

Sexual Behaviors in Children with Autism Aged 5–15 Years: Educational Challenges and Practical Implications – A Literature Review

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Abstract

This systematic review explores sexual behaviors among children aged 5–15 years diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), focusing on educational challenges and practical implications within the Albanian context. Sexual development is a natural part of growth, yet children with ASD often display atypical or misunderstood behaviors due to difficulties in social communication, sensory processing, and understanding social norms. Without tailored sexual education and professional guidance, these expressions may be misinterpreted as deviant or inappropriate, leading to stigmatization and exclusion. The review identifies five major themes from 24 peer-reviewed studies: (1) common and atypical sexual behaviors, (2) lack of tailored sexual education, (3) challenges faced by parents and teachers, (4) social and legal risks associated with inappropriate behaviors, and (5) the need for comprehensive, culturally sensitive interventions. This review emphasizes the urgent need for adapted educational curricula, teacher training, and family support systems in Albania. It proposes practical frameworks inspired by international models that can guide inclusive, evidence-based practice.

Keywords: *Autism, sexual behavior, sexual education, children, educational challenges, inclusive education, Albania.*

Introduction

Sexual development in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) represents an often overlooked and sensitive issue in educational and social contexts. These behaviors, though part of normal development, may differ significantly in form and frequency among children with ASD, largely due to challenges in communication, social understanding, and impulse regulation (Stokes & Kaur, 2005). Misinterpretation of such behaviors can lead to stigmatization, inappropriate disciplinary action, or even legal consequences for families and schools (Lee et al., 2016). In Albania, awareness and professional training on sexuality in autism remain limited. Teachers and parents often report a lack of adequate knowledge, structured programs, and professional support when addressing these issues (García-Villamizar & Hughes, 2007). The aim of this review is to synthesize existing international and regional evidence on sexual behaviors in children with ASD, identify educational challenges, and outline practical, context-relevant recommendations for Albania.

Research Question and Objectives

Research Question

What are the main patterns of sexual behaviors in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder aged 5–15, and how can educational systems in Albania effectively address the related challenges?

Objectives

1. To identify common and atypical patterns of sexual behavior in children with ASD.
2. To analyze existing literature on sexual education strategies and interventions for this group.
3. To explore challenges faced by parents, educators, and support staff.

To propose culturally sensitive educational strategies and policy recommendations for Albania.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a systematic literature review design, using a qualitative approach based on thematic analysis. This design was chosen to synthesize current knowledge and identify conceptual patterns across existing research.

Search Strategy and Data Sources

A comprehensive search was conducted from February to May 2025 using PubMed, ERIC, Google Scholar, PsycINFO, and ScienceDirect. The Rayyan platform was used to manage references and apply blinded inclusion/exclusion procedures to minimize bias.

Keywords

Search terms included: ‘Autism AND sexual behavior AND children’, ‘Autistic children AND sexuality education’, ‘Challenging sexual behaviors AND ASD’, ‘Inclusive education AND autism AND sexuality’, ‘Albania AND autism AND teacher training AND sexual behavior’.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed studies (2010–2024) focused on children aged 5–15 with ASD, addressing sexual behaviors, education, interventions, or challenges, published in English or Albanian. Exclusion criteria: adult-focused, unclear methodology, or biological-only puberty studies.

Sampling and Data Selection

From 243 initial studies, 59 were reviewed in full, and 24 met inclusion criteria. Sample size was determined by data saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following six steps: familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting.

STEP 1: Getting to know the data

After the final selection of the 24 articles that met the inclusion criteria, a full and careful reading of each paper was conducted to understand the context, objectives, methodology, and key findings. During this step, initial notes were made regarding recurring themes and relevant issues.

STEP 2: Creation of initial codes

A manual coding process was conducted, in which important text segments related to the topic of sexual behaviors in children with ASD were identified. These codes included elements such as: lack of sexual education, parental responses, teachers' approach, inappropriate behaviors, educational interventions, etc.

STEP 3: Research on topics

The codes were grouped into broader categories and analyzed to identify recurring themes representing clear conceptual patterns in the literature. Five main themes were identified that reflected the challenges and educational needs regarding sexual behaviors in children with autism.

STEP 4: Review of topics

The identified themes were reviewed in relation to the initial data to ensure that they were consistently supported by the literature and did not represent only isolated cases. This phase helped refine the definitions of the themes and exclude codes that did not contribute to the overall understanding of the issue.

STEP 5: Determining and naming topics

Each topic was named and clearly defined to represent the content it covered. The names were simple and concise, aiming to convey the essence of the problem presented by each topic.

STEP 6: The preparation of the report

In the final phase, the themes were integrated into the narrative analysis of the paper and illustrated with concrete examples from the reviewed articles. This approach allowed for a clear structuring of the findings and the extraction of practical implications and recommendations for education and intervention in the Albanian context.

