

Adults with autism at higher risk of sexual victimization

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Adults with autism are at a higher risk of sexual victimization than adults without, due to lack of sex education, but with improved interventions that focus on sexual knowledge and skill building, the risk could be reduced, according to a recent study by York University researchers.

"Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) gain more of their sexual knowledge from external sources such as the internet and the television whereas social sources would include parents, teachers and peers," says Professor Jonathan Weiss in the Faculty of Health and the CIHR Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research.

The study, conducted by Weiss, and clinical developmental psychology PhD candidates Stephanie Brown-Lavoie and Michelle Viecili, found that the lack of sexual knowledge in [adults](#) with autism played a role in increasing the risk of [sexual victimization](#) – experiences of sexual coercion, unwanted sexual contact, attempted rape or rape.

The researchers used an online survey involving 95 adults with ASD and 117 without, ranging in age from 19 to 43.

Of the 95 participants with ASD, 78 per cent reported at least one occurrence of sexual victimization compared to 47.4 per cent of the 117 adults without ASD who participated in the study.

Brown-Lavoie points out that the study participants were asked about specific situations, not just a general "have you been sexually

victimized" question. "Some may not know that the experience they had is actually classified as sexual victimization. But if you give them a specific situation, like someone touching you inappropriately after you said no, they may be more able to identify that it has happened to them."

Viecili reports, "Although the participants cannot be considered representative of the entire population, I think we have a good picture of what rates could look like with a survey approach."

[Sexual Knowledge and Victimization in Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders](#), published in the September print edition of the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.

The researchers hope that the study results will also lead to more programs aimed at teaching [sex education](#) to individuals with disabilities, in hopes of decreasing the risk of victimization. Already the pair has taken their research back to the community, where they held a workshop for 60 clinicians and another one for parents.

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Provided by York University

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