

**FOSTERING ROMANTIC FUNCTIONING IN AUTISTIC ADOLESCENTS THROUGH  
TOM INTERVENTIONS**

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## **Dedication**

For Chris, my favourite person.

## **Abstract**

While autistic individuals report desiring romantic relationships, many report high levels of anxiety regarding the initiation of and engagement in romantic relationships, as well as difficulty understanding the characteristics of a healthy romantic relationship and having the skills to be involved in one. While neurotypical adolescents often develop romantic functioning through peer learning, social observation, and information provided by parents, autistic adolescents may not be given similar opportunities. As a type of social skill training, Theory of Mind based interventions may provide the type of social skills training capable of facilitating the development of social cognition, communication, and emotional skills through storytelling, role-play, narrative training, sociodramatic play, and deceptive experiences. This project is an educational resource for practitioners, teachers, and parents, and others who wish to support the development of romantic functioning of autistic individuals.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction and Overview**

Contrary to the widely held belief that autistic people are not interested in romantic relationships, they want to be involved in romantic relationships as much and as often as neurotypical individuals (Henault, 2005; Hellemans et al., 2007; Renty & Roeyers, 2006). Despite their interest in romantic relationships, autistic individuals tend to have a difficult time doing so (Dewinter et al., 2017; Hartmann et al., 2019). Establishing and maintaining healthy romantic relationships is important for lifelong well-being because successful romantic relationships can help improve self-concept and social integration (Meier & Allen, 2008; Montgomery, 2005) and reduce levels of anxiety and depression related to relationship conflict (Davila et al., 2017). Sexual health and romantic relationship education programs have been developed that aim to teach adolescents about healthy romantic relationships from a knowledgeable and trusted adult. These programs have been designed to develop critical thinking and perspective taking skills, the knowledge to identify characteristics of unhealthy relationships, evaluate their current and future relationship goals, develop conflict resolution skills, and prevent patterns of dating violence (Clinton-Sherrod et al., 2016). Despite the wealth of opportunities for neurotypical adolescents, autistic youth may not have many opportunities to learn to manage healthy romantic relationships. Because of prevailing assumptions that autistic people are uninterested in sexual and romantic interactions, autistic individuals may be limited in their opportunities for healthy sexual and romantic expression (Sala et al, 2020). Some educators have also reported that they do not have the training or resources to feel comfortable teaching autistic students about sexuality-related topics (Kalyva, 2010).

## **Significance**

One of the main reasons why autistic people tend to have difficulty with relationships is that social deficits are diagnostic characteristics of autism. Social deficits that are typical of autistic people include difficulties in the areas of social-emotional reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviours, and understanding relationships (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013). Typically, individuals begin learning to appropriately court potential partners, engage in meaningful conversations, and maintain an overall healthy relationship during adolescence through peer interactions, modelling from their families, and direct instruction from the education system. Learning to interpret and respond appropriately to a romantic partner may be difficult for autistic people because many autistic people have impaired Theory of Mind (ToM; Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). ToM is the ability to understand the perspectives of others and is a prerequisite skill for understanding the beliefs and emotions of others within romantic relationships (Bosacki & Astington, 2001). While neurotypical children usually develop ToM by the age of four, autistic individuals may not develop ToM until much later in adolescence or adulthood (Peterson & Wellman, 2019). When initiating and maintaining romantic relationships, ToM abilities such as perspective taking, empathy, executive functioning, and emotional regulation become extremely important (Dodell-Feder et al., 2015; Ramezani et al., 2020).

Sexual and relationship-oriented education for autistic adolescents can be beneficial as they transition into adulthood (Solomon et al., 2019). Autistic adolescents need to learn to self-advocate and understand boundaries with others. Effective self-advocacy training must include direct instruction on relationship skills, such as understanding the social standards for sexual

behaviour and learning to support partners' understanding of sensory, communication, or other needs (Sullivan & Caterino, 2008).

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this project is two-fold. First, this project will describe the necessity of fostering romantic functioning in autistic people, and secondly, it will equip parents, teachers, and mental health professionals with a resource and sense of agency to do so through ToM development.

Like other ToM training interventions (Lecheler et al., 2020), this project aims to develop cognitive, linguistic, and emotional skills by improving social cognition and communication through storytelling, role-play, narrative training, sociodramatic play, and deceptive experiences (Hofmann et al., 2016). Unlike other interventions, this project aims to develop these skills in the context of romantic competences, and centres itself in building skills that promote healthy romantic relationships. As diverse expressions of sexual and gender identity are more prevalent in the autism community (Bush et al., 2020; Byers et al., 2013; George & Stokes, 2018; Pecora et al., 2020), this modular resource aims to be informative and inclusive.

The aim of this project is not to cover information related to sexual health (e.g., information relating to puberty and safe sexual practices). While accurate information about sexual health is important, the intention of this project is to attend to the emotional aspects of romantic relationships, a topic that has been mostly overlooked in the literature (Dekker et al., 2017).

## **Statement of Personal Interest**

The impetus for developing a resource that fosters romantic functioning stems from my previous experiences working with autistic adolescents as a social skills program facilitator. I

engaged with many dynamic and lively adolescents who all had their own wisdom, passions, and ambitions. Like most adolescents, they often came into the program feeling frustrated by their peers, including those who were potential romantic interests. As I searched for resources that explored the complexities of romantic relationships, I found there was a gap in what was available. The resources tended to focus on safety, puberty, and sexual relations, and not on the emotional aspects of romantic relationships. I also felt that the misconception that autistic individuals are not interested in romantic relationships continued to prevail among many people, despite the evidence to the contrary found within the scholarship on the topic. It is important to me that autistic adolescents who are interested in pursuing romantic relationships have opportunities to develop the competencies (e.g., ToM) they need to ensure that those relationships are healthy and functional. Overall, the congruency between evidence in the literature and my own personal experiences led me to want to create an informative and easy-to-use resource to equip practitioners with the tools necessary to help autistic adolescents develop the social competencies necessary for healthy romantic relationships.

### **Definition of Terms**

**adolescence:** Adolescence is the age period between childhood and adulthood, typically spanning from ages 12 to 25. This period is the maturation period of the prefrontal cortex (Caballero, Granberg & Tseng, 2016).

**autism:** Autism is a neurological condition that is marked by differences in social communication and repetitive behaviours, including patterns of behaviour, interests, and activities (APA, 2013). While autism spectrum disorder is the official diagnosis outlined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (APA, 2013), autistic advocates call for the depathologizing of autism, including the removal of the word

‘disorder’ (Bury et al., 2020). Advocates within the autism community have argued that autistic people are not disordered or deficient; instead, autism is a characteristic of being human with many benefits and strengths for the individual and society at large. Autism advocates also encourage identity-first language (autistic person) rather than person-first language (person with autism; Dunn & Andrews, 2015; Gernsbacher, 2017). Person-first language, and its inconsistent use for neurotypical individuals (person with typical development), may inadvertently perpetuate that disability is ‘bad’ and should be separated from the individual (Andrews et al., 2019).<sup>1</sup>

**gender diversity:** Gender diversity is an umbrella term used to encompass all gender identities, including cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary identities.

**intellectual and/or developmental disabilities:** Intellectual and/or developmental disabilities is defined as having sub-average general intellectual functioning, accompanied by significant limitations in adaptive functioning (APA, 2013). Autism frequently co-occurs in individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities (28%-40%; Bryson et al., 2008).

**neurotypicality:** Neurotypicality is a term used to describe individuals who experience brain development and functionality that is consistent with the societal norm. While autistic people are neurologically divergent, approaches to studying and observing autistic social behaviours are often framed by neurotypical definitions of being social (Heasman & Gillespie, 2019).

**romantic conceptualization:** Romantic conceptualization is how one understands the components of romantic relationships (Heifetz et al., 2020), such as affiliation, intimacy, and commitment (Connolly et al., 1999).

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<sup>1</sup> Given the differing positions in the literature, this document uses both identity-first and person-first language.

**romantic functioning:** Romantic functioning is conceptualized as (a) desire for a romantic relationship, (b) knowledge of non-familial intimacy, and (c) behaviour within intimate relationships (Stokes et al., 2007).

**romantic relationships:** Romantic relationships are defined as mutually voluntary, ongoing interactions, characterized by emotional intensity beyond those of non-romantic relationships (Collins, 2003). For this paper, romantic relationships will be identified as monogamous relationships; however, it is understood that many individuals feel happy and fulfilled in polyamorous relationships.

**sexual health:** Sexual health refers to the physical, mental, and social aspects of intimate relationships and sexual activity (Linberg etl., 2020). Education regarding sexual health can provide individuals with skills and knowledge to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancy and explore personal boundaries and relationships.

**sexual diversity:** Sexual diversity is an umbrella term used to encompass all sexual orientations, including, but not limited to, heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, pansexuality, and asexuality.

**social functioning:** Social functioning is conceptualized as the ways people interact with their social environments. Social functioning can be measured by the individual's ability to fulfill different roles in their life, including those within work, family, and in social activities (Bosc, 2020). It can also include the quality of their social relationships and their knowledge about how social relationships are initiated, sustained, and concluded (Stokes et al., 2007).

**social skills programming:** Social skills programming refers to psychological and educational interventions designed to improve social interactions and interpersonal relationships.

**victimization:** Victimization refers to the aversive experience of having been treated cruelly. For this project, victimization specifically refers to inappropriate sexual advances, such as sexual assault, harassment, and other acts of domestic violence.

## **Chapter Two: Research Methodology**

This chapter describes the research process implemented in gathering information to create this project and develop the modular resource (Appendix A). The research process is described, including the list of search engines and searched terms. This chapter also includes a statement of ethical conduct.

### **Research Process**

A variety of databases were searched using the University of Lethbridge online library catalogues and Google Scholar. The articles that were included were selected based on the relevance to the topic, recency of publication, and quality of the research design. Articles were considered relevant to the project if they were captured within the following search terms: *autism spectrum disorder, adolescents with autism spectrum disorder, romantic relationships and autism spectrum disorder, theory of mind, theory of mind training, theory of mind and romantic relationships*. As much as possible, recent publications (less than five years old) were privileged over older articles. Evaluation of the quality of articles was based on definitions of quality research by Mårtensson et al. (2016) as being: (a) credible, meaning the research is coherent and transparent; (b) contributory, meaning it is original, relevant, and generalizable; (c) communicable, meaning it is accessible; and (d) conforming, meaning it done ethically and sustainably.

### **Creation of the Guide**

This guide was intended to provide parents, educators, and mental health professionals with a literature review about the romantic functioning of autistic individuals. The modular

resource was created based on the findings from the literature review and my training for and experiences of, facilitating social skills programming to adolescents.

### **Statement of Ethical Conduct**

This project did not require human subjects, therefore submission for ethics approval was not required. All conclusions and interpretations were informed by the literature review and all sources were cited. As the author, I adhered to the writing and publication requirements outlined in the 7th edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA, 2020).

### Chapter Three: Review of the Literature

While the term “autism” was first used by Eugen Bleuler (1911) to describe an inclination of patients with schizophrenia tendency to avoid unpleasant realities (Bleuler, 1911, as cited in Evans, 2013), it was Kanner (1943) and Asperger (1944), who first used the term in its modern contexts when, on opposite sides of the world during a world war, they simultaneously published descriptions of a small number of children with peculiar behaviours and interests. Kanner and Asperger described the children’s indifference to surroundings, lack of affection, and mania for unusual stimuli, such as spinning objects and observable self-interest. Kanner described that some of the children had exceptionally advanced vocabulary but were unable to correctly refer to themselves in conversation. While some aspects of their conceptions of autism were different, the traits they described helped to develop the first diagnostic criteria for autism, which was included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Second Edition* (DSM-2; APA, 1968).

According to the fifth and current edition of the DSM, autism spectrum disorder is marked by two criteria: (a) persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction that may manifest as challenges in social-emotional reciprocity and nonverbal communicative behaviours, that may, consequently interfere with understanding, developing, and maintaining social relationships and (b) restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities (APA, 2013). A diagnosis requires the presence of at least two of the following four characteristics: (a) stereotyped/repetitive motor movements, speech and/or use of objects; (b) insistence on sameness and anxiety around change, rigidity to specific routines, or ritualistic patterns of speech or nonverbal behavior; (c) restrictions due to being engrossed by their interests, which are abnormal in intensity or focus; and (d) hyperactivity or hypoactivity in their

relationship with sensory input (APA, 2013). Hyperreactivity is characterized as an aversive response to stimuli, such as sounds or texture, while hyporeactivity is an indifference to sensory stimuli or a tendency to seek sensations. Sensory reactivity symptoms are reported in around 81% of autistic individuals (Tavassoli et al., 2016). The severity of autism is marked by levels one through three, with level one requiring support, level two requiring substantial support, and level three requiring very substantial support.

