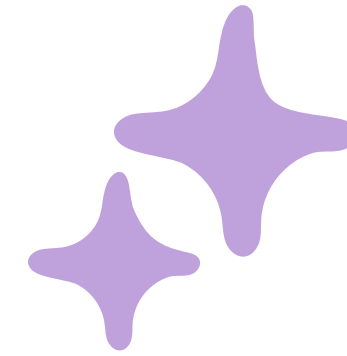


Let's Talk About



PROMOTING HEALTHY
SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT FOR
AUTISTIC ADOLESCENTS

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ABOUT US

Jaime Butler (She/Her)

- CAC Mental Health Counselor
- 6+ years working w/ autistic students
- Neurodivergent

Moe Butler (She/They)

- TN START Facilitator
- 15+ Years in Mental Health & Disability Field
- Neurodivergent



OVERVIEW

- Common Myths
- Risk Factors
- Strategies for promoting healthy sexual development

COMMON MYTHS

- Autistic individuals do not have sexual drives / interest
- Physical development of autistic youth occurs at a different rate to neurotypical peers
- Teaching about sexuality creates more issues
- Autistic individuals need to be sheltered from society
- Autistic individuals are always heterosexual and CIS-gendered

RISK FACTORS: SEXUAL KNOWLEDGE & EDUCATION

- Disabled students, including autistic students, are often excluded from their school's sex education programs
 - Exceptional Ed teacher's discomfort
 - Schools don't know how to adapt sex education curricula to meet the needs of autistic students
- Sex education is usually provided only after an individual displays sexual behavior that is situationally inappropriate, problematic or potentially criminal in nature

RISK FACTORS: SEXUAL KNOWLEDGE & EDUCATION

- Primary responsibility falls to parents/caregivers who are often unprepared, unsupported, and uncomfortable
- Healthcare providers don't feel prepared to provide sufficient psychosexual education to autistic patients

RISK FACTORS: MISEDUCATION

- Autistic people who have communication differences or face more social rejection may have fewer opportunities to learn developmental or sexual info from peers
 - Ex. Locker room talk, girls sharing about their periods, firsts, etc.
- May obtain sexual info from less accurate sources including the internet, pornography, movies, television, etc.
 - Not typically health representation of relationships (stalking, not taking no for an answer, etc)
- Media sources can be misinterpreted as evidence of accurate social scripts that indicate behaviors to engage in when pursuing relationships
- Potentially inaccurate and are not personalized to each individual on the spectrum

