

ASD and Adolescence Part Four Emotional and Social Changes

This article is the fourth of a series of eight articles about Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and adolescence. The articles are designed to be a guide for parents of children with ASD; they will provide information about adolescence, the extra challenges that may arise for children with ASD during this time, and techniques for teaching your child about adolescence and dealing with the challenges.

The eight articles are:

1. Introduction
2. Physical changes and lifestyle choices
3. Teaching public and private and appropriate sexual language
4. Emotional and social changes
5. Peer pressure, bullying, drugs and alcohol
6. Sexuality
7. Unwanted sexual attention and sexual abuse
8. Techniques and advice for parents

Emotional and social changes

During puberty there are many changes that occur. Not everyone changes at the same rate. Some children may be physically more or less mature than their same age peers.

Because of pressure from the media to look a certain way, adolescents going through the physical changes of puberty may suffer from problems with body image.

Explaining and accepting physical differences

During puberty, it may be helpful to teach children how to take care of their bodies with good hygiene practices, by eating healthily and by exercising. It is important that children focus on the parts of their body that they like, rather than the body parts that they do not like.

It may be helpful to explain the role that genetics has in determining body type. Family photos or known examples may be useful. For example, your cousin is tall because his father is tall.

Self identity

During adolescence individuals should be encouraged to develop their self identity. This is identifying personal attributes, what they are good at, and what they like to do.

This will help them to understand how others see them as a person. By doing things they are good at and enjoy they will gain confidence, and meet people with similar interests.

Mood swings

Mood swings are a teenage trademark. Children with ASD can have difficulty recognising emotions in others and themselves. They should learn to recognise the physical signs of anger, sadness and anxiety, such as how their body feels (e.g., hot, butterflies), and what their body does (e.g., face red, voice loud).



They need to be able to explain to others when when they are in a bad mood. After recognising their emotions and informing others, they need to know what to do to make themselves feel better.

Examples include talking to someone, thinking about the things they are good at, putting things into perspective, and doing something they enjoy, such as spending time with a pet, physical activity, listening to music, or deep breathing exercises.

Changes in relationships

As well as physical and emotional changes, adolescents also have to cope with changes in relationships. Children like to play games together, but teenagers and adults talk with each other about their feelings, and discuss the opposite sex.

Like the physical changes, these changes in activities do not occur at the same time for everyone. This means that old friendships may not survive the transition from childhood if one child is now interested in boys but the other is still into playing with dolls.

Levels of friendship and making new friends

Individuals with ASD need to learn about the different levels of friendship, and behaviours that are appropriate in each type of relationship. For example, it is ok to talk about certain things with your best friend, but not with an acquaintance.

Explaining social hierarchies to children with ASD is also important. If they try to go about making friends within the level of popularity they are at, they are more likely to make friends and less likely to be rejected.

Teach them about the different ways they can make friends. Techniques include being friendly to others, joining clubs, starting new hobbies, attending social events, volunteering, and having a social mentor to give advice on trends and deciphering social situations.

References and Recommended Reading

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