In Canada, about 1 in 66 children are diagnosed with autism (Ofner et al., 2018), and males are diagnosed four times more often than females (APA, 2013). Most autistic individuals receive their diagnosis before the age of 12 (90%; Ofner et al., 2018); however, this can vary based on presentation and comorbid diagnoses. Intellectual and language disabilities frequently present in individuals with autism (28%-40%; Bryson et al., 2008; Heifetz et al., 2020), which may impact adaptive behaviours expressed in conceptual, social, and practical skills (Vivanti et al., 2013; Sullivan, 2018).

### **Autism and Social Functioning**

The differences in social communication and interaction in autistic people can be described by four components (Pallathra et al., 2018): social motivation (Chevallier et al., 2012; Factor et al., 2016), social anxiety (Spain et al., 2018), social cognition (Kennedy & Adolphs, 2012) and social skills (Reichow et al., 2013). Autistic individuals tend to be less socially motivated than neurotypical peers (Carré et al., 2015) and experience more social anxiety (Bishop-Fitzpatrick et al., 2015). Deficits in social cognition and social skills in autistic individuals has also been well documented (Golan et al., 2006; Mathersul et al., 2013, Bishop-Fitzpatrick et al., 2015). For example, individuals with autism tend to find facial recognition

difficult (Tanaka et al., 2012), as well as initiating and maintaining friendships and romantic relationships (Stokes et al., 2007; Sedgewick & Pellicano, 2020).

Another necessary aspect of effective social functioning is empathy (De Waal, 2008; Riess, 2017). Empathy refers to the understanding of others' emotions based on one's own affective experiences (Stroth et al., 2019). Empathy can be divided into two separate skills: cognitive empathy, which is being able to make sense of the mental states of others, and emotional empathy, which is the ability to attune emotionally to the mood of others (Baron-Cohen, 2000; De Waal, 2008, Lawrence et al., 2004). While challenges with empathy skills are often considered to be a hallmark of autism (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004), autistic individuals tend to only find social cognitive empathy difficult (Harmsen, 2019).

Influences in childhood, such as attachments with parents (Keenan et al., 2016; Sivaratnam et al., 2018), the parenting approach used by caregivers, and sibling relationships (Ben-Itzhak et al., 2019; Laghi et al., 2020) can all affect the social functioning capacities of individuals with autism (Arranz et al., 2002; Szumski et al., 2017). During adolescents, positive friendships can improve self-esteem, the ability to detect trustworthiness, and social anxiety (Cresswell et al., 2019). Gender can also be a discriminatory factor in social functioning in autistic people. While gender differences in the presentation of autism are minimal with young children (Matheis et al., 2018), those differences become apparent in adolescence (Stroth et al., 2019; Dean et al., 2017; McVey et al., 2017; Brown et al., 2020; Eckerd, 2020). Autistic adolescent males tend to display more externalized, repetitive behaviors, such as aggression and hyperactivity, and spend more time in solitude than similarly aged peers (APA, 2013; Attar-Schwartz et al., 2017; Dean et al., 2017; Kreiser & White, 2014; McVey et al., 2017). Autistic adolescent females tend to display more internalized behaviors, such as symptoms of anxiety and

depression, and exhibit more social motivation than autistic males (Attar-Schwartz et al., 2017; Kreiser & White, 2014; McVey et al., 2017; Mandy et al., 2011; Sedgewick et al., 2016; Solomon et al., 2011). Autistic female adolescents also tend to *camouflage* social behaviors by concealing repetitive behaviours, mimicking the social behavior of others, and staying in proximity to peers (Bargiela et al., 2016; Dean et al., 2017; Eckerd, 2020; Milner et al., 2019, Rynkiewis et al., 2016).

### **Autism and Education**

Despite the development of inclusive education models across Canada to meet the needs of diverse learning differences, including differences related to autism (McCrimmon, 2015), autistic students tend to have a difficult time being successful in school. In Alberta, *Action in Inclusion*, an inclusive educational policy, was implemented in 2010 to develop a system that ensures that all students have equitable opportunities to be included in mainstream learning environments. The aim of inclusive educational models is to foster social skills and positive life outcomes for students with disabilities (Camargo et al., 2015) by providing resources and additional supports to teachers and making curriculum and technology more accessible for students of all abilities (Loreman, 2013). Examples of supports for students with disabilities include individualized education plans, extended test time, modified curriculum, adaptive technology, and support from educational assistants (Berrigan et al., 2020). An increasing number of autistic individuals are enrolling in post-secondary institutions (Volkmar et al., 2017), but they struggle more than neurotypical peers in terms of their academic and mental well-being (Jackson et al., 2017). As the needs of autistic students vary widely, many of the academic accommodations offered by post-secondary institutions are not helpful (Brown et al., 2014).

Fortunately, several institutions are beginning to implement autism-based services and social networking opportunities to better serve their students (Jackson et al., 2017).

### **Autism and Work**

Individuals with autism are underrepresented in the workforce (Bury et al., 2020; Parks, 2006). The employment rate of autistic individuals is around 24% in Canada, which is lower than the general population (79%; Turcotte, 2014; Khayatzadeh-Mahani et al., 2020), and individuals with other disabilities, including learning and intellectual disabilities (49%; Roux et al., 2015; Zwicker et al., 2017). Barriers preventing individuals with disabilities from working include: (1) co-occurring health conditions, (2) lack of training, (3) fewer available work opportunities, and (4) a fear of losing current supports (Berrigan et al., 2020). When seeking employment, people with autism may also have difficulty with unexpected changes in routine, social contact with others, and effective time management (Van Hees et al., 2015). However, employer and workplace related issues can also prevent autistic individuals from working (Zwicker et al., 2017). Some employers avoid hiring autistic individuals because they fear the new employee will increase supervision costs and decrease productivity (Solomon, 2020). Despite these misconceptions, many workplaces have reported that individuals with autism offer significant contributions to the workplace, including a tendency for detail-orientated thinking and analytic insights (Ortiz, 2020; Scott et al., 2017). For those willing to hire autistic employees, the financial and social benefits of hiring autistic individuals often outweigh the costs (Solomon, 2020).

### **Autism and Therapeutic Interventions**

Given the social challenges children and adolescents with autism face, interventions and programs have been designed to help develop social functioning skills (Alateeqi & Janjua, 2019; McVery et al., 2017; Parsons et al., 2017; Szumski et al., 2017; Tsung et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2020). Techniques that are implemented in social skill interventions include group-based social skills learning (Ashman et al., 2017; Chester et al., 2019), video modelling (Alzyoudi et al., 2015; McCoy & Hermansen, 2007), and social stories (Karal & Wolfe, 2018; Pane et al., 2015). Group-based social skills interventions typically rely on methods of cognitive behavioral therapy, and utilize behavioral modelling, role-play activities, and individualized feedback (Tsung et al., 2020). Video modelling utilizes social learning theory (Alzoudi et al., 2015) to demonstrate social behaviors, including play and conversations, by using a form of multimedia that is engaging and relevant (Cardon et al., 2019). Social stories may help people to improve social understanding by providing a narrative about social interactions that include descriptive, perspective, affirmative, and cooperative sentences (Golzari et al., 2015).

Several therapies have been adapted to fit the specific needs of autistic individuals, with particular focus on mental health conditions, such as anxiety, which often presents comorbidly with autism (Kuhlthau et al., 2017). Cognitive behavior therapy, which focuses on specific treatment strategies around thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (David et al., 2018) has shown clinical effectiveness for symptoms of depression and anxiety in adults (Cooper et al., 2018; Spain et al., 2018) and children (Sukhodolsky et al., 2013; Sukhodolsky, 2019) with autism. Therapeutic interventions may be better suited for autistic people if they include structured and concrete approaches to therapy and more visual and written materials (Cooper et al., 2018). Other effective therapies for autistic individuals include art therapy, which can improve imagination and abstract thinking (Martin, 2009; Schweizer et al., 2020), and animal-assisted

therapies (equine, canine) which can improve social and executive functioning (Borgi et al., 2015).

### **Theory of Mind**

Alongside the knowledge of social rules and behavioural norms, ToM—the awareness of the thoughts, beliefs, and desires of other people—is regarded as a form of social cognition that is responsible for competent social behaviour (Szumski et al., 2017). While the concept of understanding others' minds had been explored by philosophers for centuries (Wellman, 2017), primatologists Premack and Woodruff (1978) were the first to define and measure it in their seminal paper (“Does the Chimpanzee Have a Theory of Mind?”). In their research, the authors showed chimpanzees several videos of human participants struggling with tasks, such as escaping from a cage and accessing food that was difficult to reach. Then, the chimpanzees were shown photographs, one of which showed the task being successfully completed by the human participant, such as using a stick to access food or using a key to escape from the cage. The chimpanzee was able to correctly associate the photograph of the task being completed with the video, which indicated that the chimpanzee was able to recognize the problem, understand the human participant's purpose, and chose a solution compatible with the problem; in other words, the chimpanzee did have ToM capabilities. Following the publication of Premack and Woodruff's work, research of ToM expanded into exploring human cognitive development (Meinhardt-Injac et al., 2020), the evolutionary processes of social cognition (Brüne & Brüne-Cohrs, 2006), and how ToM abilities can differ in individuals with neurodivergence and mental health challenges (Özbaran et al., 2018; Sharp et al., 2011).

Impairments in ToM abilities have been identified in many autistic individuals (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Livingston et al., 2018). Baron-Cohen et al. (1985) first posited the association

between ToM and autism in their seminal paper “Does the Autistic Child Have Theory of Mind?” The authors assessed ToM abilities in neurotypical children, children with Down’s syndrome (intellectual impairment), and children with autism using a standard false belief task called the Sally-Anne test. False belief tasks measure the ability to recognize that another person can hold an inaccurate belief (Hofmann et al., 2016). The Sally-Anne test is a play scenario in which participants are shown two characters (dolls, named Sally and Anne) who are given information about where an object (a marble) is. The character Sally is then removed from the play scenario, and the character Anne moves the object. The participant is questioned about where they believe Sally would think the marble is on her return to the play scenario. Most of the neurotypical children were able to accurately answer the question (85%), as well as most of the children with Down’s syndrome (86%). The children with autism, however, mostly failed the false belief task (only 20% passed). The authors concluded from the results that autism is the result of an impairment in ToM (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985), which was instrumental in shifting the conceptualization of autism as an intellectual impairment to an impairment in social cognition. Since this research was conducted, ToM research with the autism population has been abundant (Brewer et al., 2017).

In autistic people, implications in ToM can present as challenges in executive functioning, emotional regulation, and empathy. Executive functioning skills are a set of cognitive constructs that involve goal-oriented, higher-level thoughts that are necessary for understanding the mental states of others (Johnston et al., 2019; Korucu et al., 2016). Executive functioning skills, such as working memory, attention, planning, self-monitoring, inhibition, and mental flexibility, can be implicated in social interactions (Singh & Young, 2020). In social situations, autistic individuals are less likely to be able to use executive functioning skills to

describe the reasoning behind their social decisions and are less likely to make use of contextual factors, such as the other person's intentions (Buon et al., 2012; Gleichgerrcht et al., 2012; Moran et al., 2011; Shulman et al., 2011).

Emotional awareness and regulation skills are important aspects of ToM abilities (Adegboye et al., 2017; Baurain & Nader-Grosbois, 2012). Emotional regulation is defined as the process of inhibiting, maintaining, or modulating the occurrence, form, intensity, and duration of emotional states (Baurain & Nader-Grosbois, 2012). Individuals who possess more developed ToM abilities tend to be better at identifying their own emotional expression and inhibiting impulsive, emotional reactions (Meyebovsky et al., 2019).

Empathy and ToM utilize similar skills (inferencing, perspective taking) which is why the terms are often used interchangeably (Gallant et al., 2020; Ginsburg et al., 2003; Ramezani et al., 2020). The commonly used measurement of ToM abilities, the Reading the Mind in the Eyes test (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001), positively correlates with empathy measurements (Vellante et al., 2013). Empathy, however, refers to the capacity to share social emotions, while ToM refers to the capacity to understand social emotions, as well as the social reasoning of others (Artinger et al., 2014; Ramezani et al., 2020). From a neurological perspective, empathy occurs in brain regions that mediate emotional experiences, such as the amygdala and insula (Dvash & Shamay-Tsoory, 2014). The networks that drive ToM involve higher-level brain areas, including the medial prefrontal cortex, superior temporal sulcus, and temporal poles (Kirkovski et al., 2016).

