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Where Autism
Professionals Connect

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Project Jiwi: sex and relationships work with autistic people

Project Jiwi is funded by the Betsi Cadwalader University Health Board in North Wales to work across the six counties to provide needs led programmes of developmental sex and relationships education (SRE) to vulnerable groups of young people.

We have no clients of our own so always work in partnership with host organisations and as such, we work with a large variety of groups in diverse settings. Examples of groups we work with are:

- people with learning disabilities
- people with physical impairments
- people not in education, employment or training (NEET)
- looked after children
- people with autism.

Because we work with a wide range of young people up to 25 years of age we have a good sense of what young people know, what myths continue to exist (“you can’t get pregnant if you have sex in the sea”) and what current memes and issues young people are encountering locally. As we are led by the needs of the young people, this means we have developed and delivered sessions on a huge range of topics relating to sex and relationships.

For our work with people with autism, the needs of a group are similar to many other groups, ranging from:

- the classic condom and contraception sessions
- work around emotions and feelings about relationships
- work on contemporary gender and identity issues (cisgender, non-binary, transgender, etc...)
- sex and the law

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- pornography.

The list is endless. Frequently we are asked to work with autistic people who have complex needs, who are possibly non-verbal and may have additional learning disabilities. We often see the same recurring identifiable needs with these groups, including:

- people not being able to distinguish between public and private places
- masturbation in public
- touching others without consent
- personal space management.

The impact of not being able to process and follow the societal norms around these issues is huge. It is very unlikely that a person who masturbates in a public place or risks touching others inappropriately will lead an independent life. Their vulnerability is increased as they are at risk of being hurt in retaliation by someone else, at risk of being criminalised or indeed at an increased risk of being abused as they may be more easily identified as vulnerable.

Within the project (and also within the network of professionals we link into) we have developed numerous programmes and activities targeting these themes. Techniques include:

- role plays between workers with symbol and verbal responses from young people
- simple physical games around learning different parts of the body and touch
- social stories and picture packs around public and private and masturbation.

We have also developed the learning and responses to role play to be generalised into the young person's real life outside of group work. Our work has been most successful when the responses in group work have become consistent and normalised by those interacting with the person outside of the group i.e. at home, in residential, in school, in a youth club. We have trained organisational staff, and sometimes multi-agency staff, as well as those who link into clients' home life to ensure that the messaging around these very life limiting issues is consistent and therefore has the maximum chance of impact.

Finally, we also push for these subjects to be tackled earlier in young people's lives. It is commonplace for us to work with people 18 years and older who are still struggling with some of the issues I mentioned above. Within the training we provide we have created activities that can be built into a very young person's life that help provide a foundation for understanding later in life.

An example of a session activity around developing skills to manage personal space can be found in the free to download '[Jiws: A pick 'n' mix of sex and relationships education activities book](#)' by the Family Planning Association (FPA) that I co-authored with Mel Gadd.

The FPA runs a training programme, [Autism and SRE](#), or can also tailor training to your local needs.

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