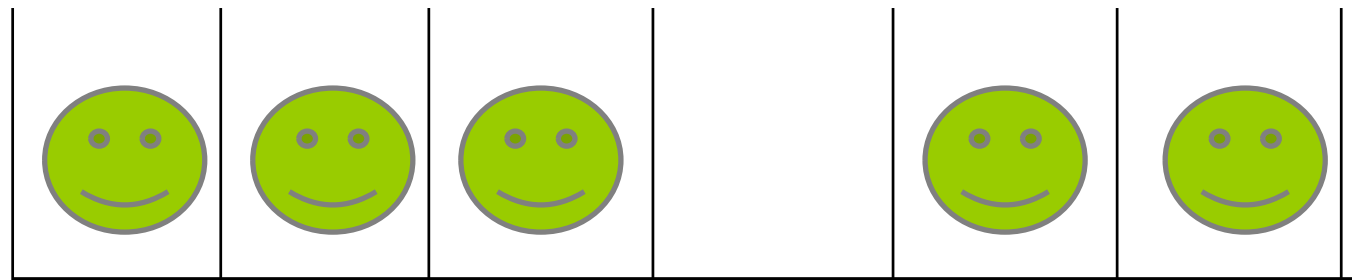
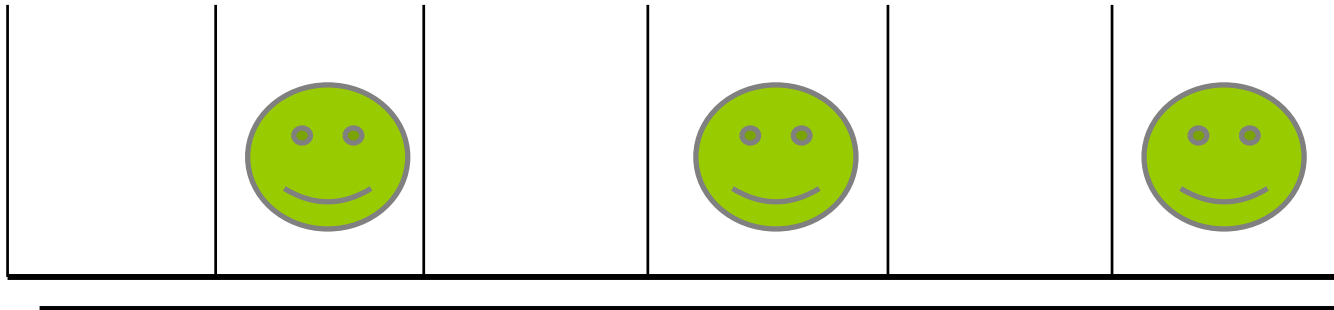
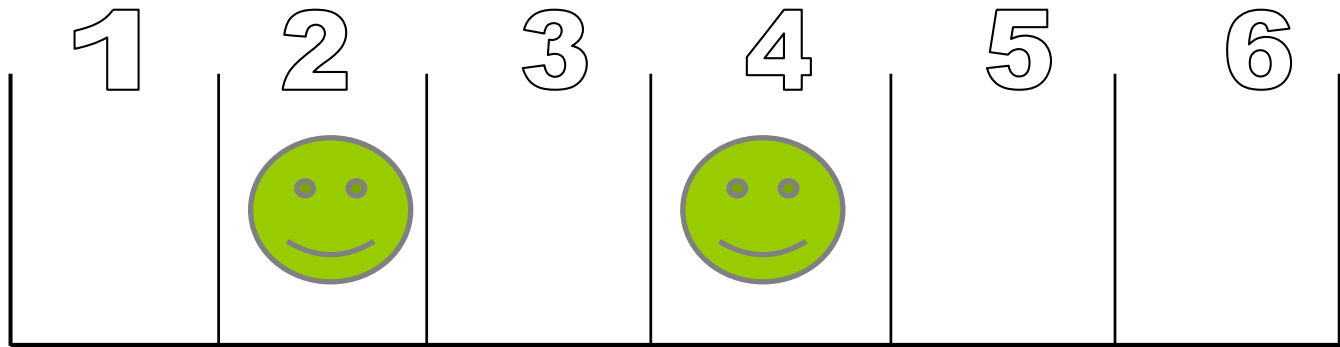
- He/she attempts to cut the person off from friends and family, including stopping the person from calling them or meeting them, or from attending events when they are present.
- He/she attempts to control lots of tiny details about the other person's actions and appearance, such as what he/she wears or eats.
- When he/she does something inappropriate/incorrect, the person is quick to criticise the partner rather than apologizing him/herself.
- He/she handles stress badly; the other person often feels like he/she is “walking on eggshells” (having to be very careful about everything said or done to avoid reactions) as he/she never knows what will make the person angry.