### **Romantic Functioning**

Healthy and satisfying romantic relationships are characterized by happiness, mutual respect, compromise, and individuality shared between partners (Cahill et al., 2020; Roberson et al., 2018). Individuals who are in committed, healthy, and satisfying relationships are less likely to

be anxious and depressed and have a better sense of self-worth and social integration, than individuals who are not in healthy relationships (Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017; Cahill et al., 2020; Gottman & Gottman, 2017; Meier & Allen, 2008; Montgomery, 2005; Roberson et al., 2018). Conversely, unhealthy romantic relationships are characterized by control, hostility, dishonesty, dependence, and potential for violence (Florsheim & Moore, 2008). Engaging in unhealthy romantic relationships can have negative impacts on wellbeing by compromising mental, emotional, and physical health and increasing the risk of anxiety and mood disorders, substance abuse disorders, and suicidal ideation (Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017; Davila et al., 2017; Monteoliva et al., 2016; Roberson et al., 2018).

### **Development of Typical Romantic Functioning**

Romantic functioning typically begins to develop during adolescence, when individuals begin to explore the complexities of non-familial relationships. The typical trajectory of social involvement for adolescents begins with same-sex peers in early adolescence, with mixed-sex groups in middle adolescence, and then with dyadic romantic relationships in late adolescence (Connolly et al., 2004). Learning to understand and get along with others during childhood is important for lifelong romantic success because social functioning of adolescents during this time is the most significant predictor of healthy romantic functioning (Allen et al., 2019; Stokes et al., 2007). Adolescents who learn to navigate relationships during adolescence are more likely to enter adulthood feeling competent and confident about romantic relationships and are more likely to engage in positive partnerships (Allen et al., 2019; Forenza et al., 2017).

While engaging in romantic relationships during adolescence is developmentally normal (Christopher et al., 2016; Forenza et al., 2017), relationships during adolescence tend to be marked by instability and fluidity (Allen et al., 2019). While there are some benefits to engaging

in relationships during adolescence (Mirsu-Paun & Oliver, 2017), engaging in unhealthy romantic relationships during adolescence increases the risk of depression and anxiety (Steinberg & Davila, 2008), difficulty concentrating, poor attendance, and a feeling of not being safe at school (Lacoe, 2016).

Adolescents who engage in romantic relationships without developing romantic functioning are especially vulnerable to problematic dating behaviours, including dating violence (Foshee et al., 2013). Besides the physical risk to safety, dating violence is also associated with substance abuse, early onset of sexual activity, and poor body image (Foshee, et al., 2013). Adolescents experiencing dating violence may isolate out of fear or self-preservation and may not realize that their relationship is problematic (Kulkarni et al., 2019). Additionally, victims of dating violence during adolescence are more likely to experience domestic abuse during adulthood and often find it challenging to develop trust, security, and intimacy with long-term partners (Foshee et al., 2013).

Parents and responsible adults play important roles in helping autistic adolescents to develop romantic functioning skills. The source of information about relationships available to adolescents (siblings, classmates, peers), but those sources of information may not always be accurate or helpful (Stokes et al., 2007). Adolescents who have open and rational conversations with their caregivers about romantic relationships tend to have more positive values and attitudes about healthy relationships (Masarik et al., 2014). Caregivers can also foster romantic functioning by emphasizing acceptance, caring, involvement, and proper supervision, rather than strict control over their adolescents (Chen et al., 2020).

### **Autism and Romantic Functioning**

While research from the 1990s dismantled the previously held perception that autistic individuals are asexual by nature and uninterested in engaging in romantic relationships (Ousley & Mesibov, 1991; Konstantareas & Lunksy, 1997), the frequency with which autistic individuals engage in romantic relationships is much lower than what would be expected (Dewinter et al., 2017; Hancock et al., 2020; Hartmann et al., 2019; Hellemans et al., 2007; Renty & Roeyers, 2006). Several factors may contribute to the reduced rate of romantic relationship engagement in autistic individuals, such as reduced employment and educational engagement (Hancock et al., 2020), as romantic relationships between neurotypical individuals are often initiated within the workplace and educational institutions (Parks, 2006). However, romantic relationship anxiety is likely the largest contributing factor to relationship avoidance (Byers et al., 2013; Cheak-Zamora et al., 2019; Hancock et al., 2017; Hancock et al., 2020). In neurotypical individuals, anxiety about romantic relationships predicts likelihood of dating status (Glickman & Greca, 2004). Romantic relationship anxiety typically stems from uncertainty about relationships structures and expectations (Sala et al., 2020). In general, autistic individuals report higher levels of social anxiety than neurotypical individuals (Kuusikko et al., 2008), and this becomes especially true when meeting and interacting with potential romantic partners for the first time (Hancock et al., 2020).

Autistic individuals would benefit from education that includes practicing neurotypical sociosexual norms, normalizes differences (e.g., in identities and experiences of sexuality), addresses disability-relevant sensory and communication needs, and is offered throughout young adulthood (Barnett & Maticka-Tyndale, 2015). Teaching ToM within the contexts of education of sexual and romantic relationships can provide autistic adolescents with insight into these

recommendations so that they can have healthy and satisfying romantic relationships (Bedows & Brooks, 2015).

As group-based social skill programs are effective in improving ToM processes, including developing the awareness of others' thoughts, beliefs, and motivations, facilitating a program with the intention of improving romantic functioning will help autistic adolescents learn the skills needed to engage in healthy romantic relationships. Improving romantic functioning will also help adolescents feel less uncertain about the social rules and expectations associated with dating, and therefore feel less anxiety about romantic interactions. By increasing the likelihood of healthy romantic relationships in autistic people, they become more likely to experience the benefits of them.

## **Chapter Four: Discussion**

This chapter describes the intentions of this project and the attached resource (Appendix A). The intended population is also described, as well as the expected strengths and limitations of this project.

### **Overview of the Resource**

The resource included in this project was designed to provide activities and discussion prompts for practitioners who work with autistic adolescents; the goal is to support those practitioners in their efforts to foster healthy and evidence-based attitudes and behaviours related to romantic functioning. The resource is divided into three modules: 1) beginning a romantic relationship, 2) being in a romantic relationship, and 3) ending a romantic relationship. Each module is split into lessons that aim to enhance romantic functioning through interpersonal, executive functioning, communication, and perspective-taking skills. Each module provides introduction questions to prime the adolescents with the topic and begin to expand their knowledge around each step of a romantic relationship.

The structure of each activity includes an introduction statement, instructions for the activity, and closing group discussion topics. The introduction statement is meant to act as a guidepost for introducing the participants to the intention of the activity and aims to act as a discussion starter. The instructions for the activity include a list of required materials and a step-by-step outline of how to implement the activity. Each activity in the modules is meant to take around thirty minutes to complete, but the time may vary depending on the ages of the adolescents, the size of the group, and the depth of discussions. The closing discussion topics are meant to help the participants integrate the activity and provide closure for the lesson. The topics provided can be adapted based on the group's needs and stages of development.

A brief synopsis of each lesson is provided for the facilitator, which outlines the specific skill addressed by the activity, its relevance to autism and romantic functioning, and the evidence-based rationale for the activity. Appendix B concisely aligns the literature review with the content and modalities of the module resource.

### **Target Population**

The activities are meant to be used within group settings, such as peer support groups or social skills programming. This project was designed for use with adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 who are autistic. However, the lessons and activities provided in this project could be adapted to fit the needs of any group-based programming for adolescents of various diagnoses and developmental needs. For example, the modules could be used with older aged individuals by adapting the content within the activity to be more in-depth with information regarding sexual health and other mature themes, such as the influence of alcohol and drug use on romantic relationships. Conversely, the modules could be adapted to fit a younger age range by removing activities that are not developmentally appropriate.

### **Expected Outcomes and Strengths**

The literature review is expected to be an informative reference for parents, educators, and mental health professionals in understanding the romantic functioning of autistic individuals. The literature review included findings from primary sources and secondary sources, which created a balance of empirical evidence with new ways of linking information together to explain the findings.

The attached modular resource is meant to act as a guide in fostering romantic functioning through group-based social skills programming in an engaging way that is

straightforward to facilitate. Adolescents who work through the modules with a facilitator may learn skills to better equip themselves for the complexities of romantic relationships, so they feel more confident and prepared to engage in a romantic relationship if they wish.

## **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this project. First, a significant limitation of this project is that it has not been empirically evaluated and is driven theoretically. As the modules have not been yet implemented, actual success in increasing romantic functioning in autistic adolescent will be determined through its implementation. While the information provided in the literature review reflects evidence-based practice, this information has not been previously interpreted for practical application. Furthermore, the articles that were selected and highlighted in this project may reflect my own personal biases pertaining to the significance and relevance of those articles.

This project is also limited in its cultural application. This project is based on a perspective of dating culture commonly associated with Eurocentric, North American social norms. Dating norms vary widely based on ethnic and cultural origins (Almond, Rodriguez-Vongsavanh, & Taylor, 2021; Pepping et al., 2017; Rochadiat, Tong, & Novak, 2018; Yum, 2004). The social skills addressed in this project to develop romantic functioning may need to be adapted to be meaningfully applied to adolescents from other cultures.

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Appendix A:

# **DATING: A GUIDE FOR AUTISTIC ADOLESCENTS**

**A 3-MODULE RESOURCE DEVELOPED FOR  
GROUP-BASED SOCIAL SKILLS PROGRAMS**



# MODULE GUIDE

## Using the Modules:

- 1) Introduce participants to each module using the Group Discussion Questions
- 2) Introduce the concept of each lesson
- 3) Complete the lesson and activity as instructed
- 4) Finish the lesson with the group discussion questions provided

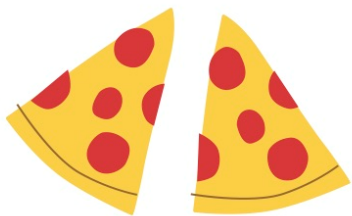
**Module 1:** Beginning a Romantic Relationship

**Module 2:** Being in a Romantic Relationship

**Module 3:** Ending a Romantic Relationship

*Each activity takes about 30 minutes, but that may vary depending on group size, age of youth, and the depth of discussions.*

**Note to the Chef:** The use of inclusive and LGBTQ-affirming language should be encouraged in use of these modules







## Key Words

**Chef:** Facilitator of the Group

**Diners:** Group Members

**Recipe:** Materials and Preparation Required for Activity

-  : Activity involves developing perspective taking skills
-  : Activity involves developing executive functioning skills
-  : Activity involves developing intrapersonal skills
-  : Activity involves developing conversation skills

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page	Purpose	Skill	Time (min) Prep/Activity	Considerations
Module 1: Starting A Romantic Relationship	5	Considering Levels of Intimacy		10/30	Printouts & pens required
	7	Understanding Dating Slang		45/30	Access to computer and internet required
	8	Evaluating Emotional Availability		10/30	Printout & pens required
	10	Practice Non-Literal Communication		0/30	Discussion based activity
	11	Visualizing Life Aspirations		10/30	Art materials, magazines required
	12	Setting Relationship Green and Red Flags		10/30	Signs, large room required
	13	Detecting and Conducting Flirting		45/30	Computer and internet access required
	14	Managing Rejecting and Rejection		10/30	Drama Props required
	15	Managing Worse Case Scenarios		10/30	Art materials and drama Props required
	18	Detecting and Conducting Non-Verbal Communication		10/30	Signs, obstacle course materials required
	19	Practice Introducing Yourself		10/30	Pens & Printout Required
	21	Planning for the Unexpected		10/30	Printout of scenarios and envelope required.
	22	Practicing Conversation Skills		10/30	Props and prizes required
	25	Learning to Trust Your Gut		10/30	Break-up scenarios written on cue cards required
	Module 2: Being in a Romantic Relationship	37	Practice Thinking Through Impulses		10/30
5		Activity 1: Circles of Intimacy			
7		Activity 2: Get with the Lingo			
Module 3: Ending a Romantic Relationship	8	Activity 3: Is this Available?			
	10	Activity 4: Is it True?			
	11	Activity 5: Your Vision			
	12	Activity 6: Deal or Dealbreaker			
	13	Activity 7: Flirting			
	14	Activity 8: Thanks, but No Thanks			
	15	Activity 9: Worst Date Ever			
	18	Activity 10: Share-Ades			
	19	Activity 11: My Spiel			
	21	Activity 12: Disaster Game Plan			
	22	Activity 13: Well, That's Debatable			
	25	Activity 14: When to Break-Up			
	37	Activity 15: A Dish Best Served Cold			

