





**Ambitious
about Autism**

Relationships and intimacy my way: an autistic perspective

A collection of blogs and audio recordings about relationships and intimacy created by autistic young people from the Ambitious Youth Network and Sex Ed Matters.



How to navigate

- 1 Click the icons    to listen to audio responses by autistic young people.
- 2 Click words underlined to read the definition. 

Please note: This blog has themes of consent, sexual activity and sexual abuse.

Introduction

The reality of sex education for autistic young people

Sex and relationships education is in dire need across the UK. The Higher Education Policy Institute found only 6% of students leave school feeling “confident” navigating the reality of sex and relationships. Ofsted found sexual abuse is “normalised” in schools and 90% of girls are sent unwanted sexual images “always” or “sometimes”.

“

I want autistic young people to have access to what I needed: accessible information and be unafraid of the taboo of sex education.”

Susannah, Youth Advisor



¹ Ofsted, review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges, 2021



Having autistic people involved in this project ensures it meets the needs of autistic people.”

Lotte, Youth Advisor

While a lack of quality and inviting sex education is a problem for everyone, it is particularly harmful for autistic young people. According to a study by Laura Gilmour at the University of York, “autistic adolescents know less about sex than their peers and have less access to sex education”². Yet there is a gap between what these young people need and what schools provide.

This blog aims to tackle this knowledge gap. Eight incredible youth advisors (Susannah, Lotte, Matt, R*, Iveta, Frankie, Harvey, Hannah) from Ambitious about Autism have teamed up with Sex Ed Matters to produce a guide to navigating the reality of relationships and **consent** for their community.

The blogs and recordings were co-produced over four workshops. Youth advisors conducted research, formed the content, format, design, and accessibility of this resource to make sure more autistic young people can access sex and relationship education.

Throughout, they reflect on their experiences, offer advice and guidance to maintain thoughtful, healthy relationships. This includes how being **neurodivergent** impacts relationships, what challenges they’ve faced and how to communicate your **boundaries** with confidence. Everyone deserves to experience positive, loving relationships and we hope this can help you see what that might look like for you.



I really liked the supportive and judgement-free environment we created.”

Susannah, Youth Advisor



² Laura Gilmore et al, [Sexuality in a community based sample of adults with autism spectrum disorder](#), 2015

“Not the relationship norm”

In this blog, Youth Advisors reflect on their experiences when starting new relationships as autistic people, including the challenges and positives, and the signs of a healthy relationship.

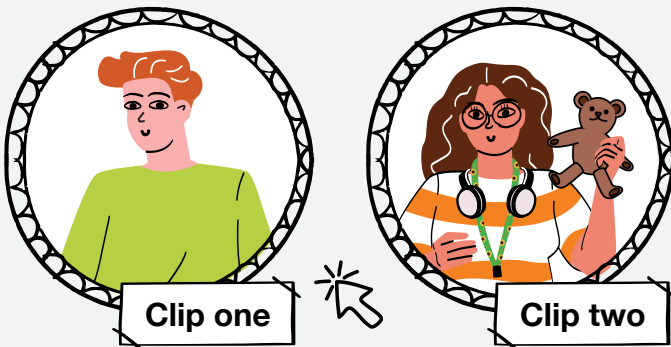
It can be difficult to recognise if (or when) someone is flirting with you as an autistic person. Personally, I find myself worrying that I’m being egotistical in assuming someone is interested in me. Because of this, I usually wait for the other person to tell me in clear words what is going on. I know some people think this can ruin the moment, but I think it’s really nice for someone to clearly state how they feel about you. Whether it’s: “I’m really attracted to you, can I kiss you?” or a close friend sharing that their feelings for you have changed. I appreciate it when someone feels confident and safe enough to share their feelings with me. – R*

“

I think it is especially difficult for autistic people to meet new people. Things like struggling to read facial expressions and body language can make it quite stressful when meeting someone new.”

Matt, Youth Advisor

▶ Recording



Listen to Harvey and Susannah talk about how autism effects their relationships.

Click here for transcript

“

When it comes to searching for potential partners, it is important to me to find someone who values and understands that I need my own space.”

Harvey, Youth Advisor



Being autistic can affect relationships positively as autistic people can be very caring and show a great deal of love in relationships. Loving relationships are likely to be more successful. Autistic people can have a very good sense of humour, and this can make relationships positive and enjoyable. They can also be very open and honest, and honesty is key for any successful relationship. Autistic people can also be reliable which is important when starting and maintaining any relationship, as well as very empathetic although they may not show it in a typical way. – **Lotte**

In a healthy relationship, both autistic and non-autistic people need to respect each other and come to a compromise which suits both people without making either feel uncomfortable. I think an honest conversation about preferences is needed, so that everyone knows what to expect. In a healthy relationship, both people should enjoy spending time together, perhaps have some similar interests and make each other laugh so that the relationship can be fun. It's also important to be kind and patient with each other and understand that you might want to do different things from each other sometimes. – **Matt**

We asked the Ambitious Youth Advisors what advice they would give to an autistic person about relationships.