THE ETIQUETTE OF THE URINAL: KNOW YOUR P'S AND Q'S

- There is an unstated code of behaviour in men's public loos which is surprisingly universal. Zip only
- **No pairing**
Unlike women, men visit the lavatory entirely for practical reasons, and it is always suspect to follow a friend to the loo immediately.
- **No talking**
Terse conversation in the loo can take place before and after, but not during, use of the urinals.
- **No looking**
Eyes should be aimed straight ahead or down in concentration; glances towards your neighbour are very suggestive.
- **No touching**
Hands should be in front of you. An elbow bump can be deflated by a sober apology, but without turning the head.
- **Urinal occupation rules**
When faced with an array of urinals to choose from, which one should you take.



The Urinal Game: Which to Choose?



At what age does it become inappropriate?

- Modesty
- Toileting
- Sharing a bed
- Stripping off clothes
- Meltdowns

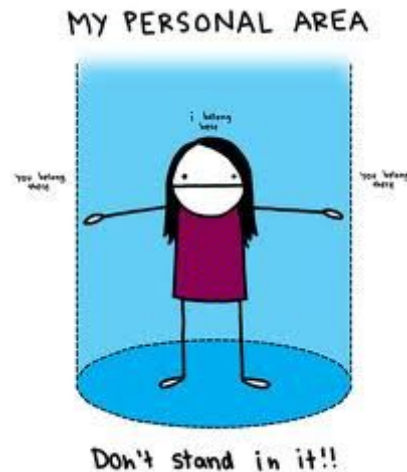




- *Actions have consequences and we do our sons and daughters no favours by pretending that they can behave inappropriately without facing them.*
- *Teach- no, not now/later, stop*



Public, Private, Personal Space



What is public?

What is private?

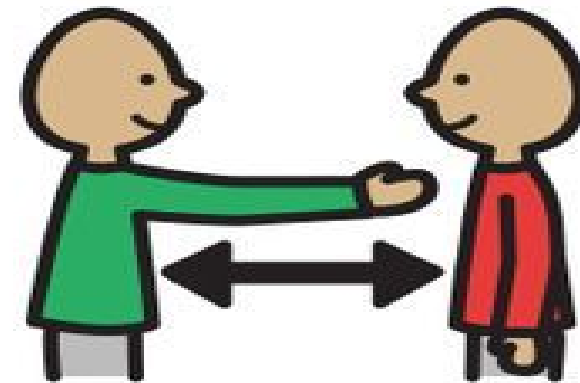
Why is it important to know about
what you can do in public and what
you can do in private?

Social rules change with age and place



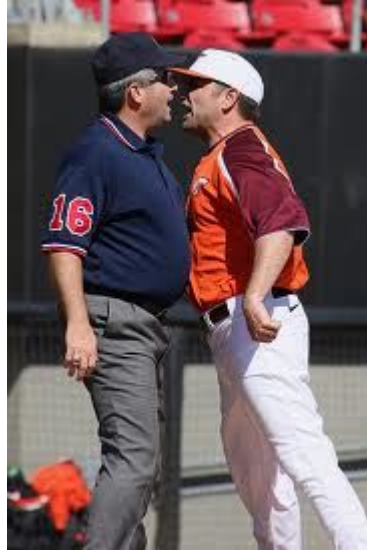
Where to stand/sit in public.

- Personal space



Now I know what
to do!

Who is too close?