# MODULE ONE

## STARTING A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP INTRODUCTION QUESTIONS

### **What are some important aspects of a romantic relationship?**

*Such as:* Commitment, Best Friendship, your partner must always respect your personal boundaries, your parents should always know you are in a romantic relationship

### **What are boundaries?**

*Such as:* Behaviours and experiences that you do not want to engage in because they make you feel unsafe or very uncomfortable. For example, not wanting to kiss or have sex

### **What are some reasons that others may have different boundaries than you?**

*Such as:* Differences in sensory sensitivities, differences in family rules, religion, and values

### **What are some skills involved in being in a romantic relationship?**

*Such as:* Emotional awareness and regulation, being a supportive person to your partner, showing kindness, being flexible

### **What are some reasons that someone may think right now is not a good time for them to be in a romantic relationship?**

*Such as:* Currently experiencing stress and/or emotional distress that may make it difficult to be a supportive partner to someone, taking time for self-care

### **When someone says, 'What is your type'? - what does that mean?**

*Such as:* Sexual orientation, physical attributes you are attracted to (brown hair, blue eyes), characteristics you are attracted to (sporty, kind)

### **What are some examples of times that you may be attracted to someone, but you should not date them?**

*Such as:* Age (consent laws in Alberta state that youth 12 years and younger cannot consent to sexual activities, youth ages 13 to 14 can only consent to individuals within 2 years of age, and youth ages 15 to 16 can only consent to individuals within 5 years of age), minors cannot consent to individuals who are in an authoritative position (e.g. tutor, boss, supervisor), individuals who do not align with your values or boundaries

### **What are some rules about dating that will keep us safe?**

*Such as:* Your parents should always know where you are going, you should never go anywhere 'secret'

## ACTIVITY ONE:



# CIRCLES OF INTIMACY



*Consider Levels of Intimacy in Various Personal Relationships*

Time to Prepare: 10 minutes

**Recipe:**

Copies of Intimacy Circles (see Printout #1)  
Pens or Markers

**Directions:**

- 1) Discuss various levels of intimacy, boundaries, and personal connection
- 2) Instruct the diners to write people who fit in each of their circles
- 3) Instruct the diners to connect the icons at the bottom of the printout to each appropriate type of relationship (Described below)
- 4) Finish with Group Discussions

*Tell the Diners:* Everyone plays multiple roles in their lives with others in different types of relationships. Knowing the differences of each type of relationship can help you decide your own personal boundaries.

### Group Discussions

**Ask:** You are having a birthday party. Who might you invite to the party? (Draw a line from the Birthday Cake Icon to the appropriate circle.)

**Ask:** You are feeling very overwhelmed with school and/or work and need to vent. Who would be the best people to vent to? (Draw a line from the Talking Icon to the appropriate circle.)

**Ask:** You find yourself lost at a community event. Who would be safe to talk to? (Draw a line from the Question Icon to the appropriate circle.)

**Ask:** You are feeling like you would like a hug. Who should you hug? (Draw a line from the Hug Icon to the appropriate circle.)

**Ask:** What are the differences between strangers and community helpers?

*Such as:* It is okay to say 'hello' and 'have a good day' to both, but if you feel unsafe, talk only to a community helper

**Ask:** What are the differences between community helpers and acquaintances?

*Such as:* With an acquaintance you may engage in casual conversations about school or your family

**Ask:** What are the differences between acquaintances and friends?

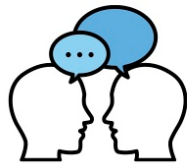
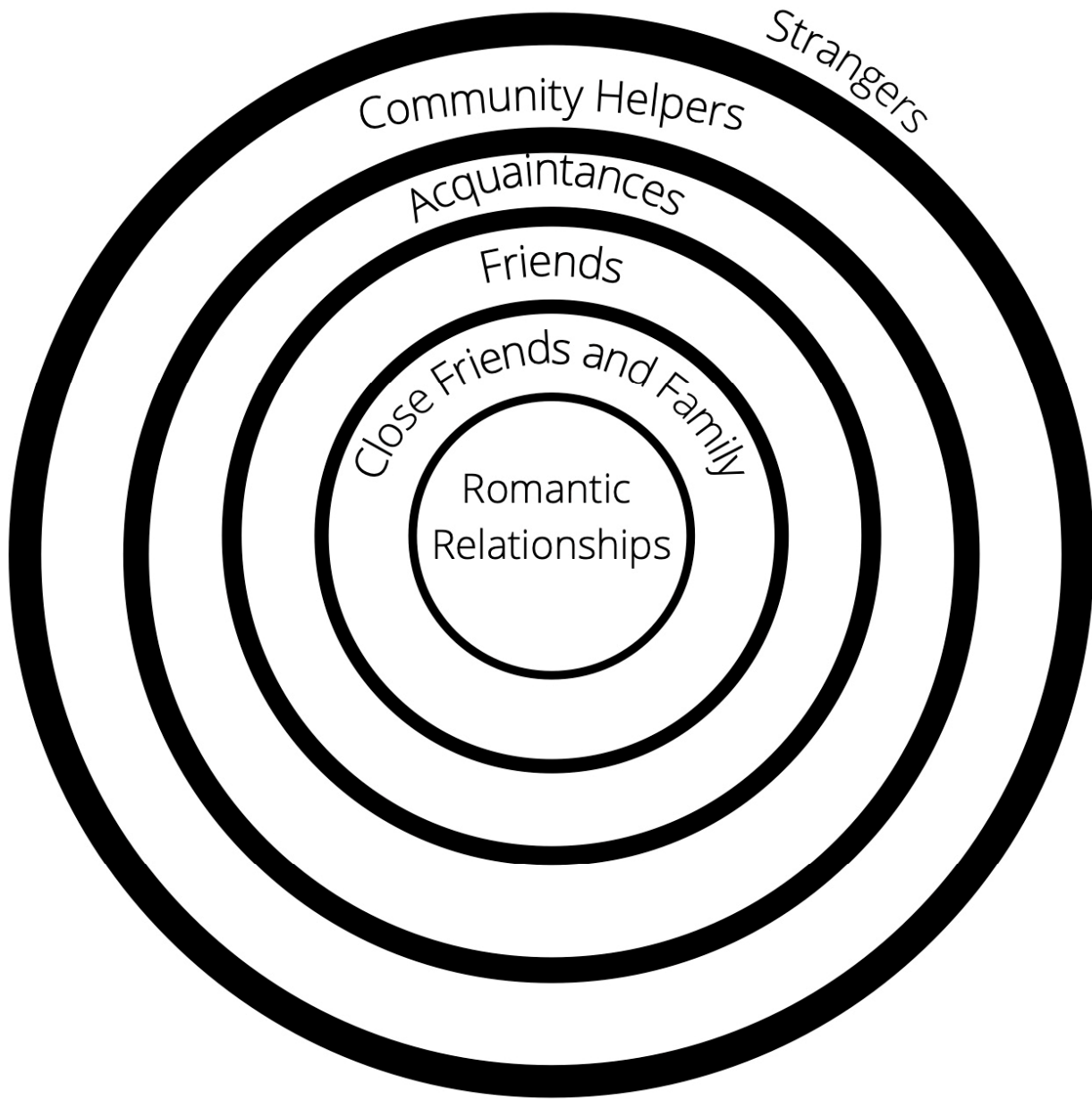
*Such as:* Friends may come over to your house and know your phone number

**Ask:** What are the differences between friends and close friends/family?

*Such as:* With close friends and family, you may feel more comfortable sharing more private information (such as information about health)

**Ask:** What are the differences between close friends and family and romantic partners?

*Such as:* We might kiss and be intimate with a romantic partner. We also may rely on our romantic partners for more emotional support than our close friends and family members.



## **Activity 1: Circles of Intimacy**

### **Relevant Skill**

We learn about how roles differ in various levels of personal relationships and the boundaries that are associated with each personal relationship. Specifically, this activity addresses how romantic love differs from friendships and familial love.

### **Why It's Important**

How an individual conceptualizes romantic love reflects their understanding of romantic relationships (Collins, 2003; Heifetz et al., 2020). Neurotypical adolescents are typically able to describe passion as the distinguishing feature between friendship and romantic relationship (Connolly et al., 1999). However, autistic adolescents tend to find romantic conceptualization difficult (Stokes et al., 2007). Autistic individuals may also be at risk for sexual victimization due to difficulties in asserting their own boundaries with respects to sexual interactions (Ballan, 2012; Brown-Lavoie, Viecili, & Weiss, 2014; Sevlever et al., 2013).

### **About the Activity**

The activity in this lesson is adapted from James Stanfeld's program Circles: Intimacy & Relationships (Stanfeld, 2020). Circles developed with the intention of teaching social boundaries to young adults with developmental disabilities. Circles is an effective way in developing knowledge of social safety and the differences of appropriate and inappropriate social behaviour.

## ACTIVITY TWO:

# GET WITH THE LINGO

## *Get Familiarized with Dating Terminology and Slang*



Time to Prepare: 45 minutes-1 hour

### **Recipe:**

A computer

Prepare a Jeopardy or Kahoot game using:  
<https://www.playfactile.com/> or  
<https://kahoot.com> using the terms provided,  
plus any additional terms that are appropriate  
for the activity

A television or large monitor (for viewing)

A prize for the winner

### **Directions:**

- 1) Using the standard rules of Jeopardy or Kahoot, play the game
- 2) Finish with Group Discussions

*Tell the Diners:* Dating Culture is constantly evolving, including the language used to represent certain aspects of romantic relationships. Knowing this 'language' can help you feel more comfortable and confident in discussing romantic relationships with peers.



### **Group Discussions**

**Ask:** Were you surprised by any of the terms we talked about today?

**Ask:** If you are having a conversation with someone you are friends with and they use a term you are unfamiliar with, what can you do?

**Ask:** If you are having a conversation with someone you know but do not trust and they use a term you are unfamiliar what can you do?

### **Example Terminology:**

**Aromantic:** Someone who does not feel romantic attraction to others.

**Asexual:** Someone who does not feel sexual attraction to others. They may still experience romantic feelings towards others and engage in romantic relationships.

**Bae:** A term of endearment meaning 'Before Anyone Else'

**Bisexual:** Feeling sexual and romantic attraction to both males and females.

**Being Exclusive:** Two individuals who have had a conversation that they are 'officially' dating and not dating other people.

**Casual Relationship:** A relationship where two individuals may engage in intimate actions (including sex), but they are not interested in the other parts of a romantic relationship (talking every day, meeting each other's families, being exclusive).

**Friends with Benefits:** Similar definition as 'Casual Relationship'.

**Ghosting:** Instead of formally breaking up with someone, the relationship ends because one partner completely stops talking to the other. This can be very hurtful.

**Hooking-up:** Engaging in intimate relations. For some people it may mean kissing and for others it may mean sex.

**Leading Someone On:** Sending flirty signals and messages to another person without any intention of dating them. This can be hurtful.

**Netflix and Chill:** Watching Netflix and engaging in intimate relations (kissing or sex).

**Pansexual:** Feeling sexual and romantic attraction to anyone of any gender (including individuals who are gender non-binary).

**Tinder:** A dating app where people can meet other individuals online to have sex with or date. While other adolescents may talk about it, you need to be 18 years old to use Tinder.

**Swipe Right:** A reference to Tinder. On the dating app, when you see a photo of someone you are interested in, you swipe the photo right.

**Sliding into DMs:** A way to say that you direct messaged someone on a social media platform to flirt.

## **Activity 2: Get With the Lingo**

### **Relevant Skill**

This lesson aims to teach slang and jargon used currently in dating culture.

### **Why It's Important**

Autistic individuals tend to interpret language in an overly literal way and often have difficulty with figures of speech and idioms, including avoiding the use of slang expressions (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). Explicit knowledge about the language and slang people use in regard to romantic relationships can be important for (a) being able to successfully socialize with peers about romantic relationships, (b) safely communicating with others, possibly reducing the likelihood of victimization, and (c) successfully navigating communication with individuals of romantic interest.

### **About the Activity**

This activity used a computer-based game, either Kahoot or Jeopardy (facilitator's choice), to make learning new terminology more enjoyable. Computer-based games also offer non-auditory support to supplement oral questioning and feedback dialogue (Tay & Hui, 2019). Approximately 90% of autistic individuals have auditory filtering challenges; therefore, using non-auditory support could be an effective teaching tool (Lane et al., 2010; Tomchek & Dunn, 2007).