RISK FACTORS: VICTIMIZATION

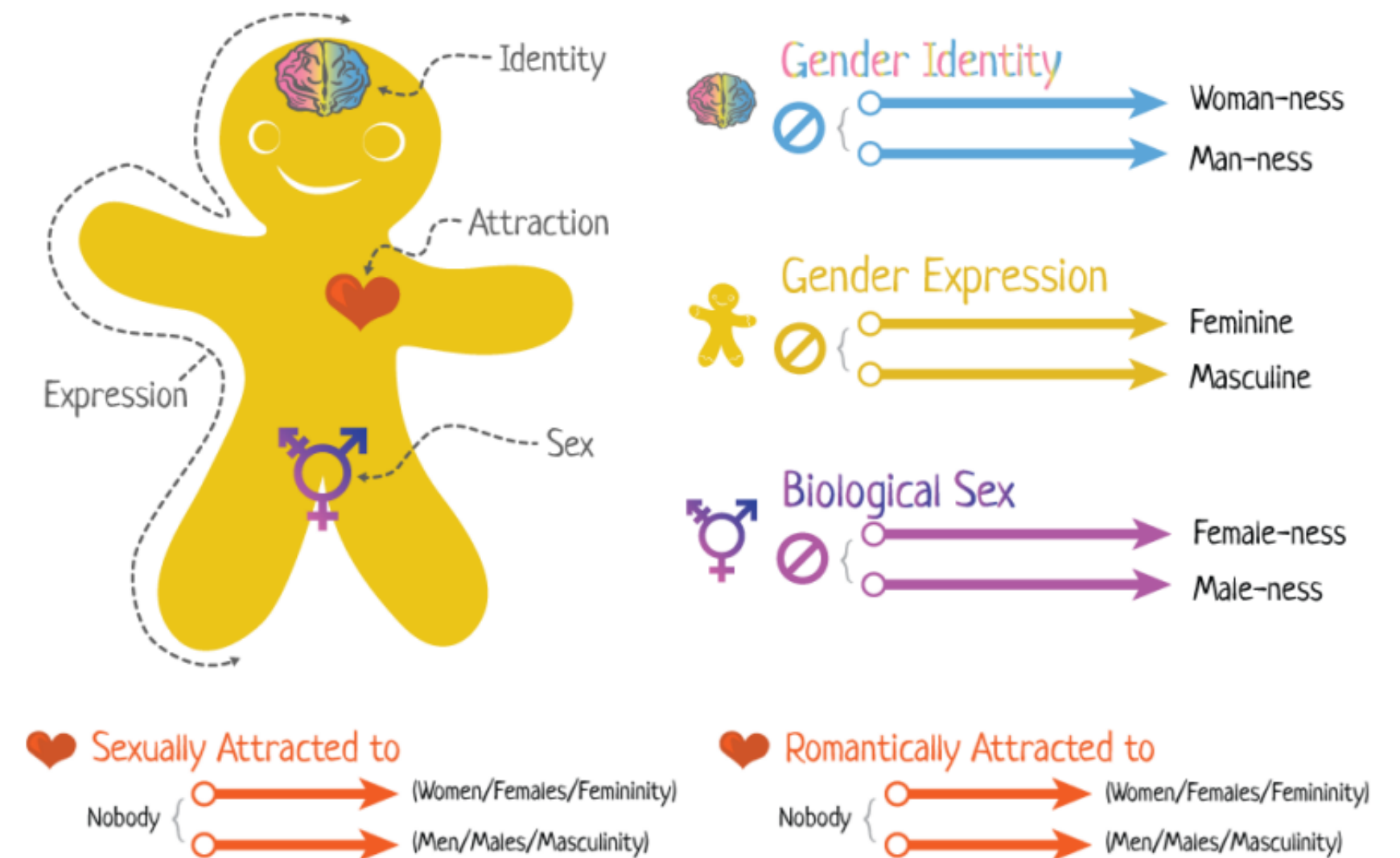
- 70% of autistic adults reported experiencing some form of sexual victimization after age 14 and into adulthood, compared to 45% of neurotypicals (Weiss & Fardella, 2018)
- A more recent study found that 9 out of 10 autistic women have been victims of sexual violence (Cazlis, et. al, 2022)
- More likely to be taken advantage of in different types of relationships
 - Sometimes unable to recognize people's intentions