- **Have and maintain healthy boundaries.** This may include the levels of **intimacy** you feel comfortable with or communication preferences throughout the day, such as having time to calm down after a long day before talking to your partner.
- **Don't forget about your community.** It is important to keep chatting to your friends and close ones even if you start a new relationship.
- **Don't define your self-worth based on your relationship status.** Work out who you are without being defined by others.
- **Think about what you would like in a relationship before you get into one.**
- **Do not be discouraged if you find it difficult to form new relationships.** It takes time and it's sometimes better to take things slowly.
- **Think about your support needs and how you can share these with your partner so they can best support you.** For example, telling your partner about your sensory needs.



Navigating intimacy and being yourself when intimate with others

In this blog, the Youth Advisors explore **intimacy**, what it means to them, how it practically works for them, the challenges autistic people may face, and how to communicate **boundaries**.

Many autistic people face challenges around **intimacy** in relationships. Speaking from experience, I find it hard to show people affection even with small gestures, such as a hug. Talking about the topic of **intimacy** with a loved one or person you have a relationship with can be hard, but it is important to set those **boundaries** and make things clear to one another. **Intimacy** is such a tricky subject for many autistic people because it's something many of us don't really know how to do.

“

Frequently, autistic people are infantilised by their neurotypical peers as well as the medical community... this isn't an accurate depiction of autistic people.”

R* Youth Advisor

In society, **intimacy** is often shown as sex, kissing, cuddling, and holding hands. For many autistic people, this is simply not realistic. In some situations, relationships may end due to a difference in what each person wants and needs and this can be hard to deal with for autistic people. – **Frankie**

To have a healthy relationship with someone, whether romantic or a friendship, you both need to understand what your **boundaries** are so you can feel safe and comfortable. For autistic people, this can be a difficult topic because the **boundaries** they may want to have in a relationship may not align with the expectations of non-autistic people, which can cause friction in the relationship. – **Matt**

▶ Recording



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It (intimacy) flips some of my traits but not all of them.”

Susannah, Youth Advisor

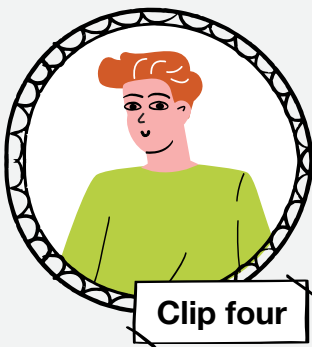
Listen to Susannah discuss how she finds intimacy as an autistic person.

Click here for transcript

To communicate your **boundaries**, I recommend sitting down with a notepad and pen (or your notes app!) and writing down how you'd want to be treated in a relationship. For example, how would you best handle tricky conversations? Would it be best in-person or over text or a phone call? Would you prefer it was spontaneous or a planned conversation? Or maybe it's how **intimacy** is initiated between you and your partner(s), such as would you want to initiate **intimacy**?

Being able to construct your **boundaries** is one thing, but communicating them can be very daunting, particularly if you're not used to telling people your true emotions. I think **boundaries** are the first step, but also the biggest, to having healthy relationships! – **Susannah**

▶ Recording



“

Boundaries are very important to me as there may be times where I go into sensory overload.”

Harvey, Youth Advisor

Listen to Harvey and Susannah discuss boundaries.

Click here for transcript

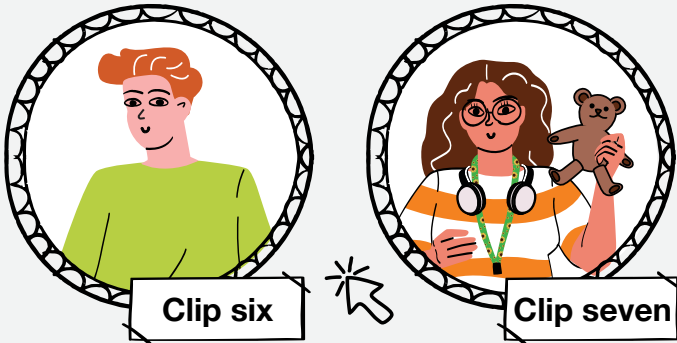
We asked the Ambitious Youth Advisors what advice they would give to an autistic person about **intimacy**.

