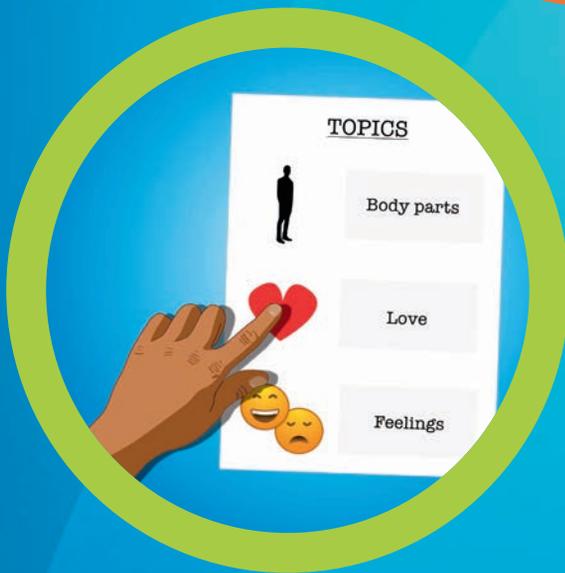




**Dr Kelly Asagba,  
Professor Jan Burns  
and Dr Sophie Doswell**



# **Sex and Relationships Education for Young People and Adults with Intellectual Disabilities and Autism**



**Illustrated by  
Adrian Asagba**



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All the worksheets can be downloaded from [www.pavpub.com/sex-relationships-education-young-people-adults-intellectual-disabilities-autism-resources](http://www.pavpub.com/sex-relationships-education-young-people-adults-intellectual-disabilities-autism-resources)

# Acknowledgements

Elements of this handbook have been inspired by findings from research with health and social care professionals experienced in delivering sex and relationships education for people with both intellectual disabilities and autism. We would like to express our sincere thanks to those who took part in the study. Without their time, dedication and enthusiasm about the project and their work with people with intellectual disabilities and autism, the development of this handbook would not have been possible. The authors would also like to extend a big thank you to Adrian Asagba for illustrating the majority of this handbook.

# About the authors

## **Dr Kelly Asagba**



Kelly is a Clinical Psychologist who completed her clinical psychology doctoral training at the Salomons Centre for Applied Psychology, Canterbury Christ Church University, in 2017. Her doctoral thesis focused on how sex and relationships education can be adapted for people with both intellectual disabilities and autism. She has worked in various NHS services for both children and adults with intellectual disabilities and autism, and more recently in perinatal mental health services. Her interests in the areas of intellectual disabilities and autism relate to sexuality, relationships and positive behaviour support. She also has interests in perinatal psychology and promoting positive parent-child interactions.

## **Professor Jan Burns**



Jan is a Professor of Clinical Psychology at Canterbury Christ Church University, UK. Previously, Jan has worked as a Clinical Psychologist with people with intellectual disabilities in the NHS and has carried out research in this area throughout her career. She has previously been the Programme Director for the Salomons Institute Doctorate in Clinical Psychology and has contributed to the development of the profession in the UK. Jan's research interests relating to people with intellectual disabilities include gender, sexuality, identity, health and sport. In 2015, Jan was awarded a Member of the British Empire (MBE) medal for her work with people with intellectual disabilities.

## **Dr Sophie Doswell**



Sophie works across child and adult NHS learning disability services in north London, UK. Sophie has worked as a Clinical Psychologist within NHS learning disability services since qualifying in 2001 and has a wide range of clinical, research and service development interests within and outside of the NHS including promoting identity and reducing stigma, utilising positive approaches including engaging in sport, intensive interaction and non-violent resistance and supporting individuals in difficult situations such those who are institutionalised and in temporary accommodation.

# Chapter One:

# Introduction

Having close and intimate relationships is a fundamental right of all people and adds greatly to the quality of a person's life. People with both intellectual disabilities and autism can find it difficult to navigate the complex world of sex and relationships. The problems which arise often result from difficulties with social communication, sensory sensitivities, interpreting subtleties in body language and social cues, and understanding the complex social rules involved in different relationships. It can also be more difficult to implicitly learn about sex and relationships, both directly from mainstream sex and relationships education programmes, but also indirectly through everyday life. This can lead to people with intellectual disabilities and autism being at a greater risk of abuse, exploitation and getting into trouble for inappropriate sexual behaviours. Furthermore, it could reduce their opportunities for developing safe and meaningful intimate relationships. Therefore, it is important that professionals, carers and family members know how best to support people with intellectual disabilities and autism in understanding and navigating the complex world of sex and relationships.

## **Intellectual disabilities and autism – terms and terminology**

This handbook is aimed at those who work with or care for people who have both intellectual disabilities and autism. Throughout this handbook the terms 'intellectual disabilities' and 'autism' are used, but it is recognised that there are various terms that are used for these conditions.