SEX, SEXUALITY, & SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

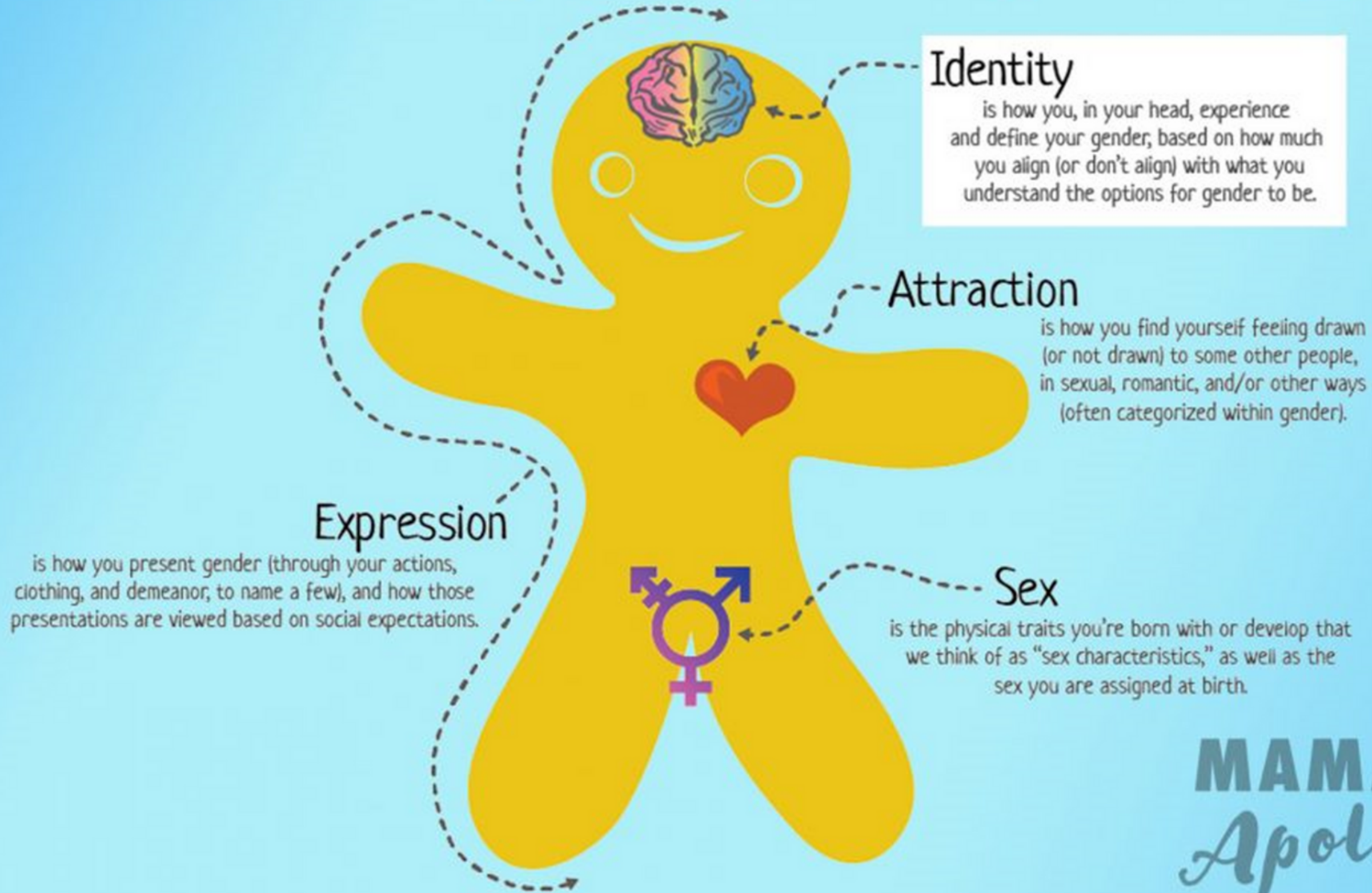
- Sexuality is essential to healthy overall development.
- Sexuality is more than sex. It's also:
 - How they feel about their developing body
 - How they understand attraction, intimacy, and affection
 - How they develop/maintain respectful intimate relationships
- Autistic teenagers develop sexually in the same way as other teenagers do, but they may need support to build social understanding

A SPECTRUM ON THE SPECTRUM

- Some teenagers are sexually attracted to different genders, some are attracted to the same gender, and some are attracted to people of all genders
- Regardless of who they're attracted to, teenagers might or might not identify as heterosexual, gay, lesbian or bisexual
- May be more or less interested in sex and sexuality



THE GENDERBREAD PERSON



MAMA BEAR
Apologetics

GENDER DIVERSITY

- Massive study on overlap between autism and gender diversity
 - Results from an analysis of 5 unrelated databases that all include information about autism, mental health and gender
 - 514,000 people
- Those do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth are 3-6 times as likely to be autistic as cisgender people are
- Gender-diverse people also report, on average, more traits associated with autism and are 5 times as likely to suspect they have undiagnosed autism
 - Why?



THE TALK

HAVING THE CONVERSATION

- It's okay that it's uncomfortable
- Opening up a line of communication keeps them safer
- Your child is more ready than you realize
- Move at a pace that both of you are comfortable with
- Get creative with what works best for your child

TOPICS OF CONVERSATION

- Present info in a straightforward, factual manner, accompanied by visual support and understanding of social implications
- Sex education for autistic individuals should cover more than just the mechanics of sex. It should also include topics such as:
 - Relationships with others and with oneself
 - Situational preparedness (in both physical and digital spaces)
 - Safe sex
 - Consent
 - Self-advocacy
 - Bodily autonomy
 - Distinguishing public versus private sexual behavior
 - Information on sexual misconduct and the laws of the land

EXPLAINING PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

- Knowing their body is the first step toward developing both awareness of themselves and the ability to make their own decisions
- It's important to help them understand the things that are happening in their body/brain
- Be sure to use proper language

During puberty, adolescents reach sexual maturity. Which system in the body changes during this time? → ability to reproduce

Puberty: The physical and hormonal changes that take place during adolescence.



