

## The Unfortunate Epidemic: Sexual Abuse in the Autistic World

One of the most perverse problems in an autistic individual's life is the threat of sexual abuse. This can come in the form of rape or simply be in an abusive relationship. Because autistic people spend much of their lives feeling different and left out, they often enjoy sexual experiences for one reason: it puts them on a playing field equal to others. It is very easy for this to become a controlling part of a relationship. The most important thing to remember is that autistic people experience sexuality in much of the same way that others do, no matter how highly functioning they may be. Parents should teach their child about sexuality from an early age in order to prevent sexual abuse from happening.

The most valuable command that anyone can learn in relationship to sexuality is "No." Teaching this to even children can be very useful. In this respect, treat your autistic child as no different than you would another child-teach him or her the parts of the body from a young age and be very clear, as the child matures, about what happens during puberty and what kinds of behaviors are appropriate and inappropriate. Be sure that your child understands the differences between good touches and bad touches. This can be extremely difficult for autistic children who are sensitive to touch in general. It may be helpful to label "zones" on the body where no one should touch without permission.

Also make sure that as your autistic child grows into an adult, he or she understands what rape is and what to do if this happens. As many autistic children are hands-on learners, it may be best to role-play some potentially dangerous situations. If your child communicates non-verbally, teach him or her clear signs to show a person to stop what they are doing. Autistic people can often not understand that others have their own thoughts and emotions-they believe that everyone thinks and feels what they do. Because of this, many are shocked to find that "bad" people in the world will take advantage of sexual situations. You may need to explain to an autistic individual what kinds of dress and conduct are appropriate in public so that he or she is not unknowingly attracting sexual attention.

Your child should learn to respect his or her body and understand that others need to respect it as well. This is only possible if parents and educators teach autistic children about their bodies from a young age. By learning how to stop sexual abuse, you can keep your children, autistic or not, safe from predators.