An intellectual disability is defined as impairments in both intellectual abilities and daily living skills, known as 'adaptive functioning', which begin before the age of 18 years old (APA, 2013). Intellectual disabilities can also be referred to, particularly in the UK, as 'learning disabilities'. Some people prefer the use of the term 'learning difficulties', however, generally speaking, a learning difficulty refers to a specific problem with one area of learning, such as dyslexia (i.e. difficulties with reading, spelling and word formation), which does not impact the person's overall intellectual functioning.

Autism can also be referred to as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or autism spectrum condition (ASC). Asperger's syndrome is a condition that comes under the umbrella of autism spectrum disorders, but people with Asperger's syndrome have an average or higher than average intellectual functioning. This means that they do not have additional intellectual disabilities.

Intellectual disabilities and autism are known to occur together at high rates. It is believed that out of all people with autism, over half of them have additional intellectual disabilities.

Also, out of all people with intellectual disabilities, it is approximated that a third of them also have autism. Whilst people with intellectual disabilities have some similar needs to people with autism, research is showing that people with both intellectual disabilities and autism have specific needs and characteristics, and that they should be considered as a group requiring specific adaptations to interventions to meet their needs.

## How to use this handbook

This handbook is designed to support professionals, parents and carers with setting up and adapting sex and relationships education to meet the unique needs of young people and adults with a combination of intellectual disabilities and autism. The aim is to guide the delivery of both formal interventions and informal education or discussions about sex and relationships. It covers an extensive range of recommendations about how to understand the unique needs and traits of people who have both intellectual disabilities and autism, and based on these, how to set up and adapt sex and relationships education.

This handbook provides a wide range of recommended methods from experts in this area, however, it is important that these methods are used flexibly and tailored to individual needs and preferences. We hope this resource provides you with guidance in effectively supporting young people and adults with intellectual disabilities and autism to learn about the complex world of sex and relationships and, as a result, experience meaningful relationships and lead fulfilling lives.

We recognise that professionals, parents and carers might approach providing sex and relationships education slightly differently depending on their relationship with the person. Therefore, this handbook has been designed in such a way that each of these groups can develop ideas on how to deliver sex and relationships education. To help readers focus on particular issues, to understand concepts through realistic examples, or to make the content more accessible, there are three different types of 'pop-up' text boxes throughout the handbook.

### Pop-up box

Pop-ups like this one will appear when there is a point that a parent or carer, who may be less familiar with sex and relationship education interventions in particular, may find helpful.

### Informational box

To provide greater detail about a concept, resource, or idea, these information boxes will appear.

### Example box

To provide practical examples of how concepts and adaptations can be applied to the real-world these boxes will appear with practical examples.

This handbook is set out in a sequential order to help you work through the steps of thinking about what adaptations might be needed, assessing needs and developing some interventions. However, the handbook can also be used in a flexible way, where you might want to look at particular sections to help you think of new ideas.

## Structure

### **This handbook contains the following chapters:**

#### **Chapter One: Introduction**

#### **Chapter Two: Understanding the Impact of Intellectual Disabilities and Autism**

This chapter provides some of the background as to the ways in which having intellectual disabilities and autism might impact on how people think, feel and behave. It aims to help you understand how you might need to adapt your usual practices to best fit the needs of these young people and adults, and why this is important.

#### **Chapter Three: Preparing to Talk About Sex and Relationships**

This chapter aims to help you think about how to assess individual needs to guide how you might set up sex and relationships education and what format might be needed (e.g. individual or groups). This chapter contains worksheets that can be downloaded/photocopied.

#### **Chapter Four: Starting the Work**

This chapter covers how to set up a session, the sorts of resources you may need, how to develop rules and boundaries for the sessions, and how to capture the person's progress. This chapter contains worksheets that can be downloaded/photocopied.

#### **Chapter Five: Adaptations and Teaching Methods**

This chapter covers ways in which you can adapt the content of the sex and relationships education sessions and support, and how you might use adaptations in various ways to support a person's learning. This chapter contains worksheets that can be downloaded/photocopied.

#### **Chapter Six: Supporting Successful Relationships in the Real World**

It is important that people are able to generalise what they have learnt into real life situations, so this chapter describes some ways to support the application of the person's learning to real life. This chapter contains worksheets that can be downloaded/photocopied.

#### **Chapter Seven: Concluding Summary**

This short chapter summarises the main messages from the previous content.

#### **Chapter Eight: Useful Resources**

This chapter lists a variety of existing useful resources, many of which have been referred to in earlier chapters, which you can use to help you find out more and

develop your expertise in this area. The chapter lists the resource, gives a short description of it, and makes suggestions of where you may obtain them.

