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ORIGINAL PAPER

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Investigation of Sexual Education Programs for Adolescents With Autism and the Role of Parents in Providing Support

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Background: Sexual education of adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex challenge, as the lack of specialized programs limits effective learning. Adolescents with ASD have difficulty understanding abstract concepts such as consent, personal boundaries and safety, which increases the risk of exploitation. **Objective:** This study seeks to examine the experiences and challenges parents face in providing sexuality education to their children with ASD, highlighting the need for programs that respond to the particular needs of these adolescents. **Methods:** The research was based on a qualitative methodology, using semi-structured interviews with 10 parents of adolescents with autism, aged 12-18 years. Thematic analysis of the data revealed important categories related to sexuality, consent, personal boundaries, and safety. **Results:** Parents face serious difficulties in communicating these issues with their children. The lack of specialized tools and limited support from the education system make it difficult to provide sex education. The need for practical examples and repeated teaching was emphasized. **Conclusion:** The research highlights the imperative to develop tailored sex education programs that will help adolescents with ASD understand critical concepts. Collaboration between parents, educators and health professionals is vital to strengthen sexuality education and protect adolescents from potential risks of exploitation.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), sex education, adolescents, parents.

1. BACKGROUND

Sex education is critical to adolescent psychosexual development, and individuals on the autism spectrum face additional challenges in this area (1). Sexuality is not only about biological processes, but extends to social and emotional dimensions, such as developing healthy interpersonal relationships, understanding personal boundaries, and consent (2). For adolescents with autism, these concepts often remain abstract and difficult to understand, as the cognitive and communication difficulties they face make it difficult to grasp them (3, 4).

An additional barrier is the difficulty of adolescents with autism to recognize social and emotional cues, which affects their ability to manage their behavior in social situations (5). Although the importance of sexuality education is clear, the lack of specialized programs that respond to the developmental and cognitive peculiarities of adolescents with autism creates serious gaps in their education (6, 7). Existing programs usually do not take these needs into account, which negatively affects their mental health and limits their ability to form safe interpersonal relationships (8, 9).

Parents often shoulder the burden of sexuality education, but they face significant challenges. The lack of specialized knowledge and tools, combined with insufficient support from the educational system, makes them uncertain about the right way to guide their children (10-12). Collaboration with professionals is critical, but is of-

ten lacking, increasing parents' feelings of isolation (5).

Thus, the need for a systematic and holistic approach to the sexual education of adolescents with autism is imperative (13, 14). Such interventions should incorporate both biological and social and emotional aspects of sexuality in order to ensure their psycho-emotional health. The present study focuses on the evaluation of existing sex education programs, examining the role of parents and the need for greater support in order to meet the psychoeducational needs of children with autism (1, 15-16).

2. OBJECTIVE

The aims of the study were threefold: (1) to explore the experiences and challenges faced by parents of adolescents with autism in providing sexuality education, (2) to examine the support parents receive from schools and health professionals in this context and (3) to analyze the effect of the lack of specialized educational programs on the psychosexual development of adolescents with autism.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present research followed the qualitative methodological approach, seeking to delve into the experiences and challenges experienced by parents regarding the provision of sexuality education to adolescents with ASD. The choice of qualitative methodology is based on its ability to examine deeply personal experiences and perceptions, thus allowing for the analytical exploration of the subjective experiences of the participants (17). The use of semi-structured interviews enhances flexibility and adaptability in exploring multidimensional issues, allowing the collection of data that reflect the unique experiences of each parent (18).

Participants were ten parents of adolescents with autism, aged 12 to 18 years, who were recruited through a private unit providing learning and psychological support for children and adolescents (19). These parents had an active role in their children's sexuality education, thus ensuring the collection of in-depth data regarding the practice and empirical application of sexuality education (15). The selection of ten participants was a critical factor, ensuring a balance between depth of analysis and the possibility of drawing generalizable conclusions (17).