Public or private place



5 4 3 2 1



5 4 3 2 1



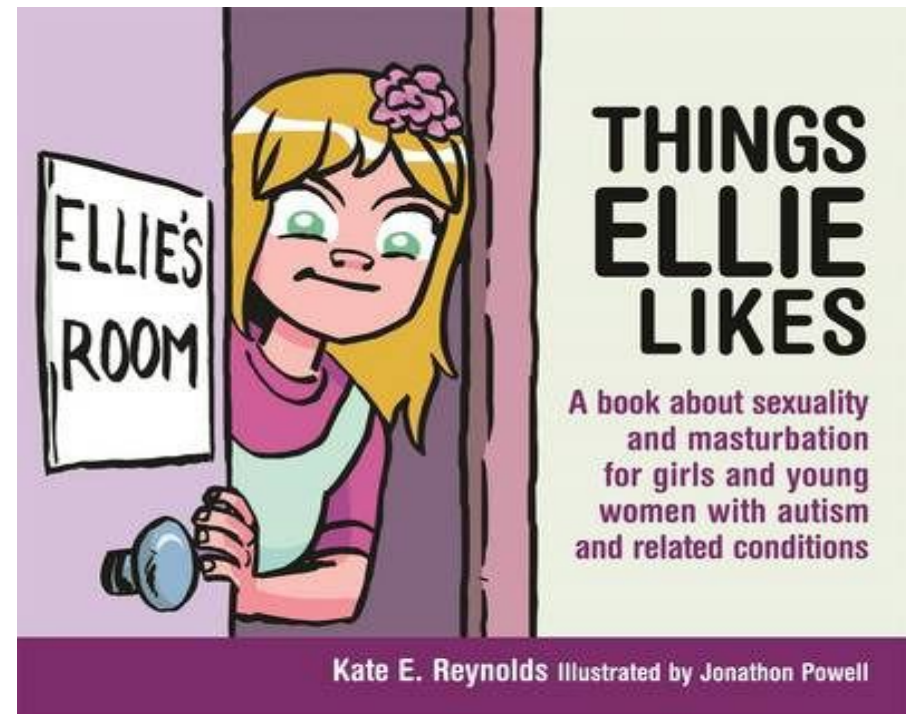
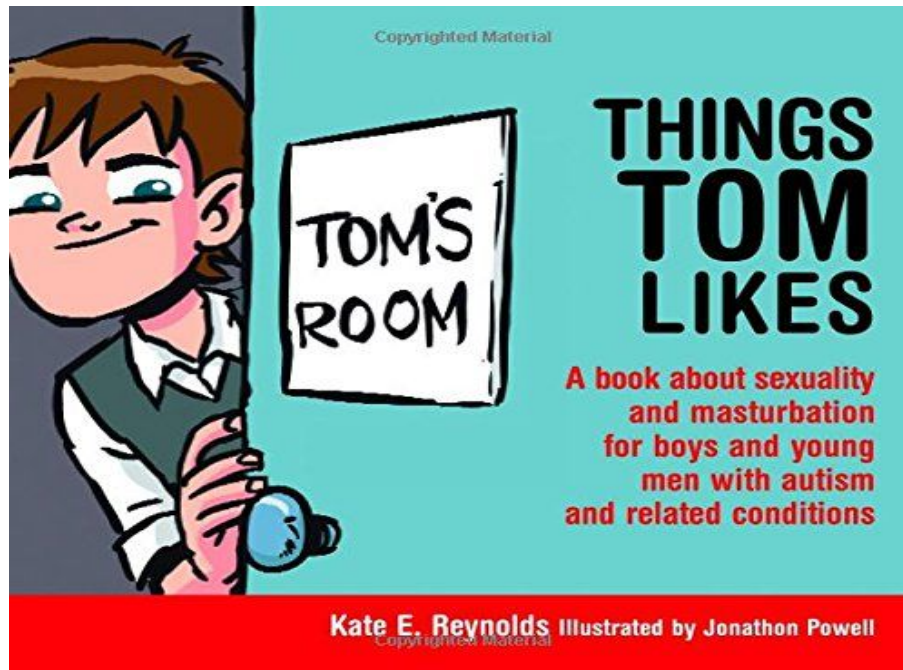
Masturbation

Strong et al. (2005) note that masturbation:

- Can teach people about their bodies and what is sexually pleasing to them-
- Can teach people how to move their bodies to become aroused
- Has no harmful physical effects -public and private
- Is a form of safer sex (as no body fluids are exchanged that could carry STIs) as long as the person not harming him/herself
- Pleasure.
- Obsessive or compulsive behaviour.
- Boredom.
- Lack of alternative activity.
- Stress