# ACTIVITY THREE: IS THIS AVAILABLE?

## Evaluating Emotional Availability

Time to Prepare: 10 minutes

**Recipe:**

Copies of Character Analysis (see Printout #2)  
Pens or Markers

**Directions:**

- 1) Instruct the diners to each think of a show, movie, or book that includes romantic relationships
- 2) Instruct the diners to analyze the emotional availability of the characters (The example provided uses characters from The Avengers: Age of Ultron, Dear, Simon, and Riverdale)
- 3) Finish with Group Discussions

*Tell the Diners:* Emotional Availability means being able to manage your own emotions, handle the emotions of others, and use your emotional awareness to effectively communicate with others. All of these skills are important aspects of being in a healthy romantic relationship.

Character What movie, television show, or book are they from?	Relationship Status	Is their current relationship status benefitting them well?  Are they happy?  Are they treating their partner kindly?	Do you think this character should be in a romantic relationship right now?
Bruce Banner/The Hulk Avengers: Age of Ultron	Considering Dating Natasha/Black Widow	No Bruce needs to spend time improving his emotional regulation skills.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Maybe
Simon Love, Simon	At the end of the movie, Simon is in a romantic relationship with Bran	Simon has gone through a period of self-exploration. He is ready for a romantic relationship. Simon and Bran appear to have a happy and healthy relationship.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Maybe
Betty Riverdale	Dating Jughead	Betty and Jughead may have things they need to work on personally, but their relationship is healthy. They support and respect each other.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Maybe



### Group Discussions

**Ask:** What did you learn from this activity?

**Ask:** If someone is currently emotionally unavailable, what can they do to become emotionally available?

**Considerations for the Chef:**

A diner may choose a character that has been violent. Express with certainty that a romantic partner should never hurt you and that violent individuals should not be in a romantic relationship. Resources can be found at: <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/teen-dating-violence>

Character What movie, television show, or book are they from?	Relationship Status	Is their current relationship status benefitting them well?  Are they happy?  Are they treating their partner kindly?	Do you think this character should be in a romantic relationship right now?
			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Maybe
			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Maybe
			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Maybe
			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Maybe

### **Activity 3: Is This Available?**

#### **Relevant Skill**

We learn about the meaning of emotional availability in the context of romantic relationships. Emotional availability means being able to regulate emotions, manage the emotional state of others, and to be able to consider and utilize the emotional state of yourself and those around you to effectively communicate with others.

#### **Why It's Important**

Emotional availability is a construct that refers to the capacity of a dyad to share an emotionally healthy relationship (Biringen et al., 2014). Autistic adolescents tend to demonstrate difficulties in emotion identification and internalization (Baron-Cohen, 2000; Baron-Cohen et al., 1985).

#### **About the Activity**

This activity teaches perspective taking through narratives. Narrative-based intervention is an effective tool in teaching emotional recognition, including the ability to recognize underlying causes and/or influencing factors to change in the character's emotional states of mind (Dodd et al., 2011).



## ACTIVITY FOUR: **IS IT TRUE?**



### *Practice Using Nonliteral Communication*

No Time to Prepare

**Recipe:**

No materials or preparation required

**Directions:**

- 1) Read through the following scenarios using the format of *Strange Stories* (Happé, 1994)
- 2) Discuss the provided questions

*Tell the Diners:* Sometimes people say one thing but mean another. Being an effective communicator is an important aspect of relationships.

**Ella goes over to her boyfriend Elijah's house after work. "Well! That was a great day!" she exclaimed while throwing her bookbag on the floor. She walks over to the couch and sits down angrily.**

*Is it true, what Ella says?  
Why may have Ella said this?*

**It is Kinsley's birthday and Willow thought long and hard about what to get for her. Kinsley had really hoped for a new video game for her Xbox. When Kinsley opens her gift, he sees that Willow had got her a photo book filled with photos of the two of them. "Thank you, Willow" Kinsley says, "I love it".**

*Is it true, what Kinsley said?  
Why may have Kinsley said this?*

**Finn is meeting their partner Azami's family for the very first time. They feel very nervous, their heart is beating very fast and they have butterflies in their stomach. "How are you feeling Finn?" Azami asks. "I am good, I am excited" Finn responds.**

*Is it true, what Finn said?  
Why may have Finn said this?*

**Talia and Abel take turns picking movies on Netflix to watch. Talia was struggling to pick a movie. "If you do not pick a show in the next five minutes Talia, I am literally going to fall asleep" Abel said.**

*Is it true, what Abel said?  
Why may have Abel said this?*

## **Activity 4: Is it true?**

### **Relevant Skill**

We learn about non-literal communication skills.

### **Why It's Important**

Romantic relationships, as a type of dyadic social relationship, inherently involve different types of communication, including communication that is non-literal, exaggerated, sarcastic, and/or figurative. Autistic individuals tend to interpret language in an overly literal way (Adreon & Durocher, 2007).

### **About the Activity**

This activity utilizes Strange Stories (Happé, 1994). Strange stories are used to assess the ability to interpret nonliteral language (Happé, 1994; Jolliffe & Baron-Cohen, 1999). Strange Stories are meant to be written so that the motivation behind an utterance would generally be interpreted in just one way. The Strange Stories that were created for the purposes of this activity, by the writer, were written with the intention of integrating the use of nonliteral communication with the contexts of romantic relationships.

## ACTIVITY FIVE:

# YOUR VISION

*Visualizing The Life You Want*

Time to Prepare: 10 minutes

**Recipe:**

A large variety of magazines  
Glue and scissors  
Poster board

**Directions:**

- 1) Introduce the diners to the function of vision boards
- 2) Instruct the diners to create a vision board (if needed, include the prompts provided)
- 4) Finish with Group Discussions

*Tell the Diners:* Knowing who you are, your values, and aspirations can help you know 'your type.'



### Picture Ideas for Vision Board

- Something to represent what you love most about yourself
- Your values
- Your favourite things
- Your favourite activity
- A job you would like
- A pet you would like to own

### Group Discussions

**Ask:** Did you learn anything about yourself during this activity?

**Ask:** Are some of your values more important than others?

**Ask:** Do you think any of the pictures on your vision board will affect what type of person you begin a romantic relationship with?

## **Activity 5: Your Vision**

### **Relevant Skill**

We learn about self-concept clarity. Self-concept clarity is the ability to have a consistent and stable sense of self, which is clearly and confidently defined (Krol et al., 2020).

### **Why It's Important**

Adolescents with higher rates of self-concept clarity tend to have more positive and stable social relationships (Becht et al., 2017). Autistic individuals tend to have a lower self-concept as compared with neurotypical individuals (Coutelle et al., 2020). Therefore, developing self-concept clarity in autistic adolescents may positively impact social relationships, including romantic relationships.

### **About the Activity**

Art-based therapies can improve imagination and abstract thinking in autistic individuals (Martin, 2011; Schweizer et al., 2020). Using the framework of Social Cognitive Career Theory, counsellors describe the method of using vision boards to promote identity exploration and enhanced self-efficacy beliefs in under-represented adolescents (Waalkes et al., 2019). For students with disabilities, vision boards can also promote self-reflection without relying heavily on verbal expression and allows for exploration and processing rather than focusing on determining the "correct" answer (Burton & Lent, 2016).

## ACTIVITY SIX:

# DEAL OR DEALBREAKER

### *Setting Your Own Relationship Green Flags and Red Flags*

Time to Prepare: 10 minutes

#### Recipe:

Divide the Room into Three Parts and Mark Them As Green Flag, Yellow Flag, and Red Flag

#### Directions:

1) Explain to the diners what area means:

**Green Flag:** A characteristic you are okay with or is important to you in relationship

**Yellow Flag:** A characteristic that you are unsure about or think it may depend on other factors in the relationship

**Red Flag:** A characteristic that is not okay in your relationship or is even a major boundary for you

2) As characteristics are read, instruct the diners stand in the area that fits best for them

3) Question the diners on why they chose green flag, yellow flag, or red flag for certain characteristics

4) Prompt each diner think of a new characteristic for the group to consider

5) Finish with Group Discussions



### Group Discussion

**Ask:** Did you learn anything about yourself during this activity?

**Ask:** Are there any characteristics that should always be a red flag?

**Ask:** Do you think these may change as you age?

*Tell the Diners:* Knowing what we like, and dislike can help us find a good partner!

### Characteristic

#### Examples:

- Is close with their family
- Does not like pizza
- Does not like dogs
- Does not like cats
- Listens to your least favourite type of music
- Big fan of exercising
- Does not like superhero movies
- Plays video games
- Has or wants tattoos
- Smokes cigarettes
- Vapes
- Steals from stores
- Skips school
- Spends lots of time doing extra-curriculars
- Is the class president
- Is rude to the waiter at restaurants

## **Activity 6: Deal or Deal Breaker**

### **Relevant Skill**

We learn about personal standards in romantic relationships. As this may be a new concept to some autistic adolescents, the goal is not to have the adolescents set their permanent romantic standards, but to begin to consider what type of standards others may have and consider what type of standards they may want to hold for themselves.

### **Why It's Important**

The ideal standards model hypothesizes that neurotypical individuals possess mate standards that are used to evaluate both potential mates (Campbell & Fletcher, 2015). The ideal standards model exemplifies the value of adopting a functional approach to social cognition in romantic relationships. Given the deficits in social cognition typically seen in autistic individuals, mate standards may not be as accessible.

### **About the Activity**

The intention of this activity is to enhance peer-involved learning, much like is seen in autism support groups (Weidle et al., 2006). This activity is formatted as a game, as games tend to be more engaging for adolescents than standard oral questioning and feedback dialogue. Furthermore, the use of cooperative games leads to increased social skill development, empathy, self-control, and conflict resolution (Hromek & Roffey, 2009; Johnson et al., 2000). Games that also stimulate fun and humour employ creativity, which moves the brain from a cognitive, rule-bound state to a more fluid and relaxed state that engages the whole body in problem-solving (Prouty, 2000).



## ACTIVITY SEVEN: **FLIRTING**



### *Learning to Detect and Conduct Flirting*

Time to Prepare: 45 minutes

**Recipe:**

A computer  
A T.V. or large monitor

**Directions:**

- 1) Provide diners with information about what flirting is and what it looks like
- 2) Use YouTube videos to model flirting
- 3) Ask questions provided with each clip

*Tell the Diners:* Flirting is a social interaction that can be complicated. Flirting involves different types of communication, including tone of voice, body language, and facial expression.

Clips provided are from Big Bang Theory which is rated PG.

### **Video Modelling Clips:**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fhgp6C2f\\_6U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fhgp6C2f_6U)

**Clip Overview:** Howard is attempting to flirt with Missy.

**Ask:** What is he doing wrong? Is he respecting Missy's response? What could he change to flirt better?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERpHH5BHKSA>

**Clip Overview:** Leonard does not realize that Alex is flirting with him.

**Ask:** How is Alex flirting with Leonard? How can you tell the different between general compliments and flirting?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFNwZ-Ez7BI>

**Clip Overview:** Different Clips of Howard flirting with Penny.

**Ask:** What would you tell Howard about his flirting skills? What would you do differently? How do you think Penny is feeling during some of these interactions?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csVP7Xa5Fig>

Warning: Reference to alcohol

**Clip Overview:** Howard, Leonard, and Raj flirts with a celebrity, Summer, on a train.

**Ask:** What were the signs that Summer was feeling uncomfortable? What would you do differently?

## **Activity 7: Flirting**

### **Relevant Skill**

We will learn about how to manage boundaries and safety while flirting.

### **Why It's Important**

The primary intention of flirting is to initiate or express interest in the other person, possibly for a sexual or romantic relationship. Flirting may also just be playful, with no intention of taking things to the next level. People with impaired ToM tend to misinterpret flirting behaviour, which may lead to cognitive distortions and ineffective communication strategies (Ward et al., 2000). Autistic males are less likely to engage in romantic relationship as compared with autistic females, and this may be because males typically take on the role of initiating relationships, which requires additional skills and confidence (flirting; Byers et al., 2013).

### **About the Activity**

This activity utilizes video modelling to teach flirting. Video modelling interventions have been used to improve a variety of social difficulties autistic individuals (O'Handley et al., 2015), including perspective taking (LeBlanc et al., 2003), and social interactions (Buggey, 2012). Furthermore, as flirting may be an uncomfortable or intimidating topic of conversation, video modelling can take the pressure off the adolescents while also working as an effective teaching tool.

