

## Romantic Relationships and Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Relationships and the dating game is an exciting and sometimes overwhelming time for everyone and particularly for those with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. This article has been written in response to requests from several members grappling with the complex issues of intimate relationships.

### Relationships are possible!

Individuals with an Autism Spectrum Disorder often have the same desire for intimacy and companionship as the rest of the population. Given that difficulties in social interaction are a key feature of having an ASD, finding a partner and making a relationship work are often more difficult for a person with ASD. That being said, many examples exist of successful relationships that include a partner with ASD. Chris and Gisela Slater-Walker; authors of 'An Asperger Marriage', or both partners Jerry and Mary Newport - subjects of the movie 'Mozart and the Whale' are just a couple of examples. All resources referred to in this article are available to borrow from Autism Victoria's library.

Assets of a person with ASD in terms of a romantic relationship may be loyalty, punctuality, reliability, commitment, and honesty<sup>1</sup>. In addition, people with ASD can

have specific difficulties that may impact on a romantic relationship, such as:

- Sensory difficulties with grooming, or tolerating physical affection
- Understanding what behaviours are appropriate in various settings, such as when on a date
- Understanding other's intentions, which can leave a person with an ASD vulnerable to misinterpreting friendliness or being used in a relationship<sup>1</sup>
- Understanding other's reactions to their own behaviour e.g. how to tell when someone is offended by your behaviour, as opposed to being interested in you
- Having the confidence, and getting anxiety under control to go into new situations in order to meet new people<sup>1</sup>
- Knowing how to identify desire in themselves (or understand desire in others)



- Rigidity eg about others being on time for a date, or about behaviour when co-habiting

So what can a person with ASD do to increase the chances of a successful romantic relationship? First the individual has to attract a potential partner. Jerry Newport, an adult with Asperger Syndrome has the following tips on improving grooming in order to “present the best you”<sup>1</sup>:

- Bathe every day (or every second day if an adult and not doing a lot of physical activity - sponge bath if needed)
- Use deodorant
- Groom facial and body hair
- Clean teeth daily - find your preference for soft or hard toothbrush, electric brush for soothing massage, firm or light pressure when brushing, and a tolerable taste in toothpaste (see [www.plaintoothpaste.com](http://www.plaintoothpaste.com), an Australian made unflavoured toothpaste)
- Wear clean clothes (choose old but neat clothing if softer clothes are preferred)
- Copy hairstyles/music and clothes of your peers

### Choosing a potential partner

The next step is selecting a potential partner to get to know better. A person with ASD might have difficulty recognising when they are attracted to another person romantically. The person may need to have the concept of ‘attraction’ explained to them with tangible examples – that when they are attracted to another person, they may feel a tingling sensation in their body, they may think about another person a lot and want to be around them most of the time. Tips for meeting people, and choosing someone to approach for a date can be found in ‘The Asperger Love Guide’ (#2690).

When the individual has identified a potential partner, they may require assistance to determine whether the other person reciprocates their interest. As picking up on other people’s emotional states through their facial expression, tone of voice and body language is difficult for people with an ASD, they may need to ask someone they trust to help them ‘read the situation’. Common mistakes may be misinterpreting signs of friendliness, or failing to pick up on disinterest.

### Misinterpreting signs of friendliness

If a person smiles at you, or talks to you, it may not mean they are romantically interested. Determine whether a person is expected to be kind and friendly because that is their job<sup>1</sup>, or because they are just an acquaintance at work or classmate at school. Use the person’s level of contact with you, and their friendliness in the past as a guide<sup>1</sup>. Look for multiple signs of interest (see table on next page).



### Understanding signals of disinterest

It is important to understand the signals another person may give out when they are not interested in spending time with you. The person with ASD may also need assistance to understand when the signals they are giving out to another person are unacceptable:

- Generally prolonged staring at others, or repeated watching from a distance makes others uncomfortable<sup>1</sup>.
- Making suggestive comments offends other people. Suggestive comments are comments suggesting another person should engage in intimate behaviour with you. A person with ASD may need examples of such comments listed so they know exactly which comments to avoid.
- Continuing to pursue another person when their interest is not reciprocated is unacceptable. A strategy for avoiding this situation is the 'three strikes rule', whereby if a person has not accepted the offer of a date after the third time of being asked, this person is not to be pursued any further. This allows for a potential partner refusing a date initially because they genuinely are not available for an activity, rather than being disinterested<sup>1</sup>.