EXPLAINING PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

- You can use visual supports like:
 - Photos– family members at different ages to help them understand when puberty happens
 - A body outline- labeling all of the body parts, and highlighting how each part will change
- Normalize and celebrate these changes
- Give them the chance to talk about how they feel about the changes in their body

Puberty Change	Already Happened	Will Happen	I feel nervous about this	I feel excited about this
Grow taller				
Has strong feelings				
Gets acne (pimples)				
Hair grows on face				
Hair gets oily				
Hair grows on underarms				
Hair grows on genitals (pubic hair)				
Gets body odor				
Penis grows				
Has an erection (hard penis)				
Mood swings				
“Like” someone				
More independent				

SEXUAL FEELINGS

- Some autistic adolescents may find it difficult to understand sexual feelings in themselves and others
- Build understanding by helping them break down sexual feelings into thoughts, body sensations and behavior.
- For example, if your child is sexually attracted to someone, they might have:
 - Thoughts – they think about the person a lot
 - Body sensations – a tingly feeling in their stomach or they get erections when they're near the person
 - Behavior – they try to find ways to be around the person.

USING “SOCIAL STORIES” & ROLE PLAYING

- Using social stories to provide context for different situations
 - Details about the setting
 - Things that typically happen in that setting
 - The actions that are most effective in that situation
- This can help them pick up on cues from neurotypical peers and learn to self-advocate
- Provide them with appropriate clarifying questions to ask if they don't understand the situation
- Practice interactions with your child.
 - For example, asking someone to go to the movies and the appropriate reaction to yes and no

CREATING RULES/BOUNDARIES

- Set clear rules about how to do things like inviting someone on a date.
 - Example: 'You can ask someone out once. If they say they're not free, you can ask them again another time. If they say no again, even if they give you an excuse, you shouldn't ask again'.
- Set boundaries about appropriate behavior. For example, following someone around or frequently contacting them online isn't OK.
- Creating rules for themselves on what does/doesn't make them feel comfortable