## ACTIVITY EIGHT: **THANKS, BUT NO THANKS**

### *Learning to Manage Rejecting and Rejection*

Time to Prepare: 10 minutes

**Recipe:**

Props

List of scene ideas for the role-play

**Directions:**

- 1) **Ask the Diners:** Why is it important to keep our cool and be respectful when we are being rejected or we are rejecting someone?
- 2) **Ask the Diners:** What are some ways to let someone know you are not interested?
- 3) Provide an example of appropriately ('No thank you') and inappropriately ('I think you are ugly so no thanks') rejecting someone. Ask the group to describe why each example is appropriate or not appropriate.
- 3) Separate the group into pairs. Provide the diners with scenarios and props for where their rejection takes place. Have the pairs role-play their scenarios for the group.
- 4) Instruct the diners to discuss each role-play
- 5) Finish with Group Discussions.



*Tell the Diners:* Everyone has been rejected at some point, as rejection is a natural part of life. Practicing being rejected can help us feel more prepared for whatever happens.

**Prop Examples:**

**Coffee Shop:** Coffee cups/mugs, apron (for the barista)

**Dog Park/Outside:** Stuffed dog, leash/collar

**School:** Fake desks, pen and paper

### **Group Discussions**

**Ask:** Why is it good to let people know how we truly feel?

**Ask:** If you were asked on a date in an inappropriate way—how did it make you feel?

**Ask:** If you reject someone and they continue to bother you, what are the next things you should do?

**Ask:** What are some reasons that someone may reject us that might not actually have to do with us?

**Ask:** If someone rejects us and we feel sad or embarrassed, what are some things we can do to feel better?

## **Activity 8: Thanks, But No Thanks**

### **Relevant Skill**

We will learn about emotional regulation skills, specifically in the context of managing rejection in romantic situations.

### **Why It's Important**

It is important for autistic individuals to learn the rules of courtship and be taught how to recognize when someone is not interested, and when someone is feeling harassed (Mogavero & Hsu, 2019). Autistic adolescents often report hypersensitivity to social rejection. Neuroimaging data suggest that the ability to integrate emotional information into ToM decisions continues to develop between adolescence and adulthood (Sebastian, 2015).

### **About the Activity**

The activity for this lesson utilizes role-playing and the Teaching Interaction Procedures (Philips et al., 1974). Role-playing is often used with social skill teaching programs as it improves social cognitions and communication (Hofmann et al., 2020). The Teaching Interaction Procedures (Phillips et al., 1974) has been used to increase social communication, social play, social emotional skills, and social friendships in autistic individuals (Leaf et al., 2009). The teaching interaction procedure is a 6-step system teaching package, which, for the context of this activity, would involve:

1. Labelling and identifying the skill: Managing emotions when feeling rejected, or when rejecting someone else.
2. Provide a meaningful rationale for why the learner should use the behaviour: Losing our temper may lead to consequences, such as looking bad in front of peers.
3. Behaviour is broken into smaller steps: Asking what do you say?

4. Instructor provides an appropriate demonstration of the target behaviour (why is this appropriate or why is this not appropriate): An example is given of someone becoming emotionally dysregulated, and another example is given of someone who is handling rejection well.
5. The learner role-plays the targeted behaviour.
6. Positive reinforcement.

## ACTIVITY NINE: **WORST DATE EVER**

*Considering the Worst to Plan for the Best*

Time to Prepare: 10 minutes

**Recipe:**

Access to paper  
Pens and Markers  
Props  
Prizes (optional)

**Directions:**

- 1) Instruct the diners to think of their version of the worst date ever (if needed, include the prompts provided)
- 2) Separate the group into pairs or teams. Instruct the diners to role-play the date for the group
- 3) The group can vote for awards such as "Most Realistic" or "Most Creative"
- 5) Finish with Group Discussions

*Tell the Diners:* The worst-case scenario is unlikely to happen. However, thinking of the worst date ever can help us practice perspective taking and consider what we do if we are ever in a situation like it.

**Examples of What Caused the Date to go Poorly:**

- Was there a miscommunication about where to meet?
- Did something go wrong in the date plans?
- Did one person not consider what the other person may enjoy?



**Note to the Chef:** This activity is designed to address interpersonal conflict, not risky behaviours, so you may want to avoid group discussions of violence, alcohol, and drugs, depending on the maturity level and concerns of the group

**Group Discussions:**

**Ask:** What about these dates made them so terrible?

**Ask:** Do you think there is anyone who would find any of these dates enjoyable?

**Ask:** What would you do if you went on a date and one of these scenarios were happening?

## **Activity 9: Worst Date Ever**

### **Relevant Skill**

We learn about how to plan a date, and how to manage our emotions when plans do not go the way it was expected to.

### **Why It's Important**

Executive functioning skills such as planning can be implicated in social interactions (Singh & Young, 2020). Autistic individuals tend to find executive functioning (Johnston et al., 2019) and interpersonal problem solving (Gómez-Pérez et al., 2019) difficult.

### **About the Activity**

The idea of this activity is that it involves peer-involved learning, much like is seen in autistic adolescent support groups (Weidle et al., 2006). This activity is formatted as a game, as games tend to be more engaging for autistic adolescents than standard oral questioning and feedback dialogue.

# MODULE TWO

## BEING IN A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP INTRODUCTION QUESTIONS

### **How many different types of communication can you think of?**

*Such as:* How people speak to others, non-verbal communication (body language, facial expression), tone of voice, how people let others know how they feel and what they need

### **What can happen when we don't communicate effectively?**

*Such as:* Miscommunications can happen, you or your partner's feelings can be hurt

**Ask the group to provide examples of when a miscommunication happened in their life.**

### **What kind of body language should we use when trying to effectively communicate with others?**

*Such as:* Facing the other person, keeping our bodies open to the other person (not crossing your arms)

### **What are some things to consider when meeting a romantic partner's family?**

*Such as:* They may feel protective over their child/sibling, they may 'tease' you, their house may have different rules than yours, being polite

### **What are some typical reasons a couple may argue?**

*Such as:* Differences in opinion, feeling misunderstood

### **What are some differences between healthy arguing and unhealthy arguing?**

*Such as:* Healthy arguing can be constructive, unhealthy arguing may involve name calling or criticism, using a louder tone of voice

### **What are some things you can do to make sure you and your partner's arguing stays healthy?**

*Such as:* Taking a break from the discussion if it gets too 'heated', using 'I feel...' statements rather than blaming or criticizing

## ACTIVITY TEN: **SHARE-ADES**

*Learn to Detect and Conduct Non-Verbal Communication*

Time to Prepare: 5 minutes

**Recipe:**

A computer

Use following websites:

<http://www.playcharades.net>

<https://wordwall.net/resource/1787517/random-feelings-generator>

**Directions:**

- 1) Describe Charades to the Diners
- 2) Instruct each diner to pick an activity AND an emotion to perform for the group
- 3) Instruct the group to guess what activity and emotion each diner is performing
- 4) Finish with Group Discussions

*Tell the Diners:* Non-verbal communication is just as important as verbal communication, but it can be harder to read. Playing charades can help us practice looking for non-verbal cues.

**After each turn, the facilitator can ask the group:**

1. How did you know that they were experiencing that emotion?
2. How do you look when you are feeling that emotion?
3. What could trigger an emotion like this?
4. How would you approach someone experiencing this emotion?



**Group Discussions:**

**Ask:** Which emotions were the most challenging to detect?

**Ask:** Which emotions were the easiest to detect?

**Ask:** Why do you think it is important to look for non-verbal cues in a romantic relationship?

## **Activity 10: Share-Ades**

### **Relevant Skill:**

We learn about non-verbal communication and emotion recognition. Non-verbal communication can include the use of body language, facial expression, and physical expression. Emotional recognition involves interpreting non-verbal communication to assess the emotional state of others. Knowing the emotional state of others can provide information about how to approach others and how to know when others require emotional support.

### **Why It's Important**

Romantic relationships, as a type of dyadic social relationship, inherently involve different types of communication, including communication that is non-verbal. Autistic individuals tend to find non-verbal communication difficult (APA, 2013).

### **About the Activity**

This activity utilizes the game of Charades to encourage the interpretation of non-verbal social cues. Games and role-plays have been used in various contexts to develop insight, empathy, prosocial skills, and improved behavior (Hromek & Roffey, 2009). Fun and humor can stimulate creativity as the brain moves from a cognitive, rule-bound state to a more fluid, relaxed state where the whole body is engaged in problem solving (Prouty, 2000).



# ACTIVITY ELEVEN: MY SPIEL



## Practicing Introducing Yourself

Time to Prepare: 5 minutes

**Recipe:**  
Copies of spiel template (see Printout #3)  
Access to pens or markers

**Directions:**

- Ask the Diners:** What comes to mind when they are asked "Tell me about yourself?"
- Ask the Diners:** Why is it important to give a good *first impression*?
- Instruct diners will fill out the template and practice their spiel (it does not have to go off the information in the template, the template is meant to just act as a guide)
  - Demonstrate spiel for diners
- Instruct the diners to present and receive feedback from the group.
- Finish with Group Discussions

*Tell the Diners:* "Tell Me About Yourself" may seem like the easiest question you can be asked. However, sometimes our mind goes completely blank. Practice makes progress!

<b>Info About Family</b> <i>(only information you feel comfortable sharing)</i>	<b>Where did you grow up?</b>	<b>Information about school/work?</b>
<b>What is most important to you?</b>	<b>What do you do in your spare time?</b>	<b>How did you meet your romantic partner?</b>

**Example Spiel:**

**Information about family:** Are you the oldest? Do you have siblings? Are your parents divorced? Are you close with your family? *Remember, you don't need to share information that feels private.*

**Where did you grow up:** Have you moved? Are you originally from a different area?

**School/Work:** Do you go to the same school as your partner? What do you like about your job?

**What's most important to you:** Is family something you value? Is school important because you want to go to post-secondary?

**What do you do in your spare time:** Are you in any clubs or sports? Do you like to read?

**Where did you meet your partner:** Did you meet at school? At the park?

### Group Conversations:

- Ask:** Do you feel prepared to be asked "Tell me about yourself?"
- Ask:** What's something you might say when meeting a romantic partner's friends or family, that you might not say during a job interview?
- Ask:** What could you say if you need a moment to collect your thoughts?

<p><b>Info About Family</b> (<i>only</i> information you feel comfortable sharing)</p>	<p><b>Where did you grow up?</b></p>	<p><b>Information about school/work?</b></p>
<p><b>What is most important to you?</b></p>	<p><b>What do you do in your spare time?</b></p>	<p><b>How did you meet your romantic partner?</b></p>

## **Activity 11: My Spiel**

### **Relevant Skill**

We will learn how to talk about ourselves when first meeting someone (first impressions).

### **Why It's Important**

When dating someone, your partner will likely introduce you to people. Introducing yourself takes social skills and perspective taking, both of which tend to be difficult for autistic individuals.

### **About the Activity**

The activity for this lesson utilizes the Teaching Interaction Procedures (Phillips et al., 1974). The Teaching Interaction Procedures (Phillips et al., 1974) have been used to increase social communication, social play, social-emotional skills, and social friendships in autistic individuals (Leaf et al., 2009).

## ACTIVITY TWELVE:



# DISASTER GAME PLAN



*Planning for The Worst So We Can Be Our Best*

Time to Prepare: 30 minutes

### Recipe:

Print off a list of scenarios and cut them up  
Put each scenario in its own envelope  
Hide the envelopes around the room

### Directions:

- 1) **Tell the Diners:** You are going on a mission. You have 25 minutes to diffuse all the bombs.
- 2) Instruct the diners to find each bomb, discuss as a group how to diffuse it and then roleplay it for the Chef. Decide if the diners successfully defused each bomb.
- 3) Finish with Group Discussions

*Tell the Diners:* Sometimes our source of nervousness comes from thinking that the worst will happen. One way to help our nervousness is to make a game plan for when the worst does happen- even though it probably won't!

### Examples of "Bombs":

- Your partner's dad calls you the wrong name.
- Your partner follows a religious or spiritual practice that you are unfamiliar with.
- Your partner's family cooks your dinner... You are allergic to the main course! Your partner's parents feel bad and are profusely apologizing.
- You spill spaghetti down your white shirt.
- You are running late because of traffic.

### Group Discussions:

**Ask:** Do you feel more prepared to meet a partner's family in the future?

**Ask:** What do you think the likelihood of these situations happening?

**Ask:** Are there some situations where you can just laugh it off?

**Ask:** If you are feeling nervous, do you think you could let the family know how you are feeling? How might you do this?

## **Activity 12: Disaster Game Plan**

### **Relevant Skill**

We will learn about managing social situations that are unfamiliar and unexpected. In interpersonal relationships, people sometimes need to be able to generate alternative solutions for problems and learn to anticipate the responses of others.

