

research snapshot

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Sexual Knowledge and Victimization in Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders

What is this research about?

There is a lack of research examining the sexual knowledge and experiences of adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Researchers have found that social sources of information (e.g., from parents, teachers, friends) are important for developing sexual knowledge and reducing unsafe sexual experiences. Given that many individuals with ASD have social difficulties, this research sought to assess whether they were missing important knowledge that would place them at increased risk for sexual violence victimization, including experiences of sexual coercion, unwanted sexual contact, attempted rape or rape.

What did the researchers do?

In this study, the researchers recruited 95 adults with ASD to participate in an online survey, and compared their responses to those of adults without ASD. Both men and women were included. All participants provided demographic information, reported on where they get their sexual information from, their perceived sexual knowledge (i.e., what they think they know), their actual sexual knowledge (i.e., what they actually know), and any experiences of sexual victimization.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that adults with ASD gained less of their sexual knowledge from social sources (e.g. parents, teachers, peers), gained more of

What you need to know:

Adults with ASD have less sexual knowledge and are more likely to experience sexual victimization than adults without ASD. Having less knowledge explains part of the increased risk of sexual victimization, and interventions are needed to increase sexual safety.

their sexual knowledge from non-social sources (e.g. the internet and tv), had less perceived and actual knowledge, and experienced more sexual victimization than adults without ASD. Seventy-eight percent of participants with ASD reported at least one occurrence of sexual victimization, compared to 47.4% of adults without ASD. Importantly, the researchers found that participants' sexual knowledge explained some of the reason why adults with ASD were at increased risk of experiencing some form of sexual victimization.

How can you use this research?

This research provides us with evidence that adults with ASD are at an increased risk of experiencing sexual victimization and that less sexual knowledge is an important part of this increased risk. These findings also suggest that adults with ASD are learning about sexual-related topics from different sources than adults without ASD. This research stresses the importance of sexual education and related interventions for building sexual knowledge in adults with ASD. This research is relevant to

clinicians, parents, teachers, support workers, and individuals with ASD.

About the Researchers

Stephanie Brown-Lavoie is a clinical-developmental psychology PhD student in the clinical neuropsychology stream at York University. Stephanie conducts research examining cognition and perception in children and adults with ASD and developmental disabilities.

Michelle Vecili is a clinical-developmental psychology PhD student specializing in the research and treatment of mental health problems in individuals with ASD, as well as the well-being of families.

As mentors for the Asperger Mentorship Program at York University, Michelle and Stephanie have developed and implemented safe sexual health workshops for adults with ASD.

Dr. Jonathan Weiss is an Assistant Professor and Clinical Psychologist at York University, and holds the CIHR Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research. His research focuses on the prevention and treatment of mental health problems in people with ASD and/or intellectual disabilities across the lifespan.

Citation

Brown-Lavoie, S. M., Vecili, M. A., & Weiss, J. A. (2014). Sexual knowledge and victimization in adults with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, doi: [10.1007/s10803-014-2093-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-014-2093-y)

Keywords

Autism Spectrum Disorders, Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Victimization, Education

This research summary was written by the authors of the study for the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research. This research summary, along with other summaries, can be found on our [blog](#) and at asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries

About the Chair

The Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research is dedicated to studying ways to improve the mental health and well-being of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families in Canada.

The Chair is funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research in partnership with Autism Speaks Canada, the Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorders Alliance, Health Canada, NeuroDevNet and the Sinneave Family Foundation. Additional funds from the Spectrum of Hope Autism Foundation and support from York University.

For more information, visit the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research website at asdmentalhealth.ca

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