A specially designed questionnaire was used to collect the data, which included open-ended questions that encouraged parents to describe their interactions with their children around sexuality issues (18). The questions covered a wide range of topics, such as adolescent sexual development, challenges faced by parents, as well as the support they received from the education system and health professionals (20). The questionnaire format allowed participants to express their experiences freely and in detail, thus offering rich data for analysis (18).

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a technique that allows for the identification and inter-

pretation of recurring patterns within the data (20). Through thematic analysis, data were categorized into key themes, such as understanding sexual development, communication challenges with children, and adolescent safety concerns (20). This method revealed both common patterns and individual differences in parents' experiences, thus offering a complete picture of the difficulties they face when providing sex education (15).

The research process complied with ethical requirements, ensuring the protection of participants' rights. Prior to participation, parents were fully informed about the aims and procedures of the study and signed a consent form. During the interviews, coded pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity, and the data was double-checked by the participants to confirm accuracy (16). The parents' personal information remained confidential and the data was used exclusively for research purposes (20).

4. RESULTS

Analysis of the interviews revealed multiple levels of challenges that emerge when providing sexuality education to adolescents with autism (21). One of the main issues was the difficulty in explaining fundamental concepts such as consent, safety and personal boundaries (10). Often, children do not easily understand abstract concepts such as the boundaries of personal space, which makes communication around these topics difficult (12). This difficulty is compounded by the inability of adolescents to recognize social messages and nonverbal cues associated with sexual behavior, further complicating the educational process (1, 3).

Challenge	Solution
Difficulty understanding the consent concept	Use simple tools with pictures and easy examples
Lack of educational programs	Creation of specialized programs adapted to the needs of ASD
Failure of parents to provide education	Provide guidance and tools for discussions at home
Lack of support from schools	Improving collaboration between schools, parents and sexuality education specialists

Table 1. Challenges and solutions faced by parents

In addition, there was a strong need for more practical and personalized training programs. Existing sex education programs, as reported by the participants, are not sufficiently adapted to the communication and cognitive needs of children with ASD, making their implementation difficult (5). In their view, training should include practical examples and repeated guidance to facilitate understanding of critical concepts such as consent and privacy (8, 11).

At the same time, concern has been expressed about their safety, as children with autism often do not recognize situations of danger or cannot manage sexual situations that may put them at risk, such as sexual abuse or harassment (4). Incidents were reported where they were unable to perceive the violation of

Problem	Quote
Lack of understanding of personal boundaries	"...does not understand in some circumstances the distinction between private and public" (P1)
Communication difficulties	"I personally do not feel comfortable discussing this topic in detail" (P7)
Need for educational material	"I don't think any effort is being made in this direction" [about sexuality] (P4)
Difficulty managing emotions	"We have stronger feelings of rage, anger and some outbursts" (P2)
Concern about children's safety	"...I think it should be one of the main aspects of education, especially for teenagers, as parents can't always manage it"
Communication difficulties	"I personally do not feel comfortable discussing this topic in detail" (P7)
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Difficulty managing emotions	"We have stronger feelings of rage, anger and some outbursts" (P2)
Concern about children's safety	"...I think it should be one of the main aspects of education, especially for teenagers, as parents can't always manage it" (P5)

Table 2. Probes that emerged from the interviews with parents

Suggestion	Details
Develop specialized training tools	Create materials with simple examples and images that facilitate understanding
Improving school-parent cooperation	Strengthening cooperation to share information and common strategies
Involvement of health professionals and sex education specialists	Provision of guidance and support to parents by professionals for the best education of their children

Table 3. Proposed solutions to improve sexuality education

their personal boundaries, which heightened concerns about their safety in public spaces and social interactions (22).

Lack of appropriate tools and guidance is another barrier to providing sexuality education (6, 9). Many participants reported that expert support is limited, so they rely mainly on their own efforts (23). This situation often burdens them psychologically, as they feel that they bear the entire responsibility for the psychosexual education of the children without adequate support (5).

