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# Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders

journal homepage: <http://ees.elsevier.com/RASD/default.asp>

## An exploration of the judgement of sexual situations by adolescents with autism spectrum disorders versus typically developing adolescents



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 2 August 2016

Received in revised form 6 January 2017

Accepted 16 January 2017

Number of reviews completed is 2.

Available online 4 February 2017

#### Keywords:

ASD

Psychosexual development

Adolescence

Inappropriate sexual behaviour

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Inappropriate sexual behaviour, sexual problems and sexual victimization in adolescents with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) is regularly reported in previous research, but little is known about factors associated with these problems, nor about factors associated with a healthy sexuality development in adolescents with ASD. Investigating the judgement of sexual behaviour can be a first step in acquiring insight into inappropriate sexual behaviour in adolescents with ASD.

**Methods:** We assessed how 94 cognitively-able adolescents with ASD and 94 typically developing (TD) adolescents judged the appropriateness of different illustrations of sexual situations and we investigated the differences between the two groups.

**Results:** The highest level of agreement between the judgements of adolescents with ASD and the judgements of an expert panel was found for severely inappropriate sexual behaviours (89.2%) and the lowest agreement was found for appropriate (31.7%) and slightly inappropriate sexual behaviours (26.1%). No significant differences were found between the judgements of the adolescents with ASD and the TD adolescents. Regarding the divergent judgements, adolescents with and without ASD were mostly more strict (i.e., more conservative) than the expert panel in their judgement of sexual situations. Finally, a small percentage of adolescents with and without ASD showed milder (i.e., less conservative) judgements of sexual situations portraying behaviour that was considered severely inappropriate by an expert panel.

**Conclusions:** Our findings showed that, overall, judgement of illustrations of sexual situations does not seem to be hampered in adolescents with ASD. More research is needed to clarify whether this also holds true for their judgements of – and actions in – more complex real life situations.

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## 1. Introduction

In adolescence, many physical, emotional and social changes take place and the psychosexual development accelerates rapidly (Dahl, 2004; Santrock, 2005). During the transition from childhood into adulthood, adolescents require a whole set of new skills and knowledge (White & Roberson-Nay, 2009), making adolescence a challenging period. The development of a healthy sexuality is an important task during adolescence, and for adolescents with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) the physical changes and a clear interest in sexuality and intimate relationships occur similar to adolescents without ASD (Pecora, Mesibov, & Stokes, 2016). Previous research showed healthy sexual and relational functioning in people with ASD and regarding several behavioural aspects of sexuality (e.g., masturbation, dating and kissing) little differences were found between adolescents and adults with and without ASD (Byers, Nichols, & Voyer, 2013; Dewinter, Vermeiren, Vanwesenbeeck, Lobbestael, & Van Nieuwenhuizen, 2015; Dewinter, Vermeiren, Vanwesenbeeck, & Van Nieuwenhuizen, 2016). In contrast to these studies reporting healthy aspects of sexuality in adolescents with ASD, other studies focussed on the challenges young people with ASD run into in adolescence and their psychosexual development (Ginevra, Nota, & Stokes, 2016; Stokes & Kaur, 2005; Stokes, Newton, & Kaur, 2007; Tissot, 2009). Adolescents and adults with ASD reported sexual frustration, lack of outlets for sexual tension, and sexual preoccupations (Murrie, Warren, Kristiansson, & Dietz, 2002; Ray, Marks, & Bray-Garretson, 2004) and a broad variety of inappropriate sexual behaviour has been described in a small group of people with ASD, ranging from asking inappropriate questions, touching others inappropriately, to stalking and public masturbation (Coskun, Karakoc, Kircelli, & Mukaddes, 2009; Dozier, Iwata, & Worsdell, 2011; Hénault, 2006; Realmuto & Ruble, 1999; Ruble & Dalrymple, 1993; Stokes et al., 2007). Case studies illustrated sexual offending behaviours in adolescents and adults with ASD (Chan & Saluja, 2011; Griffin-Shelley, 2010; Haskins & Silva, 2006; Kohn, Fahum, Ratzoni, & Apter, 1998; Murrie et al., 2002). Also, paraphilias, such as exhibitionism, voyeurism, paedophilia and fetishism, have been described in people with ASD (Cooper, Mohamed, & Collacott, 1993; Dozier et al., 2011; Early, Erickson, Wink, McDougale, & Scott, 2012; Hellemans, Colson, Verbraeken, Vermeiren, & Deboutte, 2007; Kellaheer, 2015). Very recently, a study has found that in a group of adolescents and young adults with ASD about one fourth portrayed inappropriate sexual behaviour or struggled with paraphilias (Fernandes et al., 2016). Unfortunately, most of the previous publications on inappropriate sexual behaviour in people with ASD are case studies or deal with methodological limitations, such as small sample sizes or no use of self-report measures. Adolescents with ASD are not only reported to be more at risk to portray inappropriate sexual behaviour, but also to become a victim of sexual bullying or abuse (Edelson, 2009; Sevlever, Roth, & Gillis, 2013). The prevalence of sexual victimization in people with ASD was estimated on 16.6% (Mandell, Walrath, Manteuffel, Sgro, & Pinto-Martin, 2005) and Brown-Lavoie, Viecili, and Weiss, (2014) reported that people with ASD were between two and three times more likely to experience sexual victimization, sexual coercion and rape than people without ASD. All these potential risks cause concerns in parents of adolescents with ASD. Parents have concerns both about the risk of sexual exploitation as well as about the possibility that their child will show inappropriate sexual behaviour (Ballan, 2012; Cridland, Jones, Caputi, & Magee, 2014; Ginevra et al., 2016; Nichols & Blakeley-Smith, 2009; Stokes & Kaur, 2005).

This contradiction in previous research, with some studies focussing on problematic sexual behaviour, and others indicating a healthy sexual development in adolescents with ASD, calls for research to increase insight in factors associated with the development of (in)appropriate sexual behaviour in adolescents with ASD. Investigating how adolescents with ASD judge sexual situations can be a valuable first step. In the present study, we aimed to get more insight in the judgement of sexual situations by adolescents with ASD, by using the flag system. The flag system can be used to get an indication of how children, adolescents, and adults judge the appropriateness of different sexual situations (Frans & Franck, 2010). We investigated judgement of a wide range of illustrations of sexual situations, and we compared the judgements of adolescents with ASD with the judgements of a matched sample of typically developing adolescents, by contrasting both groups to consensus judgements composed by an expert panel.

This is the first study that examines the judgement on the appropriateness of different sexual situations by adolescents with ASD. As such, this study has an exploratory nature. Possibly, adolescents with difficulties judging the appropriateness of sexual situations might also have difficulties in behaving appropriately in actual sexual situations. In other words, misjudgement of sexual situations might be associated with difficulties in both stating your own boundaries as well as taking other peoples boundaries into account and thereby increasing the chance of engaging in inappropriate sexual behaviour. When adolescents with ASD indeed judge sexual situations differently than the expert panel, and than adolescents without ASD, this might be a first step in explaining the previously reported inappropriate sexual behaviour and vulnerability to sexual victimization in adolescents with ASD.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants in this study were 94 adolescents with ASD and 94 typically developing adolescents, all between 12 and 18 years of age. This study was approved by the medical ethical commission of the Erasmus Medical Centre, Rotterdam (MEC-2013-040).

The adolescents with ASD were derived from a larger group of 184 adolescents with a DSM-IV-TR diagnosis of ASD that participated in a large randomized controlled trial on the effects of a psychosexual training program for adolescents with

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