



**National Women's  
Safety Alliance**

## **Submission on the National Autism Strategy**

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**Submitted by**

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The National Women's Safety Alliance acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and future, and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and emerging. We value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledge.

## About NWSA

The **National Women's Safety Alliance** brings together a diversity of voices, expertise, and experience to inform and guide national policy on women's safety. The NWSA, established in August 2021, connects the sector, experts, government, and victim-survivors with a shared vision to end violence against women. This will be achieved through consultation, research, and the collaborative development of expert policy advice to government.

More information about NWSA is available on our [website](#).

## Overarching Considerations

The NWSA acknowledges the work done by the Department of Social Services and the Australian Government in developing a National Autism Strategy to help improve life outcomes for Autistic people across Australia. NWSA are grateful to have the opportunity to provide feedback.

We understand that the strategy will be for all Autistic Australians, and will cover key reform areas, including access to services, healthcare, education, and employment, to aid a more coordinated, national approach supporting Autistic people at each stage of life. The NWSA supports the report and recommendations from our colleagues at Women With Disabilities Australia. We would like to see the National Autism Strategy working with the goals of the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children.

The NWSA are calling for a focus on

- sexual violence primary prevention and response
- non-segregated comprehensive sexuality education for children of all abilities.

### **Violence against people with a Disability<sup>1</sup>**

The Disability Royal commission provides a damning picture of the experience of people with disability in Australia.

People with disability:

- experience higher rates of interpersonal violence and abuse (that is, violence and abuse perpetrated by another individual) and are more likely to experience multiple incidents.
- experience more than twice the rate of violence by a domestic partner
- experience twice the rate of sexual assault
- are more likely to know the perpetrator of violence.
- are more likely to experience abuse at a young age.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016 Personal Safety Survey (PSS) is a national survey about people's experiences of violence and abuse. According to the PSS, since age 15<sup>2</sup>:

- More than half of people with disability aged 18 to 64 (55 per cent) have experienced physical or sexual violence, compared with 38 per cent of people without disability.
- Physical assault is the most common type of violence or abuse (experienced by 45 per cent of people with disability), followed by emotional abuse perpetrated by a domestic partner (31 per cent). In comparison, 29 per cent of people without disability experienced physical violence and 17 per cent emotional abuse.
- The rate of violence by a domestic partner is much higher for people with disability (21 per cent) than people without disability (9.8 per cent).
- The rate of sexual assault of people with disability is double that of people without disability (18 per cent compared with 9.1 per cent).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2023-09/Final%20Report%20-%20Volume%203%2C%20Nature%20and%20Extent%20of%20Violence%2C%20abuse%2C%20neglect%20and%20exploitation.pdf> p9

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/personal-safety-australia/latest-release>

## **Sexual Violence and the Autism Community**

An online study from 2014<sup>3</sup>, showed that 70% of autistic adults reported experiencing some form of sexual victimization after age 14 and into adulthood. In a study exploring self-reported experiences of many forms of victimisation and perpetration, researchers found that adults on the autism spectrum were more likely to report several forms of victimisation, including sexual violence, than the non-disabled population.

Autism Spectrum Disorder can be associated with differences in social communication, including difficulties decoding hidden intentions and emotions of others, and understanding implicit communication and elements of context. Research indicates that autistic women may be at considerable risk for sexual victimisation.

Recent research has indicated that 9 autistic women out of 10 have experienced sexual violence<sup>4</sup>. There is a tentative conclusion from the 2022 study that being autistic means undergoing a 10–16% risk of enduring sexual molestation as a child and a 62–70% risk of being sexually victimised in adulthood. Most victims are girls and women: autistic female risk of being sexually assaulted is between two and three times as much than non-autistic females and about four times as much than autistic males. Those figures are consistent with the general population rates: around 30% of women and 12% of children are sexually victimised in their lifetime.

## **Sexual education and the Autism Community**

Recent government legislation has acknowledged that a major primary prevention tool for sexual violence is age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education.

Women with Disabilities Australia and National Women's Safety Alliance have made the recommendation that the Australian Government abandon the term 'consent education,' and adopt the term 'Comprehensive Sexuality Education' (CSE), which views 'sexuality' holistically and within the context of emotional and social development and encompasses seven key components, including: gender, sexual and reproductive health and HIV, sexual rights and sexual citizenship, pleasure, violence, diversity (including disability) and relationships<sup>5,6</sup>.

However, in Australia a 2022 study from New South Wales reports that students with an intellectual disability tend to receive less holistic sex education as compared to students without a disability<sup>7</sup>. The approach recommended from teachers across New South Wales includes incorporating sexuality education-related goals in an Individualised Learning Plan;

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<sup>3</sup> Brown-Lavoie, S. M., Viecili, M. A., and Weiss, J. A. (2014). Sexual knowledge and victimization in adults with autism spectrum disorders. *J Autism Dev. Disord.* 44, 2185–2196. doi: 10.1007/s10803-014-2093-y

<sup>4</sup> [Frontiers | Evidence That Nine Autistic Women Out of Ten Have Been Victims of Sexual Violence \(frontiersin.org\)](https://www.frontiersin.org/journal/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.884441)

<sup>5</sup> [Submission Senate Sexual-Consent-Laws WWDA 2023.pdf](#)

<sup>6</sup> [NWSA-Teach-us-Consent-Submission-to-the-Inquiry-into-current-and-proposed-sexual-consent-laws-in-Australia-Final.pdf](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Social Sciences | Free Full-Text | Sex Education for Students with an Intellectual Disability: Teachers' Experiences and Perspectives \(mdpi.com\)](#)

teachers adopting a rights-based approach and focusing on all students' self-determination, agency, and rights regarding sex education; and providing schools with necessary resources to teach sex education to all students.

With the work happening in consent education and federal harmonisation, it is essential that these recommendations are considered as part of the commonwealth framework for education as a pillar of primary prevention. This also aligns with Action 8 with the first action plan; Develop and implement age-appropriate programs across all four domains, informed by children and young people, that are culturally safe, to intervene early to address violence supportive behaviours and support recovery and healing from trauma<sup>8</sup>. We need a tailored non-segregated approach to how we inform people about their rights and body autonomy.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dss.gov.au/the-national-plan-to-end-violence-against-women-and-children/first-action-plan-2023-2027>