

Autism and Sexuality Education

Centering Pleasure in Prevention

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(they/them, fae/faer)

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Introductions

- Disabled, agender, white, social worker focusing on making systems changes to address violence towards disabled people/ people with disabilities
- Lived experience navigating service systems as a disabled survivor
- Living on occupied land of the Peoria, the Bodwéwadmi, the Myaamia, the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ, the Hoocąk, and the Kiikaapoi. My family lives on occupied land of the [Shoshone-Bannock and Eastern Shoshone](#)
- Please introduce yourselves if you would like, share only what you are comfortable sharing

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Group Agreements

- Feel free to turn off your camera and do what you do need to be engaged
- Speak your truth responsibly and listen to understand
- Be willing to do things differently - experience discomfort, but let us know if you have any unmet access needs
- Facilitator does not have all the answers, collectively we can find answers (this may cause some discomfort)

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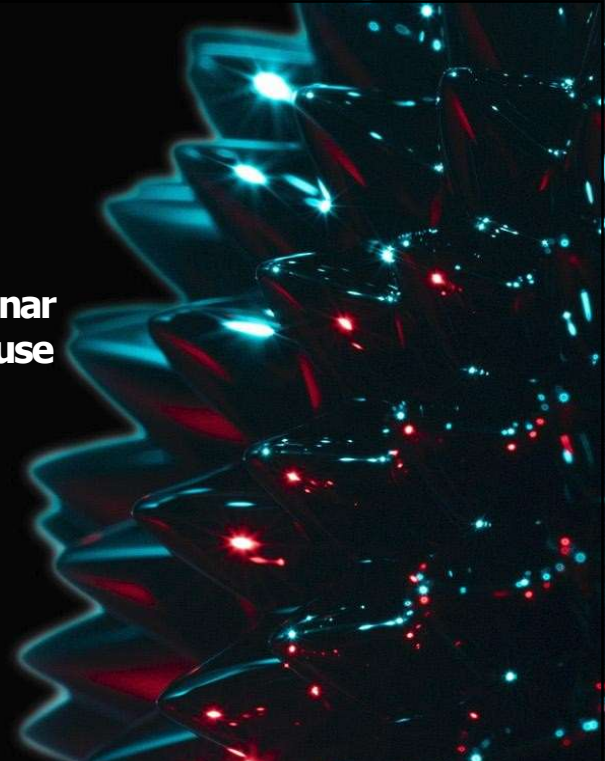


Group Agreements (continued)

- Expect and accept non-closure
- Confidentiality, share lessons but not stories
- Respect - treat others as they wish to be treated
- Make room for quieter voices
- Practice curiosity, we are here to learn from each other
- Acknowledge power dynamics in the space

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Content warning- this workshop/webinar includes discussion of eugenics and abuse including sexual assault. Please take breaks as needed and be gentle with yourself.

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Agenda

- **What does sex ed for Autistic people often focus on?**
- **What do Autistic survivors say they need?**
- **How are consent and pleasure connected?**
- **How can centering pleasure in sex ed help Autistic survivors and prevent future abuse of Autistic people?**

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Discussion Activity 1

What was helpful about the sex ed you received as a young person?

What was not helpful?

What is one thing that you wish had been different about the sex ed you received as a young person? Or, if you didn't receive sex ed, what would have been helpful to learn about sexuality when you were young?

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What is Eugenics?

- The following are primarily examples from the United States which was the birthplace of much of the eugenics movement
- Francis Galton (1822-1911) coined the term eugenics, based on idea that people from "better classes" should be having more children, that the government should prevent other classes of individuals from having children
- Fear of growth of "unfortunate classes"
- This included the poor, criminals, sex workers, Global Majority, and people with disabilities
 - Mental age theory

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What is Eugenics? (continued)

- Intertwined with movements toward racial segregation to prevent intermarrying
- Fear that providing "indiscriminate charity" would lead to increase of "unfortunate classes"
- Restrictions of marriage licenses based on family history of disability
- Buck v Bell 1927 allowed forced sterilization to prevent children (has never been overturned)

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This light flashes every 15 seconds

Every 15 seconds 100 of your money goes for the care of persons with bad heredity such as the insane feeble-minded, criminals & other defectives

Some people are born to be a burden on the rest.