### **Why It's Important**

Couples that use effective problem-solving strategies tend to preserve relationship quality and satisfaction, even when navigating inevitable problems that arise (Sullivan et al., 2010). The three aspects of young adult romantic relationship (problem-solving, love, and violence) hold profound life-course implications (Xia et al., 2018). Autistic children tend to find interpersonal problem solving difficult (Gómez-Pérez et al., 2019).

### **About the Activity**

The intention of this activity is to involve fun, peer-involved cooperative learning, like what is seen in autistic adolescent support groups (Weidle et al., 2006). This activity is formatted as a game, as games tend to be more engaging for autistic adolescents than standard oral questioning and feedback dialogue. Furthermore, the use of cooperative games leads to increased social skill development, empathy, self-control, and conflict resolution (Hromek & Roffey, 2009; Johnson et al., 2000). Games that also stimulate fun and humour employ creativity, which moves the brain from a cognitive, rule-bound state to a more fluid and relaxed state that engages the whole body in problem solving (Prouty, 2000).

## ACTIVITY THIRTEEN:

# WELL, THAT'S DEBATABLE

*Learning Health Conversation Skills Through Debate Practice*

Time to Prepare: 30 minutes

### Recipe:

Prizes (6-9)

Any props related to a court room (gavel, judges chair)

### Directions:

- 1) Discuss with the diners what it means to have a healthy disagreement
- 2) Split the diners into two groups- Group A and Group B (Teams can decide Team Names)
- 3) Give each side a debate topic
- 4) Give the diners ten minutes to prepare their points
- 5) Group A will start with their first point. They will be given 5 minutes to speak.
- 6) Group B will be given 5 minutes to speak.
- 7) Group A will be given 2 minutes for rebuttal.
- 8) Decide the winner of the debate.
- 9) Group A will decide on an MVP for the debate (someone who was respectful and assertive). The group will say what they liked about the MVP's 'performance.'
- 10) Group B will choose an MVP from Group A.
- 11) Repeat the process 2-3 times
- 12) Finish with Group Discussions

### Examples of Debate Topics:

Summer vs Winter

Pizza vs Tacos

City vs Country

More "Would You Rather"

questions can be found at:

<https://icebreakerideas.com/would-you-rather-questions/>

*Tell the Diners:* Learning how to regulate your emotions during a disagreement is an important skill to have in a romantic relationship. Learning how to debate can help build emotional regulation skills, as well as assertiveness.

### Healthy Disagreement Tips:

- Fully listen to the other person
- Describe, don't evaluate
- Begin with the end in mind
- Avoid absolute terms like "always" and "never"
- Explain the other person's perspective to ensure you understand it

### Group Discussions:

**Ask:** Was it challenging to regulate your emotions during the debate?

**Ask:** What are some other ways to practice emotional regulation skills?



## **Activity 13: Well, That’s Debatable**

### **Relevant Skill**

We will learn about interpersonal problem-solving skills. Interpersonal problem-solving skills are a set of basic processes related to intelligence where the objective is to solve problems that involve other people (such as: recognizing emotions, attributing causes, and generating alternate solutions for a single problem and anticipating their consequences; D’Zurilla & Nezu, 2010).

### **Why It’s Important**

Effective *relationship problem-solving skills* include remaining calm, listening to one another, showing respect for others’ opinions, and working toward mutually beneficial resolution during disagreements (Gottman & Gottman, 2017; Holland & Roisman, 2008). Couples that use effective problem-solving strategies tend to preserve relationship quality and satisfaction, even when navigating inevitable problems that arise (Sullivan et al., 2010). The three aspects of young adult romantic relationship (problem-solving, love, and violence) hold profound life-course implications (Xia et al., 2018).

### **About the Activity**

This activity utilizes debate skills to learn assertiveness and collaborative skills, both of which are used during interpersonal problem-solving. Debate practice has been utilized in classrooms to heighten students’ critical thinking, collaborative learning, and communication skills (Kennedy, 2007). Collaborative discussion may also help develop stronger skills related to assertiveness. Debate practice offers both the opportunity for collaborative problem solving (within team) and assertiveness skills (against team).

# MODULE THREE

## ENDING A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP CONVERSATION TOPICS

### **What are some reasons a romantic relationship may end?**

*Such as:* One or both partners no longer feel happy in the relationship, one partner is interested in dating someone else, boundaries have been crossed on a regular basis

### **What are some things to consider before you break up with someone?**

*Such as:* They may not be expecting it, they may feel sad during the conversation

### **If you end the romantic relationship, and your ex-partner is not accepting the break-up, what can you do?**

*Such as:* Talk to a trusted adult, including your parents or a teacher

### **When should you end a romantic relationship via phone or text message?**

*Such as:* The person is starting to make you feel unsafe

### **If your partner ends the romantic relationship, what are some things you can do for self-care?**

*Such as:* Spending time with some friends, talking to someone about the breakup, getting ice cream

## ACTIVITY FOURTEEN:

# WHEN TO BREAK UP

*Learning When it is Time to Say Goodbye to a Romantic Partner*

Time to Prepare: 10 minutes

### Recipe:

Write down Break-Up scenarios on cue cards. Break-up scenario examples are provided on Printout #4.

### Directions:

- 1) **Ask the Diners:** Have you or someone you know (can be fictional) experienced a break-up? How did you, or both people, manage the break-up?
- 2) Hand out the cue cards to the diners. One at a time, instruct each diner to read out their break-up scenario and ask the other diners questions based on Crick and Dodge's Social Information Processing Model (1994), outlined below.



*Tell the Diners:* Knowing when to end a romantic relationship is a complicated and personal decision that we may feel alone in making. Having a conversation with others about when and how to end a romantic relationship can provide insight that you may use in the future.

**Ask:** What is concerning about this situation?

**Ask:** What intentions may your partner have?

**Ask:** Do the behaviours of your partner in this scenario fit with your boundaries and values?

**Ask:** What are 3 different ways you may react in this scenario?

**Ask:** What is the best choice for you?

**Discuss as a group.**

## Printout #4

### **Example Break-Up Scenarios**

- 1) You want to end your romantic relationship. Your partner says, 'if you breakup with me, I will hurt myself and it will be your fault.'
- 2) Your romantic partner says, 'if you do not do my homework for me, I will break up with you.'
- 3) You are so nervous about breaking up with your romantic partner you start to ignore them.
- 4) Your romantic partner breaks up with you. A part of you thinks that if you keep trying to get them back, they might change their mind.
- 5) You have broken up with a romantic partner. They keep talking to you like you are still dating.
- 6) You have found that your values are no longer aligning with the values of your romantic partner.
- 7) Your romantic partner has been continuously pressuring you to hook-up, which you do not feel comfortable with.
- 8) Your romantic partner has been spreading private information about your relationship with other people. You have let your partner know that this makes you uncomfortable and you have set a boundary. They continue to do so anyways.
- 9) Your romantic partner continuously lies to you. You have let them know that lying is not okay with you.
- 10) You used to like spending time with your romantic partner. However, lately you feel annoyed and unhappy whenever you are spending time with them. They are often criticizing you and making you feel unworthy.

## **Activity 14: When to Break-Up**

### **Relevant Skill**

The aim of this lesson is to teach about how to manage unhealthy romantic relationships.

### **Why It's Important**

While engaging in romantic relationships during adolescence is developmentally normal (Christopher et al., 2015), relationships during adolescence tend to be marked by instability and fluidity (Allen et al., 2019).

### **About the Activity**

The activity for this lesson utilizes the social information model (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Social information processing theory concerns itself with the mental operations that are deployed to generate a behavioural response during social interactions, identifying six steps of social cognition. As individuals with autism have deficits in social cognition, rather than general cognition, the social information processing model is effective in improving social skills in autistic individuals (Flood et al., 2011; Mazza et al., 2017).

1. Encoding of cues: Is there anything concerning about this situation?
2. Interpretation of cues: Why do you think your partner may be acting this way?
3. Classification of goals: Do these behaviours fit into your values?
4. Response access or construction: What are three things you could do to respond to their behaviours?
5. Response decision: Which is the best choice for you?
6. Behavioural enactment: End with group discussion.

## ACTIVITY FIFTEEN: A DISH BEST SERVED COLD

### *Thinking Through Revenge Behaviours*

Time to Prepare: 10 minutes

#### **Recipe:**

A White Board, white board markers  
Draw a behaviour flow chart on the white board  
(Example provided on next page)  
Write Revenge Behaviours on cue cards

#### **Directions:**

- 1) **Ask the Diners:** Have you ever felt the urge to 'get back at' someone?
- 2) **Ask the Diners:** What are some examples of Revenge Behaviours?
  - 2) Give each diner a 'Revenge Behaviour'
- 3) Using a flow chart, instruct the group to discuss the possible consequences of Revenge Behaviours, including disciplinary consequences
- 4) Finish with Group Discussions

*Tell the Diners:* Revenge behaviours are actions we do to retaliate when we feel sad, embarrassed, or mad at our ex-partner to 'get back at them'. However, this may lead to big consequences, and we could even make our ex-partner feel unsafe.



#### **Examples of Unhealthy Revenge Behaviours**

- Following them home after school to bother them
- Commenting mean things on their social media page
- Spreading a rumour about them
- Saying mean things to them in the hallway at school

**Thought**

**Behaviour**

**Consequence**

#### **Group Discussions**

**Ask:** Sometimes our impulses will tell us to use an unhealthy revenge behaviour. What are some ways to manage our impulses?

**Ask:** What are some things you can do to help you move on from a romantic partner?

Activity Nineteen Example:

**Thought:**

You feel embarrassed and rejected and angry at your ex-partner



**Behaviour:**

Writing a mean word on their locker



**Consequence:**

Receive detention at school, get grounded at home, feel ashamed of your actions, other people may not want to date you



**Behaviour:**

Talking to a friend or trusted adult about how bad we feel.  
Using safe care activities to manage bad feelings.



**Consequence:**

You will not have bad thoughts about yourself, peers may think you handled the break-up well and are mature, some may even think that you are a good person to date

## **Activity 15: Thinking Through Revenge Behaviours**

### **Relevant Skill**

We will learn that anger, and despair are completely normal emotional responses at the end of a romantic relationship. We will also learn to encourage self-awareness around the impulse to retaliate against individuals who cause these uncomfortable emotions.

### **Why It's Important**

In neurotypical adolescents, most adolescents (87%) have at least one specific retaliation goal in the context of a peer conflict (Recchia et al., 2019). The action of choosing whether to follow through with a retaliative behaviour is primarily impulsive. Autistic individuals tend to find impulse control difficult, with disinhibited behaviour usually appearing in social situations with strong emotional valence, which includes situations involving romantic feelings (Hlavatá et al., 2018).

### **About the Activity**

A flow chart provides visuals and non-auditory support to supplement oral questioning and feedback dialogue (Tay & Hui, 2019). Approximately 90% of autistic individuals have auditory filtering challenges, therefore using non-auditory support could be an effective teaching tool (Lane et al., 2010; Tomchek & Dunn, 2007).