- **Never feel pressured into any form of **intimacy**.** If it doesn't feel right, stop! And that goes for more than just sex.
- ****Intimacy** means different things to everyone.** It isn't always about physical **intimacy** or sex - it's about trust and allowing yourself to be vulnerable.
- **Work out your **boundaries** around **intimacy** such as things you would do, wouldn't do and things you would maybe be open to.** If the other person doesn't respect or agree with your **boundaries**, then maybe that person is not right for you.
- **Find out what **intimacy** means to you.** Building strong friendships can be just as fulfilling as romantic or intimate relationships for some people.
- **Take things at your own pace so you can get to know someone and feel comfortable.**

Actions to explore

We asked the Ambitious Youth Advisors what positive actions autistic young people could explore when it comes to relationships and **intimacy**.

▶ Recording



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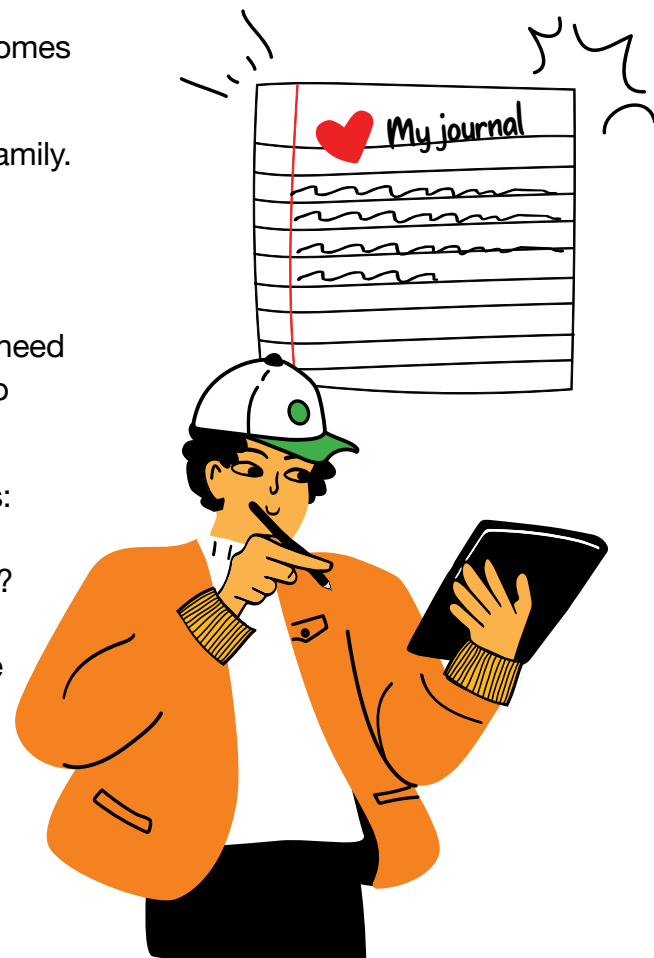
They have to know how to support me.”

Susannah, Youth Advisor

Listen to advice from Harvey and Susannah about how to tell your partner about your needs as an autistic person.

Click here for transcript

- Make a list of positive attributes you could bring to a relationship and what you want in a partner.
- Write, draw, or journal about your preferences when it comes to relationships and **intimacy**.
- Message a person that you love, including friends and family.
- Take yourself on solo dates, such as reading at a cafe!
- Chat with a friend about what **intimacy** means to them.
- Journal using the prompt: What are five things that you need in a relationship and how can you communicate these to a potential or current partner?
- When it comes to **consent**, ask yourself three questions: are you enthusiastic? Are you safe in your environment? Are you comfortable with the person/people you're with? If the answer is a clear 'yes' to all three questions, then go right ahead. If you're not sure about any one of these questions, wait until you are completely sure.



Further information and resources

The Youth Advisors explored research from academic papers, videos, and blogs about relationships, [intimacy](#), and [autism](#) to help create this resource. Here are their sources and further signposting to explore sex and relationships.