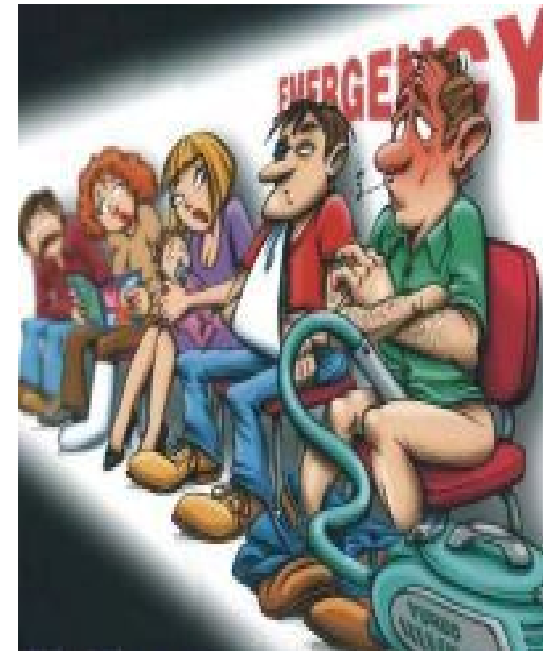
MEDICATION

Managing masturbation



Penis safety

1. Never insert your penis anywhere there's a chance it could get stuck
2. Don't try to enlarge your penis
3. Don't masturbate with a vacuum cleaner.



Staring



**DID YOU KNOW THE
LAW HAS CHANGED?**
STALKING IS NOW A
CRIMINAL OFFENCE IN
ENGLAND AND WALES

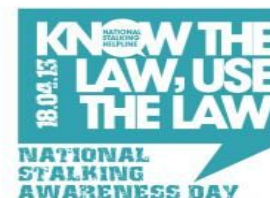
**POLICE LINE DO NOT
CROSS**

For more information call
The National Stalking Helpline
on **0808 802 0300** or email
advice@stalkinghelpline.org
For deaf or speech impaired use:
TEXTPHONE 18001 0808 802 0300
www.stalkinghelpline.org



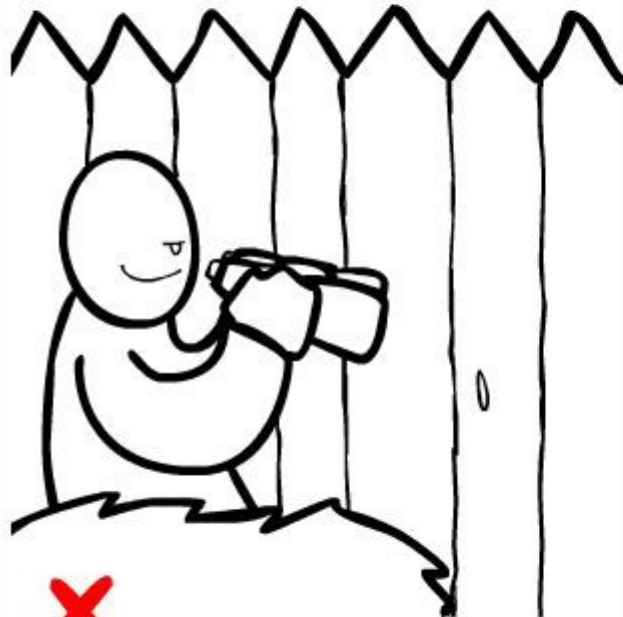
The National Stalking Helpline is run by Suzy Lampugh Trust, registered charity 802567 and in partnership with Network for Surviving Stalking 1088762 and Protection Against Stalking 1136189.

Calls to the Helpline are confidential and free from most telephone networks.



STALKING

IN REAL LIFE



endlessorigami.blogspot.com

CREEPY

ON FACEBOOK

VIEW SARAH'S
POOL PARTY ALBUM...

JACKPOT.



SOCIALLY
ACCEPTABLE



5-Point scales for Social Behaviour and Self Management

Stalking Scale

Rating	What might this look like?	What might someone else think?
5	Phoning/emailing repeatedly every day. Going to someone's house uninvited. Taking photos of them. Saying something that feels threatening to the other person.	You are too scary. You might be dangerous and I can't take a chance that you will hurt me. I need to call the police.
4	Asking someone out on a date when they have said 'no' more than three times. Phoning/emailing someone and talking about sexual or violent topics. Staring at someone for more than 60 seconds.	This person does not understand that I never want to go out with them. I am a little afraid because of the topics he talks about. I might need some help with this problem
3	Singing a song, saying a poem to a girl in the café because you think she is pretty. Sitting down at the same table but not saying anything.	This person is hard to understand. He is odd and that makes him unpredictable. I feel uncomfortable around him.
2	Phoning/emailing someone for a date after 3 'no' answers not asking again. Going to someone's room/flat when invited.	This is a reasonable and friendly person. I am not afraid of this person because he seems to understand the social rules.
1	Not talking to other people at all. Sitting alone in the café. Working quietly in the library.	This person is not dangerous but he's not very friendly. This person might be shy but I am not afraid of him.



