Providing Group Education on Sexuality and Relationships for Adolescents with ASD and their Parents

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BACKGROUND

- Adults and adolescents with ASD express interest in sexuality and engage in sexual behavior (Gilmour, Schalomon, & Smith, 2012; Helleman et al., 2007). However, adolescents with ASD engage in less social and sexual behavior, exhibit more inappropriate sexual behavior, and receive less sex education than their typically developing peers (Stokes & Kaur, 2005).

- Parents report a variety of concerns regarding sexuality for their children with ASD, including concern about behavior being interpreted as sexual when not intended as such, concern that children may misunderstand conversations about sexuality, and concern about children being sexually victimized (Ballan, 2012; Nichols & Blakeley-Smith, 2010).

- Limited research exists on programs providing education on sexuality and relationships to adolescents with ASD or their parents. Nichols and Blakeley-Smith (2010) reported that an eight-session parent education program increased parent comfort discussing topics related to sexuality. Meister, Norlock, Honeymon, and Pierce (1994) described a parent education group designed to increase parent competence in addressing issues of sexuality with their children, but did not report on parent outcome.

- The present study examined the utility of a group education program designed for adolescents with ASD and their parents, focusing on outcome measures including adolescent knowledge and parent comfort discussing sexuality-related topics.

METHOD

Participants:
- Recruited by e-mail listservs and postings on websites frequented by parents of individuals with ASD in New York’s capital district.
- Eight adolescents with ASD (6 males, 2 females) and eight parents (6 mothers, 2 fathers).
- Adolescent participants ranged from 12 to 16 years of age. Four were diagnosed with PDD-NOS; three were diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome; and one was diagnosed with autism.

Measures:
- Sexual Behavior Scale (Stokes & Kaur, 2005).
- Adolescent Knowledge Quiz (created specifically for the group).
- Parent Questionnaire (created specifically for the group). The questionnaire asked about sexuality-related topics discussed by parent and adolescent, as well as parent comfort discussing each topic.
- Family Empowerment Scale (FES; Koren, DeChillo, & Friesen, 1992).
- Stress Index for Parents of Adolescents (Sheras & Abidin, 1998).

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

- Six two-hour sessions were held over the course of three months at the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities. Adolescent and parent groups met in separate rooms. The adolescent group was led by a female graduate student and a male behavior specialist. The parent group was led by a female leader with a master’s degree in education and extensive experience working with families of individuals with ASD.

- The adolescent group covered topics including:
  - Puberty & maturation, masturbation, privacy, and personal hygiene;
  - Friendship development and types of interpersonal relationships
  - Appropriate dating behavior;
  - Types of physical contact, sexual activity, and safe sex;
  - Personal safety, legal issues, and safe use of technology.

- The parent group reviewed the content of the adolescent sessions, as well as discussed strategies for supporting children during adolescence.

RESULTS

Adolescent Sexual Behavior
- Highlighted findings from the parent-completed Sexual Behavior Scale include:
  - 75% of adolescents exhibited desire for an intimate or romantic relationship.
  - 50% of adolescents had previously attempted to pursue a romantic interest.
  - 67.5% of adolescents had previously received sex education. However:
    - Only 29% of adolescents had an understanding of what is and is not acceptable behavior toward a person one is romantically interested in.
    - Some evidence of inappropriate sexual behavior was reported:
      - 62% of adolescents had touched their own private body areas in public.
      - 37.5% of adolescents had touched another person inappropriately.

Adolescent Knowledge
- A paired-sampled t-test revealed no significant difference between adolescent knowledge prior to (M = 81.67, SD = 18.35) and following (M = 93.33, SD = 12.11) participation in the group for the six adolescents who completed the assessment at both times. However, the means were in the expected direction.

Parent-Reported Topics Discussed
- A paired-sampled t-test revealed that parents reported having discussed more sexuality-related topics with their adolescents following participation in the group (M = 14.13, SD = 6.11) than prior to participation (M = 8.25, SD = 3.62), t(7) = -3.18, p = .015.

- Parent Comfort with Discussions of Sexuality
- A paired-sampled t-test revealed no significant difference between parent comfort prior to (M = 33.75, SD = 12.51) and following (M = 38.50, SD = 10.80) participation in the group, though the means were in the expected direction.

- Family Empowerment & Parent Stress
- No significant pre-post differences were found on measures of family empowerment and parent stress.

DISCUSSION

- Providing education on sexuality and relationships to adolescents with ASD and their parents appears to be a feasible model for providing much-needed education and support.

- Due to the small sample size, the present study had low power to detect significant differences in outcome measures prior to and following group participation. Further research should continue to investigate the impact of this type of education program.