This light flashes every 16 seconds

Every 16 seconds a person is born in the United States.

Fitter Families CONTEST

This light flashes every 7 1/2 minutes

Every 7 1/2 minutes a high grade person is born in the United States will have ability to do creative work & be fit for leadership. About 4% of all Americans come within this class

THE ALLIANCE FOR THE EASTERN STATES EXPOSITION

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The Present Reality of Eugenics

- 2001-Doe ex rel. Tarlow v. D.C three women with intellectual disabilities brought a suit against the city on the grounds that they had been forced to have surgeries (two abortions and one eye surgery) against their will.
 - Judge Kavanaugh ruled, “accepting the wishes of patients who lack, and have always lacked the mental capacity to make medical decisions does not make logical sense” (Leibson & Cokley, 2018).
- 2007- “Ashley Treatment”- hysterectomy and estrogen treatment to prevent six year old girl with disability from physically maturing so she would be easier to care for.

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The Present Reality of Eugenics (continued)

- 2006-2010- Forced sterilizations of at least 148 women in two California prisons.
- 2016- In her book, *To Siri With Love: A Mother, Her Autistic Son, and the Kindness of Machines*, Judith Newman states that she wants to get power of attorney when her Autistic son turns 18 so that she can make him get a vasectomy.
- 2020- Forced sterilizations at ICE detention centers
- Some states have policies for the rationing of care, including ventilators, that values the lives of abled people over people with disabilities.
- Eligibility requirements for Medicaid and SSI can make it difficult for people with disabilities to get married or openly have relationships.

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What are some of the themes in research on Autistic sexuality and sexuality education?

- **Autistic sexuality viewed as a problem (MacKenzie, 2018)**
 - **"Hypersexual"**
- **Pathologizing asexuality**
- **Pathologizing interests in kink and BDSM "paraphilia"**
- **Pathologizing the sexuality of disabled people (particularly those are who Global Majority, 2SLGBTQIA+, sex workers, involved in criminal justice system) comes directly from the history of eugenics**

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What are some of the themes in research on Autistic sexuality and sexuality education? (continued)

- **Pathologizing lack of adherence to cisheteronormative expressions of sexuality**
 - **Assumption that queerness is due to "social deficits" rather than an actual identity**
- **Blaming Autistic people for their own sexual abuse ("social deficits")**
- **But more and more researchers are listening to Autistic people and creating more affirming sexuality research!**

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How does this show up in sexuality education for Autistic people?

- Sexuality education as a tool of normalization or control
- Focus on teaching “masking” or adherence to social norms
- Normalizing violence against Autistic people as an inevitable result of “social deficits” rather than looking at factors that contribute to abuse of Autistic people
 - Perceiving abuse as a result of person shortcomings on the part of Autistic people rather than as a systemic problem

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How does this show up in sexuality education for Autistic people? (continued)

- Conflation of safety with following social rules
- Normalization around social rules may sometimes also extend to presuming cisheteronormativity, despite the fact that Autistic people are much more likely to be 2SLGBTQIA+

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Caveat

- This is not to say that all sexuality education for Autistic people is this way but it is a trend that I have observed

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Discussion Activity 2

If you received sex ed as a young person, what messages did you receive about sexual assault and interpersonal violence?

What messages did you receive about who was responsible?

What messages did you receive about how to prevent sexual assault and interpersonal violence?

What do you wish you had been told about sexual assault and interpersonal violence as a young person?

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How does this create problems for Autistic people?

What do Autistic survivors say they need from sexuality education?

-Based on findings from interviews with Autistic survivors from Foundations for Divergent Minds Securing Autistic Futures from Endangerment (SAFE) study

**You can learn more about FDM or make a donation to support their work at this link
<https://divergentminds.org/>**

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The Consequences of Victim Blaming

- **Attributing the abuse of Autistic people to "social deficits" has similar consequences as victim blaming in other contexts**
- **In romantic relationships this might look like helping professionals not believing the Autistic survivor, perceiving the perpetrator as more credible, or taking sides with the perpetrator**
- **Friends and family of the Autistic survivor may also be more inclined to believe a perpetrator and see the perpetrator as more credible**
- **This contributes to further isolation, abuse, and control**

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Barriers to Receiving Help

- **A common theme in interviews with Autistic survivors is the experience of gaslighting, that is being told that they are responsible for the harms that other people do to them or that those harms are justified by their need for support from the perpetrator**
- **Domestic violence center workers who have unexamined ableism may tell survivors they are responsible for abuse they experience**
- **Many survivors described feeling like they did not deserve better because of messages that everything is their fault and past experiences resulting in low expectations**

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How is This Supported in Other Research?