Other Blogs

[Sex Ed Matters blog](#)

[Autism, relationships and marriage](#) by Nicholas Marshall

[Developing and maintaining a relationship](#) by Alis Rowe

[LGBTQ+ blogs](#) – Ambitious about Autism

[Making friends as an autistic young person](#) – Ambitious about Autism



Websites

[Brook](#) sexual wellbeing charity

[PSHE](#) Association resources

[Outspoken](#) Sex Ed for parents



Videos

[Successful relationships](#) – Sarah Hendrickx

[Everyone in a relationship should read this](#) – Hannah Witton



Podcasts

[Autistica Discover Podcast: Relationships](#)

[Where should we begin?](#) – Esther Perel



Academic papers and reports

Comparing Physical Intimacy and Romantic Relationships of Autistic and Non-autistic Adults: A Qualitative Analysis

INSAR Special Interest Group Report: Stakeholder Perspectives on Priorities for Future Research on Autism, Sexuality, and Intimate Relationships

HEPI, Most students think passing a sexual consent test should be compulsory before starting higher education

Ofsted, culture change needed to tackle 'normalised' sexual harassment

Sex Ed Forum, Young People's RSE Poll 2024

All About Love – bell hooks



Glossary

Autism Autistic people process the world around them differently from non-autistic people. Someone who is autistic, or has a diagnosis of autism, is different in four areas: social interaction, social communication, routines and repetition (social imagination) and sensory differences.

Boundaries are markers which define the limits of something. For example, you might establish boundaries with a partner by letting them know you don't feel comfortable with public displays of affection, or that you need time to yourself after work. Your boundaries may change over time so it's always a good idea to check in with your partner if they seem uncomfortable and to keep communicating about your feelings, too.

Consent is an enthusiastic 'yes'. Legally, it means giving someone the freedom and capacity to make a choice.

Contraceptive failure happens when your birth control method has not worked. For example, when a condom splits open during use, or an implant was ineffective. Although this is unlikely to happen, there is a small chance it might. Make sure to check failure rates before engaging in sexual activity and always remember a condom, whether you're using another method as well or not, to protect you from sexually transmitted infections.

Flirting: to interact with others in a fun or cheeky way which suggests sexual attraction. This could include excessive eye contact, touching someone's hand or being overly complimentary.

Infantilisation: to treat someone as if that person were a child, or were younger than they are. Examples include baby talk, being over protective, assuming someone is helpless or knows less than you, belittling someone's opinions or mocking their independence.

Intimacy is a feeling of closeness. This can mean different things to different people. Being intimate can mean any act which gives you a sense of closeness with your partner, including holding hands, having long meaningful discussions, kissing and having sex.

LGBTQIA+ community is an abbreviation and umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and others who don't identify as being heterosexual or gender-conforming.

Meltdown is a response to an overwhelming situation. The response can be very loud and sometimes physical. The person needs time to recover and should not be laughed at for having a meltdown.

Neurodivergent This is the term used to describe someone who has a neurodiverse condition, for example, autism. This means their brain functions, learns and processes information differently.

Neurotypical This is the term used to describe people who are not autistic, that is, whose neurodevelopment has been typical and whose brain functioning is considered 'normal' according to societal norms.

PIP Personal Independence Payment can help with extra living costs if you have both a long-term physical or mental health condition or disability and difficulty doing certain everyday tasks or getting around because of your condition.

Sensory overload occurs when an individual's sensory system becomes overwhelmed by too much sensory input. This can happen in various environments and situations, such as crowded places, bright lights, loud noises, or even during times of heightened emotions.

Sensory processing is how we take in and perceive sensory information. This may include hyper (high) or hypo (low) sensitivity to the five senses (taste, touch, sight, smell and sounds), as well as balance and body awareness.

Shutdowns are similar to meltdowns but are not as visible or loud. A person may withdraw instead of being their usual self.

Special interests are an intense and passionate level of focus on things of interest on a specific subject. For some people, this can be a game or TV show, a type of animal, a type of machine or a country. Special interests are varied and can bring the person joy.

Spoons or spoon theory is a metaphor often used to depict the amount of mental energy a person has available for daily tasks. A spoon is used as a symbolic unit of mental or physical energy that autistic people possess. As the day goes on, we encounter various stressful situations and environments. For example, social or sensory situations may cause us to feel stressed and thus use up some of our capacity to cope.

Credits

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About the **Ambitious Youth Network** and Youth Advisors

The network is a fun and friendly space for autistic young people, between the ages of 13-25, to be themselves.

Our Youth Advisors provide expertise and co-design projects to ensure that autistic voices are at the heart of everything we do.

About **Ambitious about Autism**

Ambitious about Autism is the national charity standing with autistic children and young people. We believe every autistic child and young person has the right to be themselves and realise their ambitions. We started as one school and have become a movement for change. We champion rights, campaign for change and create opportunities.

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About **Sex Ed Matters**

Sex Ed Matters is an award-winning not-for-profit community interest company dedicated to bringing relationships and sex education (RSE) into the 21st century and making quality, confidence-building RSE as accessible and inclusive as possible. We believe RSE has the power to transform the lives of young people and tackle pressing national problems, including the rise in Violence Against Women and Girls and incel culture.

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