THE CIRCLE OF RELATIONSHIPS

1 PURPLE PRIVATE CIRCLE

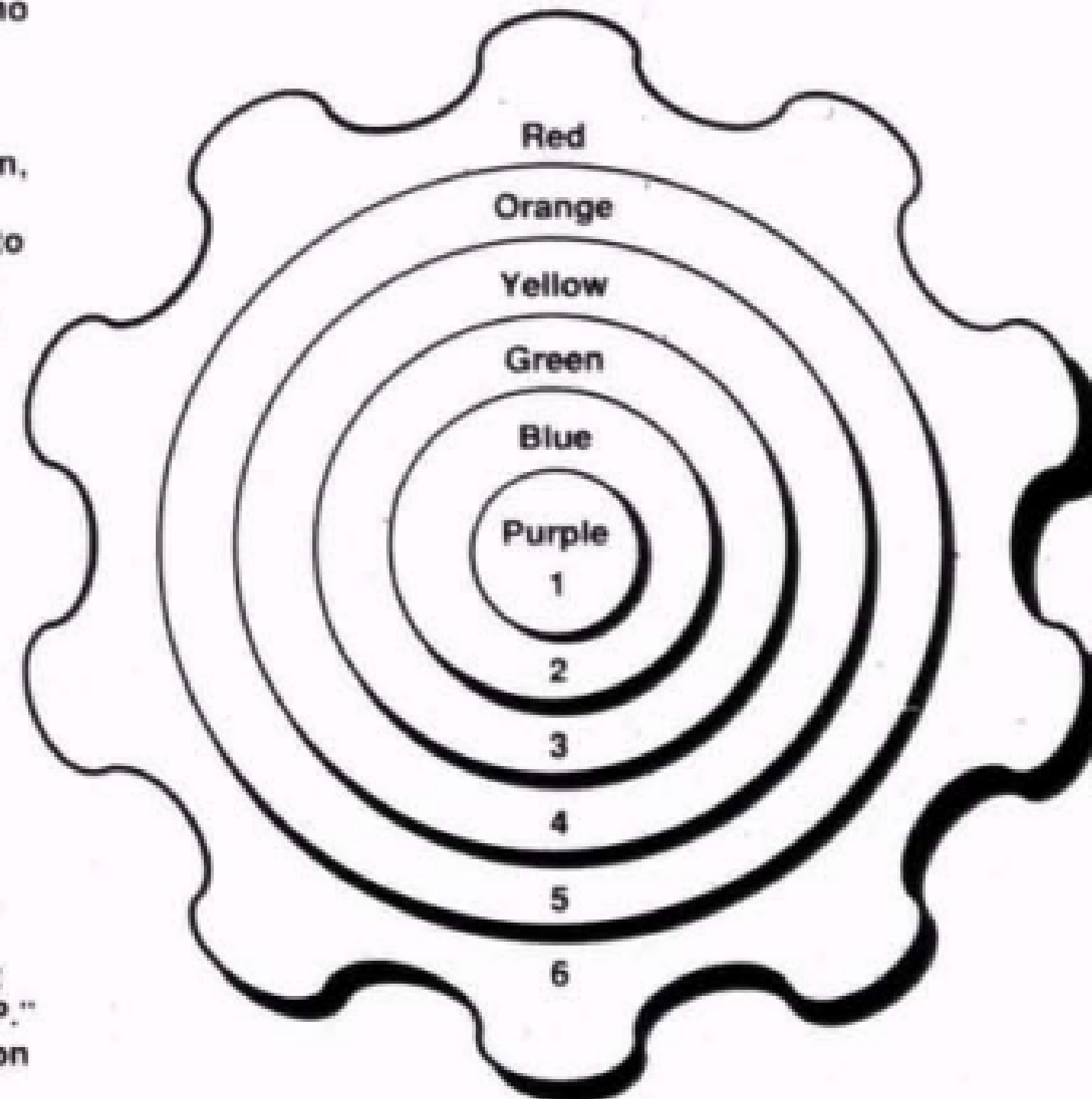
- You are important, and you decide who will touch you.
- No one should touch you unless you want to be touched.
- Sometimes people in your Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange, or Red CIRCLES will try to get too close to you. You need to say "STOP."
- No one touches you unless you want to be touched, and you do not touch other people unless they want to be touched.

2 BLUE HUG CIRCLE

- It is a mutual decision to kiss and be close. If you do not want to, you must say "STOP."
- Sometimes you may not feel like being touched. This does not mean you are no longer close with your partner, but only not feeling loving at that moment.
- Your partner can "STOP" you, too.

3 GREEN FARAWAY CIRCLE

- Sometimes a friend may want to be closer to you than you want. You just explain to your friend and say, "STOP."
- I will give you a "Faraway" hug only on special occasions.
- You are not in my Blue Hug Circle.



4 YELLOW HANDSHAKE CIRCLE

- Sometimes someone whose name you know may ask for a "Faraway" hug. You can say "No."
- No one can touch you unless you want to be touched.

5 ORANGE WAVE CIRCLE

- Wave to an acquaintance who is too far away for a handshake.
- Sometimes children will want to hug and kiss you, but you can say "No."
- It is best to wave to children.
- Children do not know as much as you, and so you have to show them correct behavior.

6 RED STRANGER CIRCLE

- Some people stay strangers forever.
- You may talk about business to a stranger who is a community helper.
- Other strangers do not talk to you or touch you.

SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

- As they learn about sexual feelings, you'll need to talk with them about sexual relationships
- Important for them to know that sexual relationships are a normal part of life, but they don't have to have sexual relationships regardless of outside pressure
- Learning about sexual cues from other people to build confidence and keep them safe.
 - Example: 'Someone might be interested in having sex if they've been kissing or touching you and then invite you into their bedroom. If you want to have sex with them, you must ask them if they want to have sex. You must not do anything the other person doesn't want to do'.