## Worksheets

Worksheets have been provided to help you apply some of the approaches described in the book. These worksheets may be copied or downloaded from [www.pavpub.com/sex-relationships-education-young-people-adults-intellectual-disabilities-autism-resources](http://www.pavpub.com/sex-relationships-education-young-people-adults-intellectual-disabilities-autism-resources). The worksheets are designed as blank templates for you to complete in a way that is most useful to you, and those you are working with. Some of the worksheets also include worked examples so you can see how some of the methods described in the handbook may be translated into practice.

## Summary

This handbook has been drawn from the experience of the authors and other experts in the field. It can be worked through in chronological order or used as a reference. We have pulled out particular points you may find useful; we have also provided practical tools in the form of worksheets and examples to help you put these ideas into practice. It is meant as a starting point for you to develop your own practice and understanding. Everyone you work with will have individual differences and needs so please feel free to adapt the contents of the handbook to make them work for you and the people you support. We hope you find it useful.

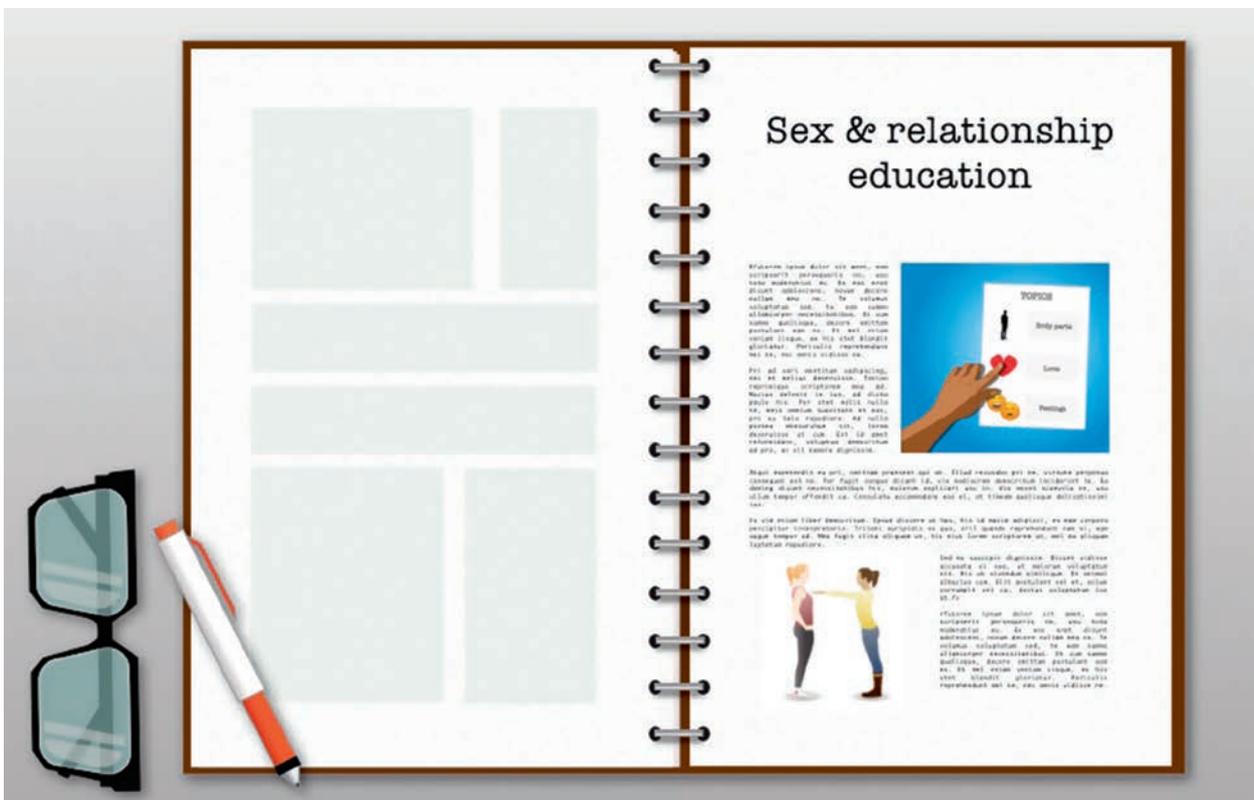


Illustration 1.1: Sex and relationships education © Adrian Asagba

# Chapter Two: Understanding the Impact of Intellectual Disabilities and Autism

Research has shown us that at the heart of both the diagnoses of intellectual disabilities and autism lies some differences in how people think, feel and sense. To understand how to adapt sex and relationships education for this group, there needs to be a understanding of how some of these possible differences impact upon the person.

## How to use this chapter

This chapter will cover some of the most important differences and characteristics that might need to be considered when delivering sex and relationships education for people with intellectual disabilities and autism. The chapters that follow will provide further details about how to prepare for and adapt sex and relationships education interventions based on the characteristics that are outlined in this current chapter.