Internet crime



- It is illegal to download or own pornography showing children (age 17 and under) or take or make any indecent photograph of a child. Owning pornography of adults who look like children is illegal.
- It is illegal for an adult to contact children on the internet and pretend they are a child as this is what a paedophile would do.

Mobile phone cameras



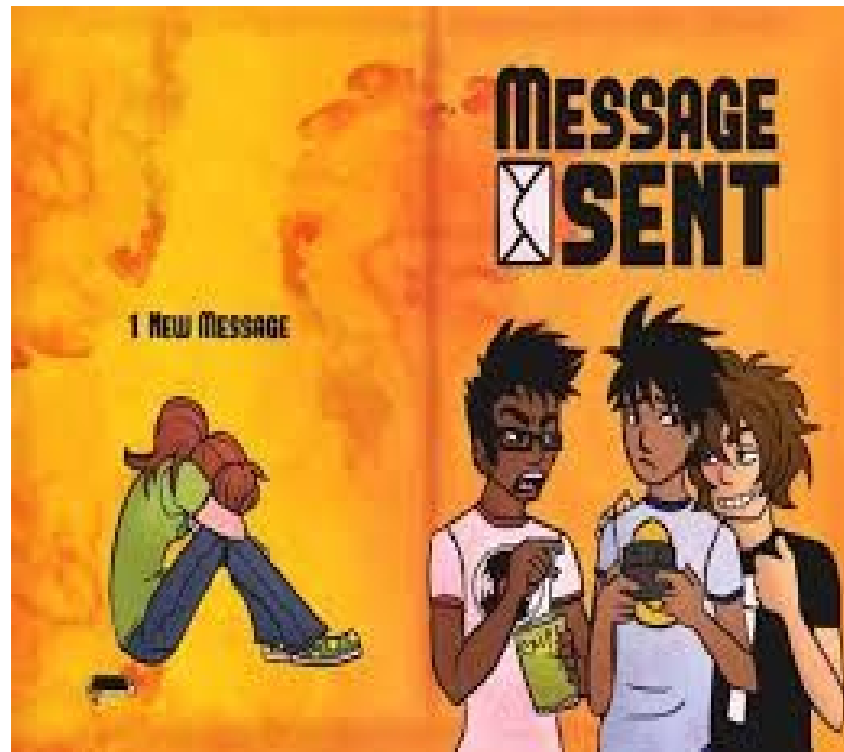
Voyerism



Happy slapping

Sexting

- Sexting is sending sexually explicit text or photographs from mobile devices. Sexting can lead to embarrassment and can also be a crime



Sexting, a name given for the creating and sharing of sexually explicit pictures or messages through mobile phones, the internet and other electronic devices, has become an increasingly recognised and concerning pastime of children.

It is estimated that in 2012, over **20%** of teenagers engaged in sexting, with a higher prevalence reported among girls. In a survey carried out by a popular girls magazine in 2010, around **40%** of girls reported that they had been asked to send sexually explicit photos of themselves, with the majority of girls complying, citing fears about disappointing or aggravating their male peers as reasons for engaging in sexting.

Sexual images and pornography

- Over the past three decades there has been a dramatic increase in the use of sexualised imagery in advertising.
- While most of this imagery features women, there has also been a significant increase in the number of sexualised images of children.
- Home Office : “It is no longer a case of if a young person will be exposed to pornography but when.”

