

Promoting Internet Safety Among Users with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Advisory: This Fast Fact contains adult content and may not be suitable for all readers

In today's technological world, the Internet has become an important and growing source of information and connectedness. The Internet is useful for many reasons, whether it is being used to chat with old friends, find directions to a restaurant, or read a movie review. However, individuals with ASD and their families may face unique challenges when attempting to safely navigate the web. It is possible for individuals with ASD to unintentionally break the law, however, a proactive approach helps keep everyone safe and informed.

Factors and Risks

Many factors have potential to make the Internet a risky place for individuals with ASD. These can include disparities between chronological and developmental age, poor or limited sexual education, excessive online time, isolation, and lures. Researching a special interest may unintentionally segue into accessing illegal pornography. Lures like pop-up ads and misleading language on otherwise legal websites can lead web users to access material that is exploitative and illegal, like child pornography. Deficits in Executive Functioning and perspective taking (Theory of Mind) can make it difficult to grasp why these videos are against the law and what the serious consequences may be for accessing them.

Be Proactive! Provide Instruction

People with ASD absolutely must have explicit and accessible sexuality education. This includes teaching people about pornography. Some topics to cover include:

- **Legal vs. illegal images.** Images of children will get you arrested.
- **Exploitation.** Children have been hurt in the making of pornography.
- **Social perception.** What do other people think about the use of pornography? Is that information to share with others? If yes, when and with whom?
- **Skewing body images.** Real people don't look like that. You do not look like that. Your partner will not look like that.
- **Pornography is fake.** It is not an example of real relationships or real life.
- **Relationships develop over time.** Physical and emotional intimacy increase gradually.

Suggestions for Families

Many individuals with ASD spend A LOT of time on the Internet. However, these individuals may not always understand the dangers that are present online or the issues they can get into online. As family members, we must educate ourselves on these issues and, in turn, educate our children.

- Know what apps your family member accesses.
- Know how to operate the devices that are present in your home.
- Set up an Internet safe home (filters, virus protection, parental controls, child friendly browsers)
- Set up and post family rules for Internet usage.
- Check and double-check what websites and apps your family member is visiting.
- Teach your family member what can get them arrested.
- Know your family member's accounts and passwords.

Additional Resources

Facebook Smart Card

public.navy.mil/usff/Documents/FaceBook%20Smart%20Card.pdf

Sexuality Education Manual from Autism Speaks

autismspeaks.org/docs/family_services_docs/parentworkbook.pdf

National Autistic Society Top Tips – Sex and Relationships

autism.org.uk/about/communication/sex-education/top-tips.aspx

FBI's A Parent's Guide to Internet Safety

fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/parent-guide

Archived webinars from The Arc and NCCJD

thearc.org/NCCJD/training/webinars/archive

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