It is important to remember that everyone is different – no one size fits all, so some the individual characteristics of the person always need to be considered.

## Aims of this chapter

- ▶ To describe what impact intellectual disabilities and autism might have on thinking and learning.
- ▶ To understand more about how intellectual disabilities and autism might interact together.
- ▶ To consider how we may need to adapt teaching and support methods to cater for the characteristics and difference associated with intellectual disabilities and autism.

The chapter starts with outlining what intelligence is, and then describes the different type of cognitive abilities and how they can be different in people with intellectual disabilities and autism. It then goes on to describe some of the emotional and sensory differences experienced by people with intellectual disabilities and autism, and finally what 'the triad of impairments' in autism are.

**Note:** There are no worksheets for this chapter.

## Intelligence or cognitive abilities

Intelligence is made up of lots of different types of intellectual abilities, which are sometimes called 'cognitive abilities'. Measures of intellectual abilities (Intelligence Quotient, or 'IQ', tests) are made up of a number of tasks (often referred to as 'subtests') which measure specific types of cognitive ability such as:

- ▶ memory
- ▶ logic
- ▶ verbal skills (i.e. an ability to understand words and how verbal information is understood and then used to communicate a response)
- ▶ non-verbal skills (i.e. the ability to make sense of the world without using language, such as pattern recognition)
- ▶ processing speed (i.e. the speed by which we can take in, analyse and respond to information).

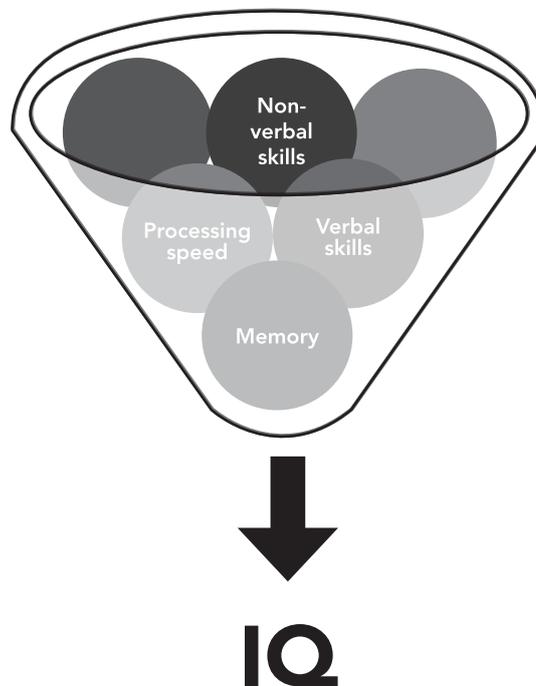


Illustration 2.1: Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and its components

The results of the subtests are calculated to produce an overall IQ score. However, across the different subtests of discrete abilities, people usually have different strengths and weaknesses, so sometimes an overall IQ score does not give the full picture of a person's abilities. Therefore, it is important to consider people's different cognitive strengths and weaknesses. This is typical for people with autism who may be very good at some tests of non-verbal cognitive abilities. For example, this includes the ability to make sense of the world without using language, such as pattern recognition. However, the person may be poor at verbal tasks such as comprehension where language is used to understand and link concepts, often in an abstract way.

# Sex and Relationships Education for Young People and Adults with Intellectual Disabilities and Autism

Dr Kelly Asagba, Professor Jan Burns and Dr Sophie Doswell

People with autism have specific characteristics which can make interpersonal relationships challenging. When this is combined with intellectual disabilities it can make responding to these challenges even more difficult as the individual may struggle to learn and adapt in ways others might not. Positive experiences of sex and relationships can enhance quality of life considerably, whilst negative experiences can be damaging and have ongoing serious consequences, leading to further lost opportunities. For these reasons, sex and relationships remain a major concern for individuals in this group and their families.

*Sex and Relationships Education for Young People and Adults with Intellectual Disabilities and Autism* includes the resources and guidance needed to provide education tailored to support young people and adults who have co-occurring autism and intellectual disabilities to manage intimate relationships, acknowledging not only the characteristics of both conditions, but also how they interact. Based on the authors' research study drawing on the extensive experience of practitioners working in this area, as well as the authors' own clinical and educational expertise, this handbook provides professionals, carers and parents with the knowledge and skills to best prepare for and meet the unique educational needs of this population. Such needs might include difficulties with learning, social communication, sensory sensitivities, interpreting subtleties in body language and social cues, and understanding the complex social rules involved in different relationships.

The contents address the adaptations of formal interventions and informal education and discussions about sex and relationships, supplemented by case studies, session plans, online illustrated worksheets and resource lists.

This handbook will be useful for health, education and social care professionals who work with people with co-occurring autism and intellectual disabilities in education, health, residential and community settings, as well as parents and carers.



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