The Influence And Impact Of Pornography On Young People

- Hardcore material is widely available on the internet with 25% of all searches seeking access to one of the 1.3 million porn websites.
- Among young people with at least weekly internet use, 57% reported having come into contact with online pornography (for one third this was an accidental occurrence whilst searching for something else)
- 70% of young people aged 15-17 report unintended exposure to pornography
- 58% of teenagers view porn regularly
- 1 in 10 view it every day
- The average age that males start to access porn is 10/11 (NSPCC 2013 reduced this to 7)

- For an adolescent, talk about how the body reacts to certain pictures: a certain excitement is normal. Talk about how the body works. Discuss what they've seen, without making the young person feel uncomfortable, sinful, dirty or ashamed.
- Prime them to challenge what they see, 'Do you think women enjoy sex as well?' 'Why does porn exist?' It's so people can make money.

Non-confrontational ways of opening dialogue on porn

- Have your friends started to look at this sort of thing?
Have you got any questions?
- Do you know why people worry about this?
- What things do you think people will worry about?
- Do you think that's what normal people do?"

Gender

- How someone feels about their gender is known as gender identity. Some people identify as the gender they were assigned with at birth, others don't.
- One of the most frequently cited studies found that about 15 percent of autistic adults in the Netherlands identify as trans or nonbinary; the percentage is higher among people assigned female at birth than among people assigned male, a trend seen in other studies
- Walsh R.J. *et al. J. Autism Dev. Disord.* **48**, 4070-4078 (2018) [PubMed](#)

- Zaffy Simone in (Gainsborough 2020)
- “I was always called a tomboy and wanted to wear trousers. I never felt comfortable in a dress or skirt. I would change as soon as I could. Midway through high school, there was an awakening that my body was a female body. There was a realization that I wasn’t going to develop the way I wanted to develop. My chest developed very quickly and it was big and I couldn’t hide it. I certainly was unhappy, uncomfortable, horrified.

Sex and relationship education

- Goals:
 - Wider and more accurate knowledge
 - Develop own limits and judgement
 - Decode situations: interpersonal & intimate contexts
 - Improve social and sexual skills: learn adaptive and positive behaviours

- All individuals need to learn as a minimum the basics of body parts, how they work and safety (Gill and Hough, 2007)
- If their learning disability or autism is severe, the content may need to centre on masturbation and establishing a sexual identity in a solo manner (Cambridge et al., 2003).

- ***To deprive a person of boundaries is to leave them, clueless as to what sorts of behaviour would be acceptable or unacceptable.***

Clearly and consistently outlining what is acceptable and what is not.

It also means respecting the person enough to understand that sometimes they will push those boundaries just to see how firm they are

Hellemans (2007)

- interest in sexual experience is usual
- sexuality is important for most autistic people.
- Autistic people should have the right to fulfil their sexual needs;
 - receive training in sociosexual behaviour
 - have access to the sexual knowledge they can manage
 - have the right to express sexual impulses in a socially acceptable way

Social Behavior and Self-Management

5-Point Scales for Adolescents and Adults

This award-winning tool now expanded for adults!

Scale to Rate Common Roommate Issues

Rating	This Is How It Might Make Me Feel and Think	This Is What Would Probably Happen
5	This is a deal breaker.	I would move out. Please never do this!
4	This is very upsetting. Maybe I should find a new roommate.	I would ask for a meeting.
3	This would irritate me, and I would have to say something to my roommate about it.	I might be upset, but I would talk about it.
2	This would bother me.	I would be a little uncomfortable.
1	This wouldn't bother me at all. I am very comfortable with this.	I would be fine.

Scale to Monitor the Need for Support

Rating	I Feel:	You Will Be Able To Tell Because:	This Is the Level Of Support I Need:
5	I feel the worst I have ever felt.	I will leave. I might go without saying a word. I will avoid people.	I really want you to know I'm upset, but please do not talk to me.
4	I'm feeling pretty bad right now.	I might just go to sleep. My hair and clothes might be dirty.	Write me a note to ask what is wrong. Give me some time.
3	I'm feeling OK right now, but a little down.	I'll stick around, but I'm quiet. I might be unshaved.	Ask me if I want to talk. Keep tabs on me, but don't crowd me.
2	I'm feeling pretty relaxed right now.	I can go to work or class.	No extra help needed. Maybe check in from time to time.
1	Right now I'm great!	Happy; will talk a lot and share.	Nothing extra. I am just fine.

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Foreword by Stephen Shore, EdD

Bishuk.com includes a funny, informative guide to Planet Porn including an A-Z.

Brighton and Hove Council , Sex and Relationship Education
Brook Traffic Light Tool <https://www.brook.org.uk/our-work/category/sexual-behaviours-traffic-light-tool>

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