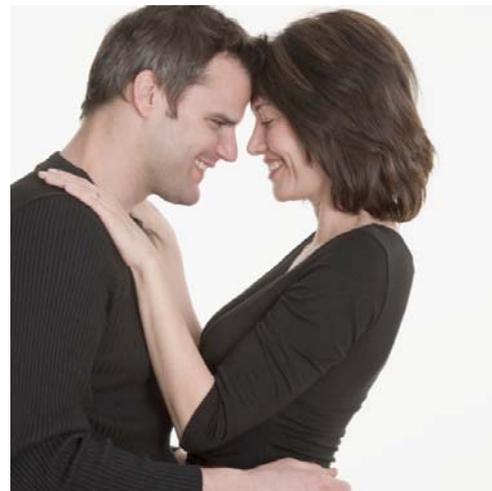
This table may help distinguish between interested and not interested behaviours or responses:

Interested	Not interested
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• giving strong eye-contact</li> <li>• leaning forward to hear what is said</li> <li>• smiling</li> <li>• 'flipping' or touching their hair</li> <li>• laughing at your jokes</li> <li>• the other person initiating conversation</li> <li>• the other person touching you in a friendly way (eg patting you on the back, touching your arm)</li> <li>• the other person inviting you to do an activity with them outside of school or work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• looking away</li> <li>• turning away</li> <li>• moving away</li> <li>• looking unhappy</li> <li>• having arms folded</li> <li>• not responding when you talk to them</li> <li>• telling you to go away</li> </ul>

When an individual has successfully identified a reciprocal love interest, the next step is choosing a place to go on date. Jerry Newport<sup>1</sup> suggests the following elements when selecting somewhere to take a potential partner.

- An activity the person enjoys enough to do alone.
- An activity that is a shared interest of the person being asked on the date.
- A low cost date. This helps to avoid the expectation that the other person has to provide a spectacular date to make up for the money spent.
- It helps to have advance preparation for a date, such as practicing how to get there on public transport, where to park if driving a car, etc.

### Behaviour during a 'date'



The person with ASD may need assistance in understanding that behaviour expectations change dependent on the setting. In public places such as the library, at church or on public transport, different ways of speaking and levels of physical contact are acceptable, compared with a nightclub or pub. Expectations about behaviour in different settings can be taught to a person with ASD by using tips in the book 'The Hidden Curriculum'<sup>2</sup>. Social niceties, such as 'don't

talk about yourself too much' may need to be taught to a person with ASD in a very concrete way to assist with 'dating behaviour'. For example, the person can be taught that for every statement or conversation about things that they are interested in, they should ask about (and listen to!) something that the other person is interested in. Other tips for behaviour during a date can be found in 'The Asperger Love Guide' (#2690).

### Tips for people with ASD in making a relationship last

What happens after several happy times spent together, and a mutual agreement is made to be in a 'physical relationship' with another person? The chapters 'What Men Want' and 'What Women Want' in the book 'Autism-Asperger's and Sexuality. Puberty and Beyond' (# 2119) are useful guides. Explicit information is contained in the 'What Women Want' chapter, and parental guidance is recommended for adolescent readers.

The book 'The Asperger Love Guide' (#2690) was written by two adults diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, and has a specific section devoted to helping a relationship last, including tips on quality time, romance, intimacy and dealing with conflict in a relationship.



### Teaching relationship skills to an adolescent with ASD

How can parents help to prepare their child for intimate relationships?<sup>1</sup> The most important thing is to work on your child's self-esteem, so they have the confidence to approach others.

- Praise positive achievements.
- Allow engagement in activities the child is successful with.
- Give specific feedback about appropriate social behaviour.
- Teach social skills in a structured way, such as how to make a phone call to ask a friend to do something together.
- Encourage social encounters of all kinds in order to practice with 'associates'. Associates are people you interact with for a distinct purpose. This helps to learn about shared interests.
- Have mock dates with your child and practice conversations.