- **Research has demonstrated that perpetrators intentionally target Autistic and neurodivergent people (Gotby et al., 2018).**
- **A 2023 study by Pearson et al. also found that Autistic people often felt it normal to experience abuse from people close to them, that they often felt pressure to mask, and that it often took a long time for Autistic people to recognize abuse. They also found that more education for support staff could be helpful.**

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Autistic Narratives of Abuse

- **In contrast to the idea that abuse is the result of “social deficits” Autistic survivors described how these rules of compliance and self-blame had been taught to them from a young age, from schools, friends, family, etc.**
- **They also described how they were blamed for abuse**
- **Moreover, much of violence described by survivors related to the devaluation of Autistic people as inferior (particularly for Global Majority and 2SLGBTQIA+ Autistic people)**
- **This is not surprising given how eugenics has shaped our understanding our disability**

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What is Helpful?

- **More understanding for an Autistic survivor’s support needs**
 - **Sensory needs**
 - **Food sensitivities**
 - **Need for space**
- **More support for social and emotional development, particularly during childhood**
- **Being taught to have self-trust and sense of self**

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What is Helpful? (continued)

- **Support around developing a positive identity as Autistic, including connecting with other Autistic people**
 - **Particularly those who share other intersectional identities such as ethnicity and 2SLGBTQIA+**
- **Having better examples of communication, boundaries, and more autonomy from caregivers as a young person**
- **Having better support from support professionals**
- **Having non-judgemental and affirming community supports**

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Discussion Activity 3

If you had sex ed as a young person, did you learn about consent or pleasure?

What did you learn about pleasure?

What did you learn about consent?

What do you wish you had learned about consent and pleasure when you were a young person?

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How does this connect to pleasure?

How are consent and pleasure related?

Why is it important to center pleasure in sex ed for Autistic people?

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Pleasure

- **Many survivors described having their boundaries, needs, wants, and self-advocacy dismissed**
 - **Both in sexual or romantic relationships and in life generally**
 - **Many survivors described how it was difficult to learn how to advocate for what they wanted because they had had many experiences where they had not been allowed to advocate or set boundaries**
 - **Pleasure, or pursuing the things that felt good and affirming, was very often denied to the survivors due to their circumstances**

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Consent and Pleasure

- **Based on what the survivors said, I believe it is very difficult if not impossible, to meaningfully teach consent without an emphasis on recognizing, validating and centering joyful, pleasurable experiences**
- **This means validating what an Autistic person likes and does not like**
 - **For example sensory needs, need for routine etc.**
- **Even if those things are different than what other people expect**

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Sexual Pleasure

- **There has been much written about the concept of certain bodies being more deserving of sexual pleasure than others, pertaining to identities such as gender, race, age, disability etc.**
adrienne maree brown. (2022, October 11)
- **Because of the way that Autistic people have been infantilized and our sexual expression denigrated and pathologized, I would argue that Autistic people are also often not seen as deserving of pleasure**
- **In fact many of the survivors described the feeling that they had to tolerate whatever treatment other people gave them and that they should not expect more from romantic or sexual partners**

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What are Interpersonal Power Imbalances?