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## Appendix B:

Activity:	Learning Objective	Significance	Rationale for Content	Rationale for Training Approach	Correspondence to Literature Review
Activity 1: Circles of Intimacy	Teach relationship identification and introduce boundary setting.	Being able to identify and understand different types of relationships is an important aspect of social competence. In adolescents, understanding the roles within each type of relationship can also reduce the risk of victimization, as adolescents can better navigate appropriate and inappropriate behaviours in others.	By addressing concepts of romantic love, we help adolescents to understand how those relationships differ from platonic relationships, which tends to be something they have difficulty with (Stokes et al., 2007). Direct discussions can help those youth stay safe because they begin to understand how boundaries are managed, both their own and the boundaries of others (Ballan, 2012; Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014; Sevlever et al., 2013).	Autistic adolescents tend to learn better when the content is visual, structured, and concrete.	“Adolescents who learn to navigate relationships during adolescence are more likely to enter adulthood feeling competent and confident about romantic relationships and are more likely to engage in positive partnerships.”
Activity 2: Get With the Lingo	Learn about language used in dating culture, and the social norms associated with that language.	Clear understandings of language and slang used in dating culture are important for: (1) being able to successfully socialize with peers about romantic relationships, (2) successfully navigate communication with individuals of romantic interest, including deciphering dating expectations and preferences in potential partners, and (3) reducing the risk of victimization, as being able to discuss romantic relationships with others, without the risk of not understanding certain terms or idioms, can improve insight into healthy and unhealthy behaviours.	Autistic individuals tend to interpret language in a literal way, and struggle with figures of speech and idioms (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). Teaching the language used in dating culture will help adolescents have more clear and meaningful discussions with others about romantic relationships.	Autistic adolescents tend to benefit from non-auditory support to oral questioning and feedback dialogue.	“According to the fifth and current edition of the DSM 2013, autism spectrum disorder is marked by two criteria: a) persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction that may manifest as challenges in social-emotional reciprocity and nonverbal communicative behaviours.”  “Romantic relationship anxiety can stem from uncertainty about relationships structures and expectations.”
Activity 3: Is This Available?	Introduce emotional availability and how to assess it in themselves and others.	Autistic adolescents tend to find emotion identification and internalization challenging (Baron-Cohen, 2000; Baron-Cohen et al., 1985; Tager-Flusberg, 1995). Emotional identification and awareness are	As romantic relationships during adolescence tend to be marked by instability and fluidity (Allen et al., 2019), improving awareness of emotional availability will help adolescents have insight into what being in healthy romantic relationships means. By using movie characters as a type of	In teaching emotional recognition, narrative-based interventions are an effective tool (Dodd et al., 2011).	“Being able to interpret behaviours in another individual who is showing interest is a crucial skill during romantic relationship initiation.”

		important aspects of healthy romantic relationships.	narrative-based examples of differing levels of emotional availability, adolescents can objectively assess whether the characters should be exploring romantic relationships or working on themselves.		
Activity 4: Is It True?	Practice non-literal communication in the context of romantic relationships.	Social communication, including the use of non-literal language, is an important aspect of meaningful connections with others. In romantic relationships, non-literal communication can often be used as a tool to express emotions and needs.	Autistic individuals on the spectrum tend to interpret language in an overly literal way (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). By having an open conversation about non-literal language, adolescents can learn to interpret subtle communication cues, which will help them better relate to others in all types of social relationships.	Strange stories are used to assess the ability to interpret nonliteral language (Happé, 1994; Jolliffe & Baron-Cohen, 1999).	“According to the fifth and current edition of the DSM 2013, autism spectrum disorder is marked by two criteria: (a) persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction that may manifest as challenges in social-emotional reciprocity and nonverbal communicative behaviours.”
Activity 5: Your Vision	Build self-concept clarity.	Self-concept clarity is associated with more positive and stable relationships. Individuals on the spectrum tend to have a lower self-concept as compared with neurotypical individuals (Coutelle et al., 2020).	Self-concept clarity development can build self-awareness and esteem, as well as determine current and future relationship goals. Creating a vision board can encourage adolescents to begin to explore their values and hopes for the future.	Art-based activity improve imagination and abstract thinking in autistic individuals. (Martin, 2011; Schweizer et al., 2020). It also promotes identity exploration and self-efficacy (Waalkes et al., 2019).	“Sexual health and romantic relationship education programs have been developed that aim to teach adolescents about healthy romantic relationships from a knowledgeable and trusted adult. These programs have been designed to develop critical thinking and perspective taking skills, the knowledge to identify characteristics of unhealthy relationships, evaluate their current and future relationship goals, develop conflict resolution skills, and prevent patterns of dating violence.”

Activity 6: Deal or Deal Breaker	Explore personal preferences and boundaries specific to romantic relationships.	All individuals possess mate standards, or personal preferences, that they use to evaluate others as potential romantic partners. These standards may not be as accessible to adolescents, or autistic individuals, as they involve high levels of social cognition and Theory of Mind. Mate standards may be an important step in developing a healthy and satisfying romantic relationship.	<i>Red Flags</i> and <i>Green Flags</i> in romantic partners may be a new and unfamiliar concept to adolescents. By normalizing the fact that sometimes there are behaviours or characteristics that you may not want in a romantic relationship, adolescents can begin to assess their own values and personal preferences in romantic partners. This may also help prevent unhealthy romantic relationships by encouraging adolescents to think objectively prior to entering a romantic relationship.	Game-based Activities increase social skill development, empathy, self-control, and conflict resolution in autistic adolescents.	“Adolescents who engage in romantic relationships without developing romantic functioning are especially vulnerable to problematic dating behaviours.”
Activity 7: Flirting	Get familiarized with flirting as a form of social communication.	Flirting, a complex form of social communication, tends to be challenging for individuals with impaired ToM (Ward et al., 2000). Teaching adolescents about flirting will help improve social communication with others, including those who are of romantic interest. It may also help autistic adolescents interpret the social language of strangers and decrease the risk of victimization.	People with impaired ToM tend to misinterpret flirting behaviour, which may lead to cognitive distortions and ineffective communication strategies (Ward, Keenan, & Hudson, 2000). Watching others flirt in video modelling will give adolescents a clearer understanding of what flirting is, without the embarrassment of performing it for the group.	Video modelling improves perspective taking and social interactions in autistic adolescents.	“People with impaired ToM tend to misinterpret flirting behaviour, which may lead to cognitive distortions and ineffective communication strategies.”
Activity 8: Thanks, But No Thanks	Teach emotional regulation skills, specifically in the context of managing rejection in romantic situations.	Learning how to recognize when someone is uninterested or feeling harassed, and what to do when you feel uninterested or harassed, may decrease the risk of victimization, and improve social relationships.	It is important for people to learn the rules of courtship and be taught how to recognize when someone is not interested, and when someone is feeling harassed (Mogavero & Hsu, 2019). By role-playing, adolescents will develop pathways that will serve them in future natural social situations.	The Teaching Interaction Procedures (Philips et al., 1974) has been used to increase social communication, social play, social emotional skills, and social friendships in autistic individuals (Leaf et al., 2009).	“Individuals who possess more developed ToM abilities tend to be better at identifying their own emotional expression and inhibiting impulsive, emotional reactions.”
Activity 9: Worst Date Ever	We learn about how to plan a date, and how to manage our emotions when plans do not go the way they were expected to.	Interpersonal problem-solving skills are a set of basic processes related to intelligence where the objective is to solve problems that involve other people. Examples of interpersonal problem-solving skills are being able to recognize emotions, attributing	As interpersonal problem-solving skills tend to be challenging for autistic adolescents (Gómez-Pérez et al., 2019), introducing common relationship challenges and collaborative skill building practice will help adolescents prepare for future romantic relationships.	Game-based Activities increase social skill development, empathy, self-control, and conflict resolution in autistic adolescents.	“In social situations, autistic individuals are less likely to be able to use executive functioning skills to describe reasoning behind their social decisions and are less likely to make use of contextual factors, such as the other person’s intentions.”

		causes, generating alternate solutions for a single problem, and anticipating their consequences (D’Zurilla and Nezu, 2010). Individuals who use effective interpersonal problem-solving skills tend to have better relationship quality and satisfaction (Sullivan et al. 2010).			
Activity 10: Share-Ades	Practice non-verbal communication and emotional recognition.	Interpreting the emotional state of a romantic partner can provide information about how to approach them and knowing when they require emotional support, which is a hallmark of a healthy romantic relationship.	Individuals with ASD tend to find non-verbal communication difficult (APA, 2013). By having adolescents practice expressing and identifying emotions in many different people, emotional recognition may become easier. Using a game to practice non-verbal communication can stimulate creativity, and create a more fluid, relaxed state where the whole body engages in problem solving (Prouty, 2000).	Games and role-plays have been used in various contexts to develop insight, empathy, prosocial skills, and improved behavior in autistic adolescents.	“According to the fifth and current edition of the DSM 2013, autism spectrum disorder is marked by two criteria: a) persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction that may manifest as challenges in social-emotional reciprocity and nonverbal communicative behaviours.”
Activity 11: My Spiel	We will learn to practice self-promotion.	Autistic individuals tend to use fewer executive functioning skills to determine the intentions of others in social situations (Buon et al., 2012).	During romantic relationships, an individual will likely introduce their partner to their family and friends. When meeting a friend or family member partner, people often provoke questions to determine suitability for their loved one. Managing these introductions can have an important impact on the relationship. By breaking down this process step-by-step, adolescents won’t have the moment of ‘freeze’ when they meet new people.	The teaching interaction procedures (Philips et al., 1974) has been used to increase social communication, social play, social emotional skills, and social friendships in individuals who are on the spectrum (Leaf et al., 2009).	“In autistic people, implications in ToM can present as challenges in executive functioning.”  “In social situations, autistic individuals are less likely to be able to use executive functioning skills to describe reasoning behind their social decisions and are less likely to make use of contextual factors, such as the other person’s intentions.”
Activity 12: Disaster Game Plan	We will learn about managing social situations that are unfamiliar and unexpected.	Interpersonal problem-solving skills are a set of basic processes related to intelligence where the objective is to solve problems that involve other people. Examples of interpersonal; problem solving skills are being able to recognize emotions, attributing	In romantic relationships, couples can face unexpected and complex challenges. Interpersonal problem-solving skills tend to be challenging for autistic adolescents (Gómez-Pérez; Mata, & Calero, 2019). By having adolescents practice problem solving in a collaborative activity, they can learn to examine the needs of	Game-based Activities increase social skill development, empathy, self-control, and conflict resolution in autistic adolescents.	“In social situations, autistic individuals are less likely to be able to use executive functioning skills to describe reasoning behind their social decisions and are less likely to make use of contextual factors, such as the other person’s intentions.”

		causes, generating alternate solutions for a single problem, and anticipating their consequences (D’Zurilla & Nezu, 2010). Individuals who use effective interpersonal problem-solving skills tend to have better relationship quality and satisfaction (Sullivan et al. 2010).	others while also managing the problem at hand.		
Activity 13: Well, That’s Debatable	Practice interpersonal problem-solving skills and assertiveness.	Interpersonal problem-solving skills are a set of basic processes related to intelligence where the objective is to solve problems that involve other people. Examples of interpersonal problem-solving skills are being able to recognize emotions, attributing causes, generating alternate solutions for a single problem, and anticipating their consequences (D’Zurilla and Nezu, 2010). Individuals who use effective interpersonal problem-solving skills tend to have better relationship quality and satisfaction (Sullivan et al. 2010).	By normalizing typical disagreements within healthy romantic relationships, and introducing healthy disagreement tips, adolescents can learn to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy disagreements. Using debate practice will encourage the adolescents to stay regulated, use collaborative problem solving (within team), and assertiveness (against team).	Debate practice enhances collaborative problem solving and communication skills, such as assertiveness (Kennedy, 2007; Williams-Brown, 2015).	“In social situations, autistic individuals are less likely to be able to use executive functioning skills to describe the reasoning behind their social decisions and are less likely to make use of contextual factors, such as the other person’s intentions.”
Activity 14: When to Break-Up	The aim of this lesson is to learn how to manage unhealthy romantic relationships.	While engaging in romantic relationships during adolescence is developmentally normal (Christopher et al., 2015; Forenze et al., 2018), relationships during adolescence tend to be marked by instability and fluidity (Allen et al., 2019). Learning to identify cues of unhealthy romantic relationships may also reduce the risk of engagement of them, which could prevent the negative impacts of unhealthy relationships (anxiety, depression, poor school attendance; Steinberg & Davila,	When romantic relationships become unhealthy, it can be an isolating experience for individuals. By having adolescents consider what they would do in fictional scenarios, they are developing cognitive pathways that will serve them if they ever find themselves in an unhealthy relationship.	The social information processing model enhances social cognition, which is effective in developing social skills in autistic adolescents (Flood et al., 2011; Mazza et al., 2017).	“Adolescents who engage in romantic relationships without developing romantic functioning are especially vulnerable to problematic dating behaviours.”

		2008, Baynard & Cross, 2008; Lacoce, 2016).			
Activity 15: Thinking Through Revenge Behaviours	Normalize the emotional impact of ending a romantic relationship and response inhibition around revenge behaviours.	In general, disinhibited behaviour tends to become more challenging in social situations with strong emotional valence (Hlavatá et al., 2018). The endings of romantic relationships can be especially complex and emotional, and often inhibition can be reduced. In neurotypical adolescents who face peer conflicts, including the end of relationships, most have at least one retaliation goal (Recchia et al., 2019). As autistic adolescents find response inhibition challenging (Singh & Young, 2020), retaliation impulses may be intensified.	By normalizing the negative experiences and emotions related to the termination of a romantic relationship, adolescents can develop self-awareness. Addressing the impulses that some adolescents face in response to feelings of sadness and despair, and encouraging thinking through them, can impact how adolescents experience these impulses in the future.	Autistic adolescents tend to learn better when the content is visual, structured, and concrete.	In autistic people, implications in ToM can present as challenges in executive functioning.”  “Individuals who possess more developed ToM abilities tend to be better at identifying their own emotional expression and inhibiting impulsive, emotional reactions.”