Limited assistance from schools was also identified as a key barrier to the educational process. Adequate sexuality education is not provided to adolescents with autism, which shifts the responsibility solely to guardians (14). Many felt isolated in this process, as support from teachers and health professionals is insufficient or non-existent, increasing stress and feelings of isolation (10, 24).

Overall, the need for enhanced collaboration between educators, health professionals and families was highlighted in order to ensure better and more comprehensive provision of sexuality education to adolescents with autism (16). Such cooperation is considered vital to properly support them and protect them from potential risks.

These findings highlight the importance of developing specialized strategies for educating adolescents

with autism, which will be further elaborated in the discussion.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the present research underline the imperative need for the development and implementation of specialized sexual education programs that respond to the particularities of adolescents with autism (5, 25). Although parents recognize the importance of sexuality education, the lack of appropriate tools and programs makes it difficult to provide this education to their children (10). Parents often report feeling unsure about how to approach topics such as body changes during puberty, safety and personal boundaries, and traditional sex education offered in schools does not adequately meet the needs of adolescents with autism.

The absence of tailored programs not only affects understanding of issues such as safety and personal boundaries, but can also cause significant problems with self-esteem and confusion about their sexual identity (15, 26). Adolescents with autism experience cognitive and communication difficulties that make it difficult to process abstract concepts, which reinforces the need for educational programs that explain these topics in a clear and understandable way (15). The consequences of this lack of education are wide-ranging and negatively affect the psychosexual development of adolescents with autism, leaving them exposed to an increased risk of exploitation (8).

The inability of adolescents to understand and control their sexuality often causes feelings of frustration, leading to disturbances in their psycho-emotional balance (4). This emotional distress is likely to have long-term effects on their social development, as the inability to manage sexuality limits their ability to develop healthy interpersonal relationships (8). At the same time, the absence of appropriate tools and educational resources makes communication between parents and their children complicated and insufficient. This difficulty in the communication context increases the risk of sexual exploitation, as adolescents with autism have difficulty recognizing when their personal boundaries are being violated (25). This gap in their psychosexual education reinforces the need for specialized programs that focus not only on understanding sexuality but also on protecting adolescents from dangerous situations (1, 22).

Lack of support from schools and health professionals is another factor that weighs on caregivers. Caregivers often feel isolated and helpless, unable to provide their children with the guidance they need (5, 12). This isolation heightens their concern for the safety of their children, as they cannot recognize dangerous situations or manage their sexual urges (9). Many parents who participated in the survey reported that

the lack of cooperation between school and parents further burdens the process of sexuality education, as the school environment rarely provides specialized information about the needs of adolescents with autism (2). The inadequacy of this cooperation intensifies the feelings of uncertainty experienced by parents, while at the same time reducing the effectiveness of the sex education provided to their children.

The need to strengthen training in the management of social and emotional situations is also evident. The social difficulties faced by adolescents with autism increase their vulnerability, making them more susceptible to exploitation (8, 9). Therefore, psychosexual education should focus on understanding social cues and teaching self-protection skills (8). The ability to recognize social cues that may indicate danger or inappropriate behavior is critical to the safety of adolescents with ASD. The development of self-protection skills, with appropriate support from school and health professionals, will help boost adolescents' self-confidence and safety.

The analysis of the interviews revealed that collaboration between schools, family and health professionals is essential to address these challenges (5). Lack of cooperation makes it difficult to develop coordinated strategies to provide comprehensive education, reinforcing parental isolation and hindering adolescent psychosexual development (7). The creation of stable cooperation structures would significantly improve the quality of education and its effectiveness (21). Research participants emphasized the need for a systematic approach involving the cooperation of all stakeholders, which is not often the case today (2).

