

Teaching Dating and Relationship Skills to Teenagers with High Functioning Autism

Dating and relationships can be tough for anyone to handle, but teenagers with high functioning autism face unique challenges. That's because they lack certain skills and abilities that make it easier to meet people and to get close to them, both physically and emotionally.

Let's examine three challenges to successful romantic relationships to see how you can help your teenager.

Recognizing Emotions

Teenagers with high functioning autism often find the world of emotions to be overwhelming and puzzling. They have problems labeling, or even recognizing, their own emotions. They may not understand the varying degrees within a single emotion, not comprehending the difference between a slight irritation and rage. They may also seem to show a complete lack of emotion, due to the fact that they don't understand how to express their emotions appropriately. What makes dating and relationships even more difficult is that they find it difficult to understand the emotions of others.

Activity One

Materials needed: an empty photo album or notebook and a camera or phone.

1. Identifying and labeling emotions in photos: Using the camera or phone, take photos of your teenager displaying any naturally occurring emotions, both positive and negative. Print out the photos.

Share each picture with your teenager, asking them to label the emotion. After they label the picture, have them tape the photo into the album or notebook and then label the picture with the correct emotion.

2. Identifying and labeling nonverbal clues using photos: Using the photo album or notebook, ask your teenager to look for the nonverbal clues in their facial expression or body language that helped them label which emotion was being expressed. Have them label the photograph with the nonverbal clues that they find.

3. Using role-playing to identify and label emotions as well as nonverbal clues: Role-playing is a great tool to help teenagers with high functioning autism recognize their own emotions, as well as the emotions of others. Take turns doing role-plays, and guessing each other's emotions. Freeze half way through a role-playing turn to point out facial expression, tone of voice, and nonverbal clues. A mirror may be very helpful when practicing this exercise.

4. **Using video to identify and label emotions as well as nonverbal clues:** Videorecord your teenager displaying any naturally occurring emotions throughout the day. Show the video to your teenager, and freeze when any noticeable emotion is shown. Help your teenager label the emotions, as well as any nonverbal clues.

Activity Two

1. With your teenager, brainstorm as many different feelings as you can and list them on a sheet of paper. Group similar feelings together (for example, angry, mad, furious, etc.).

2. Draw a four-columned table on another sheet of paper. Label the tops of the columns with the following terms: Feeling, Situations, Physical Cues, and Body Language. Taking each feeling or group of feelings one at a time, have your teenager work their way through the chart. For example, here’s how the table might be filled in for “anger.”

Feeling	Situations	Physical Cues	Body Language
Anger	[It's probably best to use real situations from your teenager's life.]	Racing heart, sweaty palms, loud voice, etc. [Point out to your teenager that when they start to notice themselves experiencing these physical cues, this is their body’s way of telling them that they are experiencing intense feelings. The goal for your teenager is to recognize these signs early on before the anger gets out of control.]	Clenched fists, angry face, folded arms, etc. [Point out to your teenager that when they see these “clues” in another person, that person may be angry. This helps your teenager to start to identify angry feelings in others, whether the feelings are verbalized or not.]

3. Expand the activity with the following discussion questions:

- Does everyone have the same feelings? Why or why not?
- Why does the same situation affect different people differently?
- How can recognizing angry body language be helpful in our interactions with others?
- How might recognizing the physical cues for feelings in ourselves help us manage our feelings better?

Sensory Responses

Teenagers with high functioning autism may have sensory difficulties. These can occur in one or all of the senses (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste). The degree of difficulty varies from one individual to the next. Most commonly, an individual's senses are either intensified (hypersensitivity) or underdeveloped (hyposensitivity). Hearing and touching hypersensitivity are common. For example, light background music played at a low volume can be perceived as loud and shrill. Similarly, a slight brushing up against the skin can provoke the same intensity of pain as would be caused by a sharp object. Various forms of sexual stimulation can therefore cause discomfort or even pain, reinforcing avoidance behaviors and hindering the development of intimate relationships.

The attached worksheet (“The Five Senses”) can be used to help a teenager with high functioning autism explore sensory responses to various experiences so that they will be better equipped to identify and avoid stimulations that could lead to sensory confusion. The goal of the exercise is to test each of the five senses to determine the level of sensitivity. For example, what is a teenager’s reaction to soft music or to a loud noise? This can be tested by placing headphones over their ears and playing soft and loud music. The test can also be accomplished by whispering in their ear and slamming a door. In order to test the sense of touch, the forearm can be caressed with a soft fabric and then sandpaper. This exercise will allow your teenager to express what they feel and to realize that what is perceived by their senses has an impact on behavior. The second part of the exercise examines the impact of sensory responses on sexuality. These questions can be a useful starting point in addressing the subject of sexual behaviors.

Eye contact

Maintaining eye contact requires serious concentration for teenagers with high functioning autism. Some teenagers will avoid eye contact just so they can concentrate on what is being said.

When Luke Martin, an adult with high functioning autism, was 13 years old, he offered this explanation as to why he didn’t like eye contact:

“When I look someone straight in the eye, particularly someone I am not familiar with, the feeling is so uncomfortable that I cannot really describe it. First of all I feel as if their eyes are burning me and I really feel as if I am looking into the face of an alien. I know this sounds rude but I am telling it how it is. If I get past that stage and don't look away, then whilst someone is talking I find myself staring really hard and looking at their features and completely forgetting to listen to what they are saying.”

“Sometimes it is too hard to concentrate on listening and looking at the same time. People are hard enough to understand as their words are often so very cryptic, but when their faces are moving around, their eyebrows rising and falling and their eyes getting wider then squinting, I cannot fathom all that out in one go, so to be honest I don't even try.”

Unfortunately, lack of eye contact is often interpreted by others as a lack of interest. If your teenager is unable to maintain eye contact, here are two tricks that Luke suggested:

1. "I look at people's mouths. That means that the other person is satisfied enough because you are looking in their direction but yet you do not have to have that horrendous, burning into your very soul feeling that comes with staring into someone's eyes."
2. "Look in the direction of the speaker's ear. This is a good one because it reminds you to listen."

Here's another trick for appearing to maintain eye contact:

Shift back and forth from looking at the person's left eye to looking at their right eye.

Adapted from the following sources:

1. www.associatedcontent.com.
2. Susan Carney, www.suite101.com.
3. www.nas.org.uk.
4. Asperger's Syndrome and Sexuality: From Adolescence through Adulthood, Isabelle Henault, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006.
5. Terri Mauro, www.about.com.
6. www.wikihow.com.

The Five Senses

Check (✓) the appropriate boxes as you test your reactions to the following stimuli.

	Hyposensitive Under-sensitive	Sensitive Acceptable	Hypersensitive Over-sensitive
1. Hearing (soft music/loud noise)			
2. Smell (perfume/alcohol)			
3. Touch (soft fabric/sandpaper)			
4. Sight (bright colors/blurry images)			
5. Taste (lemon/honey or chocolate)			

What impact does your level of sensitivity have on your sexuality?

What are some of the ways you can overcome your under/over sensitivities?