- **Most of our interpersonal relationships are not entirely equal in terms of the amount of power held by each person**
 - **Things that can contribute to power differences include race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, class, disability, etc.**
- **Power differences can make it easier or more difficult for someone to advocate for or access the things they need**
- **Someone with more power may not always be aware of these difficulties. Building awareness is essential to preventing inadvertent abuse of power.**

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Consent, Pleasure, and Power

- **When one person's pleasure is seen as more valid than another's that creates a power imbalance**
 - **Many of the survivors described power imbalances in their relationships with others (family, friends, and romantic and sexual relationships)**
 - **They described how the lack of recognition of a power imbalance and the abuse of power contributed to their own mistreatment**
 - **For example, gaslighting and denying the needs and experiences of the Autistic survivor**

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Centering Pleasure in Sex Ed

- **Sexual health education for Autistic people can help to address this**
 - **Providing opportunities to practice advocating for what they need, recognizing the importance of how to address conflicting access needs**
 - **Validating Autistic needs and experiences, including gender identity, sexual orientation, relationship style (such as ethical non-monogamy), and sexual expression (such as kink or BDSM)**
 - **Providing education about internalized ableism and other isms**

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Centering Pleasure in Sex Ed (continued)

- **Sex ed for Autistic people that is liberatory and centers pleasure would take a neurodiversity affirming approach rather than a neuronormative approach.**
- **This means focusing on teaching consent, boundaries, self-advocacy rather than teaching Autistic people how to engage in socially normative behaviors**
 - **Just because something is a norm does not mean that it is consensual**
 - **For example, norms around hugging, shaking hands, eye-contact may conflict with a person's own bodily autonomy**

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Centering Pleasure in Sex Ed (continued)

- Many of the survivors I interviewed described their own journey toward unlearning internalized oppression, to stop blaming themselves for the abuse they experienced and to recognize that despite what they had been taught when they were younger, that they deserved better.
- Many of them described how better sex ed would have helped
- I want to envision a world where survivors do not have to struggle for years, decades to find the support and community that they need to heal and unlearn the internalized oppression taught by abusive systems

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Sex Ed Resources

- [Explore the sexual health resources created by Sexual Health Equity for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities \(SHEIDD\)](#)
- [Proud and Supported Series](#)
- [Amaze](#) is a great resource on sex ed for middle school youth
- One of my favorite sex ed curricula (for inclusion and accessibility) is [Sexuality for All Abilities](#)

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Sex Ed Resources (continued)

- [Training module on providing services to Autistic survivors of sexual assault on college campus](#)
- In Portland, Oregon I helped to create puberty education library kits for parents of Autistic youth. Consider if something like that would be helpful in your community.

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Evaluating Sex Ed Curricula

- Is the educator disabled themselves/ a person with a disability?
 - Does the information promote supported decision making, pleasure, and dignity of risk?
 - Does the information promote mental age theory, restriction and control, and pathologization of sexual expression?
 - Does the information align with the [10 Principles of Disability Justice](#)?

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How Can You Help to Promote Sex Ed for Autistic and other Disabled People?

- In schools-do young people who receive special education services have access to sex ed?
- In organizations that provide supports to disabled people-are staff trained to provide support and education around sexuality (this includes employment services)?
- In healthcare-Is the physical space and online patient portal accessible to people with a range of access needs? Do providers know how to interact with people with disabilities in a trauma informed way, including around sexuality?

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How Can You Help to Promote Sex Ed for Autistic and other Disabled People? (continued)

- For people in your own life-modeling consent and bodily autonomy is very helpful
- Respecting a person's no, however they communicate (words, gestures, AAC etc.)
- Not making assumptions about whether or not someone will want to be a parent (people with disabilities can be great parents)
- Recognizing that disabled people can be queer, trans, ace, polyamorous, kinky etc.
- Treating disabled adults as adults, teens as teens
 - Don't infantilize them

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Systemic Changes Beyond Sex Ed

- **Providing liberatory sex ed is one piece to helping Autistic survivors but there are many other components to addressing this systemic issue**
 - **Access to safe, affordable housing**
 - **Access to affirming therapists (particularly for Global Majority and 2SLGBTQIA+ survivors)**
 - **Access to disability supports, including supports around executive functioning**
 - **Better support and compensation for disability support workers who are often underpaid and underappreciated and often Global Majority women**

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Systemic Changes Beyond Sex Ed (continued)

- **Supportive individuals who will listen to a survivor and help on the terms that the survivor needs rather than forcing help**
 - **Believing Autistic people when they say they are abused (particularly children)**
 - **More supports for parents raising Autistic children, particularly those who are Autistic themselves**
 - **More opportunities for Autistic people (particularly young people) to connect with the Autistic community and develop a positive identity as Autistic**

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