The provision of tailored sex education programs, which will include clear instructions and practical applications, is considered necessary. The use of multisensory methods, such as pictures, videos and interactive exercises, will improve the understanding of abstract concepts and facilitate their practical application by adolescents with autism, helping them to develop safe and healthy social relationships, while at the same time reducing the risks of exploitation (25). This approach aims to bridge existing gaps in education and strengthen the ability of adolescents with autism to protect themselves from dangerous situations, improving their quality of life and sense of safety for both themselves and their parents.

Suggestions

Analysis of interview data highlights the need to improve existing sex education programs for adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (4). First, it is necessary to develop educational tools that will be adapted to their cognitive peculiarities. These tools need to be designed in simple, understandable language, incorporating practical examples from everyday life and illustrated scenarios to understand topics such as the human body, interpersonal relationships, safety and personal boundaries (21). In addition, tools should support repetitive learning, which is critical for adolescents with autism, who need frequent repetition to

reinforce concepts (5). Collaboration between parents and schools is critical to the success of sex education. Caregivers need support from schools, while teachers would benefit from training themselves to meet the needs of adolescents with autism, with the help of specialists in the field of therapeutic interventions (25). Consistent and open communication between parents and teachers is essential to creating an environment of interaction that enhances the effectiveness of education (9). The implementation of common strategies contributes to better meeting the needs of adolescents with ASD, improving the quality of the educational process (14).

At the same time, research shows that many guardians feel embarrassed and uncertain when they have to communicate with their children about sexuality issues (23). Lack of support from schools heightens feelings of isolation, necessitating greater involvement of educators and health professionals (25). The creation of programs that respond to the above needs will strengthen the self-confidence of the guardians and equip them with the necessary tools to support the psychosexual development of their children (25).

Finally, the active participation of health professionals in sexuality education is critical. Caregivers often report insufficient specialist support, which creates gaps in comprehensive education provision (24). Professionals such as psychologists and psychosexual development specialists can provide practical advice and guidance to enhance adolescent sexuality education (12). Collaboration between parents, educators, and health professionals is necessary to develop a comprehensive program that effectively meets the needs of adolescents with autism and supports them more effectively (23).

6. CONCLUSION

The present study, through the analysis of interviews with parents of adolescents with autism spectrum disorder, highlighted the significant challenges that families face in providing sexuality education. Guardians highlighted the lack of specialized programs and tools that meet the particular needs of adolescents with ASD, creating gaps in information about topics such as sexuality, human relationships, consent and personal boundaries (4). This lack heightens parents' feelings of anxiety and helplessness, as they struggle to protect their children from potential dangers such as exploitation and abuse (22).

The findings also highlight that communication between parents and teachers is often insufficient, while the involvement of health professionals in the education of adolescents with autism remains limited (7). Parents expressed the need for greater collaboration with teachers and the development of specialized strategies that take into account the special needs of adolescents with ASD (24). The lack of this cooperation creates feelings of isolation for parents and adolescents, as the necessary support for their psychosexual development is not provided (14).

The study highlighted the critical importance of implementing tailored sex education programs for adolescents with ASD. Parents emphasized the need for educational materials based on visual examples and simple language, while expert guidance is essential to provide the appropriate tools to support their children's development (5). Creating programs that include not only educational tools for understanding abstract concepts, but also a broader collaboration between schools, parents and health professionals, is critical for the psychosexual development of adolescents with ASD. This will help parents feel better equipped and teens develop important social skills. Cooperation between parents, schools and health professionals is considered essential for the holistic psychosexual development of adolescents with autism (25).

- **Participant Consent Form:** All participants were fully informed about the subject and objectives of the study, as well as their rights and obligations during the research. A written consent form was signed before the interviews began.
- **Author's contribution:** Every author participated in every stage of preparing this article. Writing A.P. Conceptualization I.V. Research A.P. Data Analysisi D.V.K. Editing D.V.K. Final proofreading was made by the first author
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