Findings

Five major themes emerged from the analysis:

1. Common and atypical sexual behaviors – Behaviors range from normative curiosity to socially inappropriate actions such as public touching or undressing (Koller, 2000).
2. Lack of tailored sexual education – Few structured curricula exist to address sexuality in children with ASD, creating confusion for teachers and parents (Ballan, 2012).
3. Challenges for parents and teachers – Limited professional training and cultural taboos hinder effective responses (Mehzabin & Stokes, 2011).
4. Risks and social implications – Misinterpretation of sexual behaviors can lead to stigmatization, exclusion, and legal consequences (Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014).
5. Need for comprehensive intervention – Integrative programs combining parent training, visual learning, and ABA-based strategies show strong potential (Travers & Tincani, 2010).

Main topics identified

Based on the literature review and thematic analysis, the main findings regarding sexual behaviors in children with autism aged 5–15 years and the challenges associated with them are as follows:

TABLE 1. Main themes identified from the literature

Main Topic	Short description
Common and atypical sexual behaviors	Behaviors ranging from normal curiosity to inappropriate public expressions
Lack of tailored sexual education with ASD	Lack of programs designed for the specific needs of children
Challenges for parents and teachers	Unpreparedness and lack of resources for dealing with sexual behaviors
Risks and social implications	Isolation, legal misunderstandings, and harsh reactions to children's behavior
The need for comprehensive intervention	Development of policies, programs, and systemic support for children with ASD

- 1) **Common and atypical sexual behaviors.** Children with ASD show a wide range of sexual behaviors, including here a typical developmental sexual behavior such as curiosity and exploration, as well as atypical behaviors that

may appear inappropriate in public or social settings. Children with ASD display self-stimulatory sexual behaviors, body exposure, or inappropriate touching, often as a result of a lack of social awareness (Koller, 2000; Stokes & Kaur, 2005).

- 2) **Lack of tailored sexual education:** A large part of the literature highlights the absence of sexual education programs aimed for children with ASD, making it difficult for teachers and parents to provide adequate and understandable guidance for this group. For many children with ASD, a structured sexual education curriculum is missing. Personalized models have shown a positive effect in reducing risky behaviors (Ballan, 2012; Nichols & Blakeley-Smith, 2009).
- 3) **Challenges for parents and teaching staff:** Parents and teachers often feel unprepared and insecure about how to handle the sexual behaviors of children with autism, due to the lack of appropriate training and resources. Parents often feel unsure and unprepared, while teachers lack training to address sexual behaviors in children with ASD (Mehzabin & Stokes, 2011).
- 4) **The risks of inappropriate behaviors** bring social and legal dangers. Sexually inappropriate behaviors, in the absence of effective interventions, can cause social isolation for children, stigmatization, and even legal consequences for families and educational institutions. Misinterpreted behaviors can lead to severe disciplinary interventions or social isolation. Sexual victimization is also an increased risk (Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014).

The need for a comprehensive intervention: Literature suggests that only a comprehensive approach, which includes the development of tailored sexual education curricula, teacher training, and support for families, can help in the effective management of these challenges. Methods such as Social Stories, visual education, and ABA-based programs are effective (Travers & Tincani, 2010; Ruble & Dalrymple, 1993).

Albanian Context:

Existing studies and analyses are limited in Albania; however, international evidence suggests that the lack of training and social stigma are factors that are negatively affecting this context as well, emphasizing the need for local adaptation of good international practices.

In Albania

- Sexual education for children with ASD is not included in current educational policies and programs in Albania.
- Cultural stigmas encourage silence and avoidance of the topic.
- There is a notable lack in training for teaching assistants and educators.

- Families seek clear strategies and structured support.
- International models can be adapted for local use, e.g., the “Healthy Relationships, Sexuality and Autism” program (Autism Speaks, 2020).

Discussion

The findings confirm that sexual behaviors in children with ASD are often misunderstood due to lack of knowledge and cultural barriers. While Western studies offer valuable frameworks, the Albanian context lacks culturally adapted resources. In Albania, sexual education is not included in IEPs, professional training is minimal, and cultural stigma fosters silence. Families request clear, structured guidance. Addressing these issues requires collaboration among teachers, parents, and therapists, as well as national-level reforms. Programs such as ‘Healthy Relationships, Sexuality and Autism’ (Autism Speaks, 2020) can be adapted for Albanian schools.

Implications and Recommendations

1. Integrate sexuality education for children with ASD into national education strategies.
2. Provide continuous professional development for teachers, assistants, and psychologists.
3. Offer parent workshops to manage and discuss sexuality development positively.
4. Create visual, story-based, and ABA-informed materials tailored for ASD learners.
5. Encourage local empirical studies to generate context-specific data.
6. Address societal stigma through awareness and inclusion campaigns.

Conclusion

Sexual behaviors in children with autism are a natural part of development that require informed, structured, and compassionate responses. This systematic review highlights a significant gap in the Albanian education system regarding sexual education for children with ASD. Addressing this gap through culturally adapted, evidence-based programs will foster inclusion, reduce stigma, and improve quality of life for children and families.

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