You can also help your child develop a healthy attitude towards intimate relationships.

- Impart the attitude that sexual relationships are a normal part of life.
- Convey that intimacy is an acceptable topic of conversation during private times.
- Teach your child not to use sex for popularity.
- Encourage your child to be sceptical about 'locker room' talk (peers bragging about sexual encounters).
- Teach your child that they never have to do things they feel uncomfortable about (e.g. touching).
- If sensory issues in being touched by others are a concern, exercise, meditation and some medications can assist in desensitising to touch -

Occupational Therapy input may also help.

- Explain to your child that there is probably a difference between parent rules, and what other teens see as acceptable behaviour.

It is equally important to help your child to recognise signs of a bad relationship, such as

- The other person only wants money.
- The other person does not want you to meet their friends and family.
- The other person does not give much attention, affection or compliments in return.
- The other person uses 'put downs'.
- The other person is physically abusive.

### Support for people in a relationship with an ASD partner

The Family Counsellor and Information service is getting increasing numbers of enquiries from individuals who think their partner may have an ASD. There are also regular enquiries about how to cope in a relationship where one person has been formally diagnosed as having an ASD (which often comes after a diagnosis for the couples' child). The following resources are recommended to assist with understanding a partner with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

No. 2247 - STANFORD, A., Asperger Syndrome and Long-Term relationships, Jessica Kingsley Publications, 2003.

Written by a person in a relationship for 14 years with an Asperger partner, this book links the criteria for ASD diagnosis with the actual behaviours a partner might see in the relationship. The book also gives helpful tips for partners without Asperger Syndrome in changing their own behaviour, in order to help the relationship. This is especially important in cases where an official

diagnosis has not occurred, and the non-affected partner does not feel confident raising the possibility of Asperger Syndrome. It is also helpful in situations where the person with Asperger Syndrome does not acknowledge that anything about them needs to change.

No. 2560 - SLATER-WALKER, C. & G., An Asperger Marriage, Jessica Kingsley Publications, 2002.

Written from the perspective of a woman without Asperger Syndrome, and her husband who has this diagnosis. Alternating chapters give an insight into the different perspectives both parties can have on issues related to marriage and raising children. The book also details the compromises both parties have made in order to keep their relationship going.

No. 2111 - ASTON, M. The Other Half of Asperger Syndrome, National Autistic Society, 2001.

Written by a relationship counsellor who has a partner with Asperger Syndrome, this book is a helpful guide for anyone who is in a relationship with a person with Asperger Syndrome.

The 'Aspires' website has useful information for partners: [www.aspires-relationships.com/](http://www.aspires-relationships.com/)

No. 2886 - TILLEY, R., You and Me Equals We, Rosemary Tilley, 2007.

This is a clearly written and presented book of value to anyone interested in understanding or making sense of their relationships – work, school, social, community. Rosemary presents 41 different relationship scenarios and offers Action Items for each. The book would be of value to almost anyone, and would be very helpful

to older teenagers and adults with Asperger Syndrome.

Copies of this book are available for purchase (price \$29.95) from the Autism Victoria office.

### Other Relationship Resources:

No. 2503 - ASTON, M., Aspergers in Love, Jessica Kingsley Publications, 2003. Chapters on women with Asperger Syndrome and the Asperger Syndrome parent.

No. 2880 - BENTLEY, K., Alone Together- Making an Asperger Marriage Last, Jessica Kingsley Publications, 2007

No. 2642 – HENAULT, I., Asperger Syndrome and Sexuality, Jessica Kingsley Publications, 2006.

No. 2613 - LAWSON, W., Sex, Sexuality and the Autism Spectrum, Jessica Kingsley Publications, 2005.

### References:

1. NEWPORT, J & M. Autism-Aspergers and Sexuality: Puberty and Beyond, Future Horizons, 2002. (# 2119). The authors have given permission for parents to copy up to five chapters from this book for use with their child.

2. SMITH MYLES, B., TRAUTMAN, M.L. & SCHELVAN, R R.L., The Hidden Curriculum, Autism Aspergers Publishing, 2002 (#2603)

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