

### Behaviour – Sexual Issues for Children with Autism

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Sexual curiosity and behaviours within young children are an integral part of development whether the child has Autism or not. The curiosity ranges from questioning, to looking at others, to “playing doctors” to imitating adult sexual behaviour. Through all these aspects the child is learning about his/her body, which is a positive approach to self esteem and learning to have respect for his/her own body as well as others.

Masturbation is an issue that can present behaviour problems at all ages. Working with children with Autism who masturbate can provide additional concern as the behaviour often occurs in inappropriate situations. For the adult it can cause concern in being able to explain and guide the child to understand that there is a time and place for everything. In addition, this kind of behaviour can create strong emotional reactions from adults due to the sexual and moral implications.

Boundaries and limits are a part of life. Children need boundaries and limits to help keep themselves, others and the environment safe. Guidelines establish clearly for children what it is you want them to do (e.g. Rule: “Don’t run inside” is translated to Guideline: “We walk inside”). These same guidelines apply to children who masturbate at inappropriate times.

The development of strategies occurs over a period of time with a continual re-assessment of rules and limits established within the service. Rules are not necessarily changed for the skill level of each child, but adapted in the way in which they are presented and reinforced. The aim is to enable children to understand and participate in the process of enforcing the rules and limits. This process is an integral component in the development of children's social skills, communication and being a valued member of a group. In some cases, children with Autism, thrive on consistency of behaviours, rules and routines. As long as the adult is consistent with the rule and what is said, the learning often occurs and the child will be able to comply with the requests given. Bearing this in mind, reinforcing with a child with Autism that masturbating in public is not appropriate may require ongoing reminders and consistent distractions.

In approaching this behavioural issue it is important to take each child and his/her behaviours in context and respond according to your knowledge of the child and situation. It is important to be creative in your approach and open to learning from the child and yourself.

### Food for Thought

- ❖ It is normal for all children to explore their bodies.
- ❖ Masturbation is a normal part of life.
- ❖ Some children have learned to comfort themselves by manipulating their genitals and will use this at sleep times, during stressful periods, changes in routines, environment and additional changes occurring within the family i.e. new baby in family, moving house.
- ❖ These attributes are normal for all children but may be exaggerated for a child with Autism due to the specific behavioural characteristics the child may present.
- ❖ If child is masturbating in his/her private space or in a private manner it rarely is a problem.

Each child diagnosed with **Autism Spectrum Disorder** will be different and individual. In regards to sexual behaviour issues for children with autism, it is important to gain information from the parents as to what characteristics of **Autism Spectrum Disorder** their child displays. The following strategies are just some examples which may be applied to support the behaviour guidance process. This list is only the start and is dependant on a variety of factors such as environment, length of time child is in care, child's interest, likes, dislikes, skills already achieved. The strategies are divided into developmental areas, however some strategies overlap and assist in a variety of developmental areas.

### Suggested Strategies

- If the child is verbal, does he/she ask specific question about body parts, reproduction or intimacy? If so, aim to respond accurately and appropriately to child's developmental age. Avoid using nicknames about body parts and keep answers brief and simple.
- Observe the child when the masturbation occurs to assist in what may trigger the behaviour e.g. end of day, at rest time, anxiety, separation from parent, being excluded by other children, noise level of environment.
- If child is masturbating in front of others responses such as "You have found that feels good but I would like you to wait until nap time or when you are at home".
- Provide a child with other ways to comfort themselves such as carrying a cuddle toy, manipulating clay or other sensory materials.
- Aim to interrupt the behaviour without showing emotional reaction.
- Redirect the child to an activity that is incompatible with masturbation.
- Ensure that the child's clothes are comfortable and not too tight, too loose or twisted in order to avoid the child's attention to the genital area.
- Ensure that all staff are consistent with their response and direction to the point that all staff use the same words each time.

### Additional Resources:

#### Autism Queensland

Provides a phone advisory service which enables staff or parents to discuss the concerns with an outreach consultant. This service is free of charge.

Ph: 07 32730000 and ask for Outreach Consultant.

#### Family Planning Qld.

Offers sexuality and relationship education services for people with disabilities, their parents/carers and professionals working in the disability field.

Phone advice is available.

One on one education is available in regional areas however there is a waiting list for this.

Ph: 07 33250 0240 to obtain your nearest regional office.

### References:

Fouse B *A Treasure Chest of Behavioural Strategies for Individuals with*

Wheeler M *Autism* Future Horizons 1997

Hewitt D *"So this is normal too"* Working out developmental Issues in Young Children Redleaf Press Minnesota 1995

Sanders M *"Every parent"* A positive approach to children's Behaviour. Addison-Wesley 1992

Family Planning [www.fpa.com.au/factsheets](http://www.fpa.com.au/factsheets)  
Queensland.

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