PRIVATE VS PUBLIC

- You may also need to provide some guidelines about the difference between public and private.
- These may include:
 - Who they can talk to about any concerns they have (ex. parents, medical professionals)
 - Which rooms are private and which are public
 - They should only undress or masturbate in a private room (eg their bedroom)
 - That people should always knock on a bedroom door before entering

SEXUAL HEALTH

- Sexual health includes
 - Practicing safe sex
 - Cleaning their genitals, seeking medical attention and talking to trusted individuals or professionals if they need help.

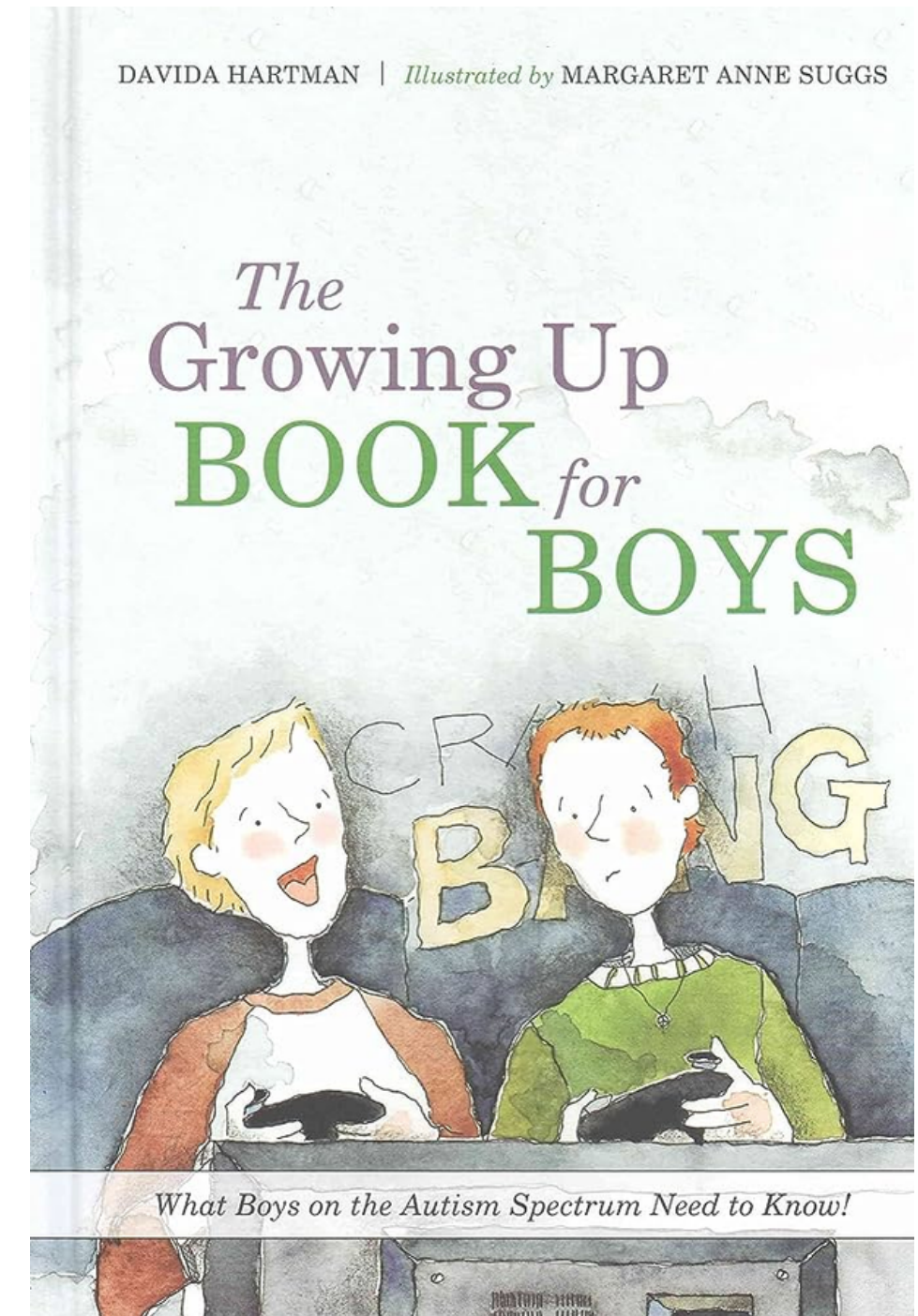
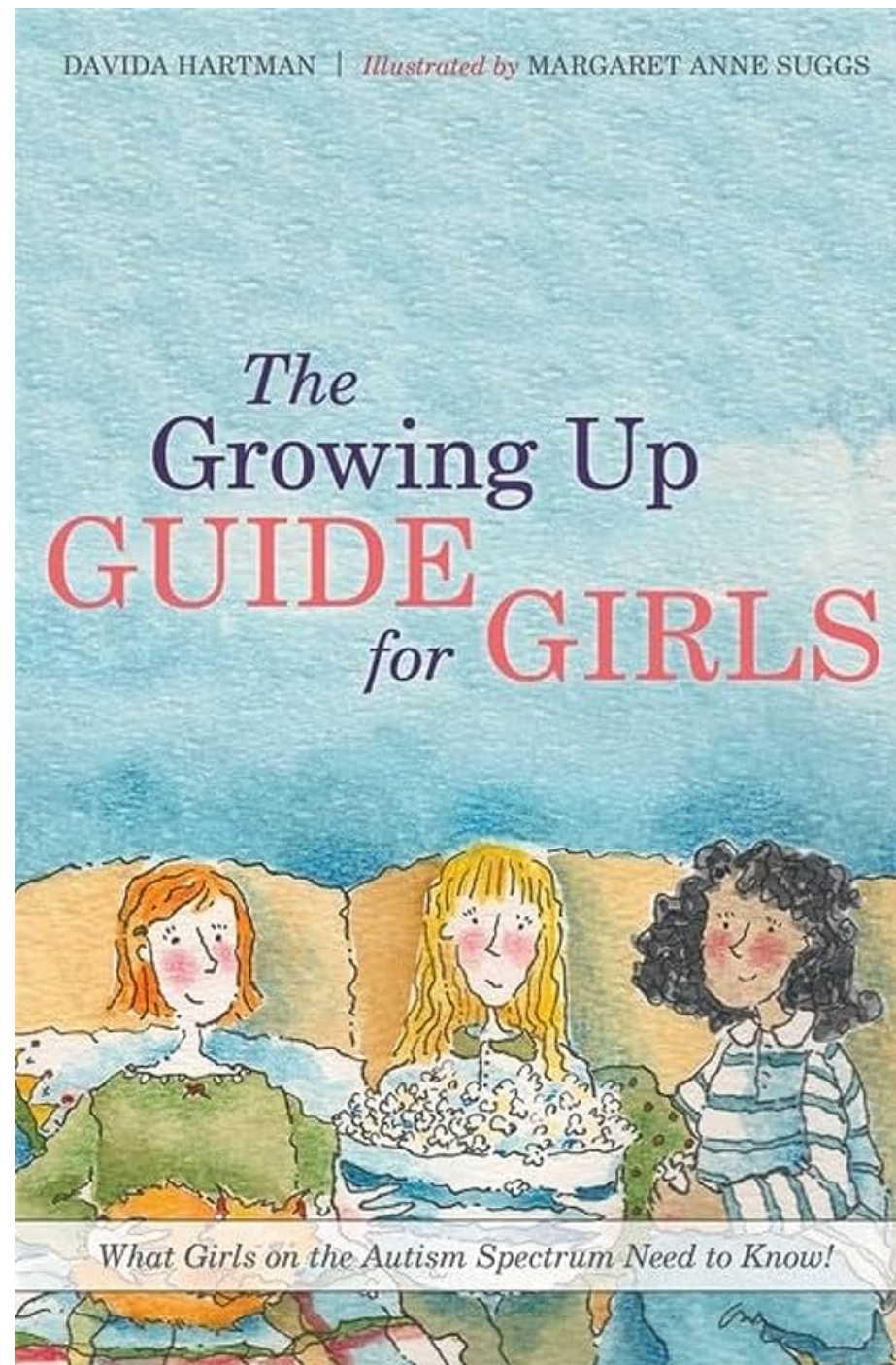
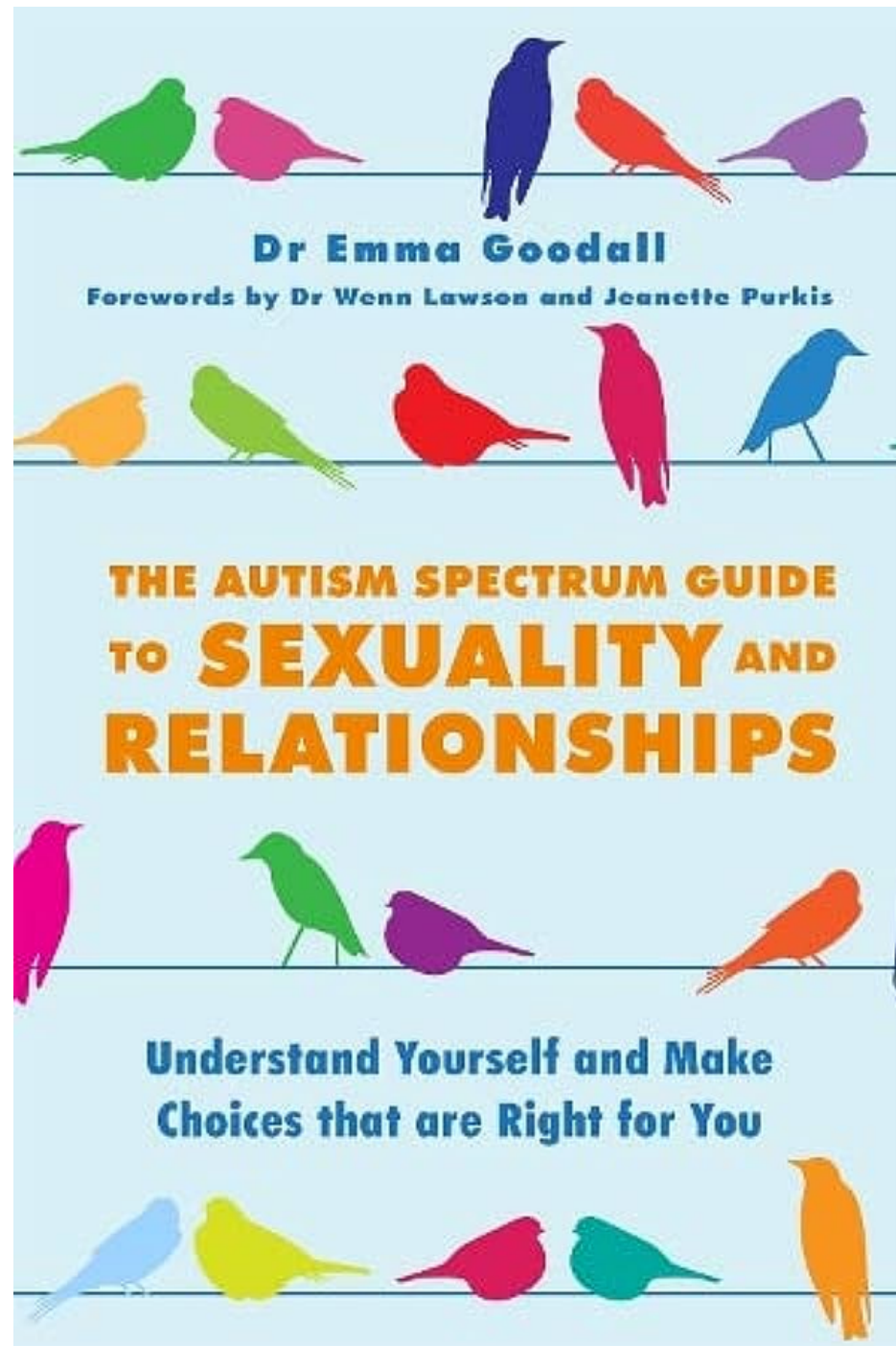
HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

- Putting things in context of relationship red and green flags



DIGNITY OF RISK

- The right of a person to make an informed choice to engage in experiences meaningful to him/her and which are necessary for personal growth and development.
- Normal living often includes risks. Dignity of risk allows people to lead normal lives.
- Overprotecting disabled people keeps them from many life situations that they have the right to experience, and prevent meaningful connections and fulfillment of their hopes and dreams



QUESTIONS?