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Social Signals – Mike’s Crush

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This review discusses the unique audiovisual-based curriculum Mike’s Crush, by Nancy Nowell, and briefly describes the autism spectrum and its associated challenges. The review explores the curriculum’s noteworthy approach to teaching social skills and recommends it as helpful material for all educators, especially for those working with students on the autism spectrum.

KEYWORDS *Sexuality education, relationships, social skills, autism spectrum disorders, autism, Asperger’s syndrome, review*

From the Website:

Social Signals *videos and curriculum teach what healthy and unhealthy relationships look like at different ages, in different situations, with different people, and in different environments. Using videos, video modeling and interactive lessons, the Mike’s Crush curriculum teaches a wide range of skills to adolescents with autism, Asperger’s and intellectual disabilities.— www.socialsignalsed.com*

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are now being diagnosed in approximately 1 in 110 children, disproportionately affecting boys (1 in 70 males compared with 1 in 315 females). Given the high prevalence of ASDs and the complex ways they can affect people, just about anyone who works with children, teens, or adults should be informed about ASD.

The spectrum of autism disorders, including Asperger’s syndrome, may present as a complex set of strengths and weaknesses within an individual. While some individuals with autism experience delays in cognitive functioning, the majority of individuals with Asperger’s syndrome (also known as High Functioning Autism) have average to above average intelligence. They may also have more unique perceptions of the world, strong language capabilities, or other talents.

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Autism, regardless of one's placement on the spectrum, is a neurological difference in how the brain processes information. Despite associated strengths, people affected by autism tend to have difficulties in three primary areas: communication (all the subtleties and nuances of both verbal and nonverbal communication), social interaction (knowing when and how to socially interact), and imagination (which can include restricted interests or the ability to intuitively understand someone else's perspective). It is sometimes difficult for individuals on the autism spectrum to "put themselves in someone else's shoes." In addition, others often misunderstand their behaviors and ignore their underlying intentions. As a result, individuals on the spectrum often have difficulty forming and maintaining relationships. This may contribute to a sense of loneliness, especially at a time of expected increased social involvement, such as adolescence and young adulthood.

Like any difference from others, however, the frustrations are not limited to a specific set of issues. Most individuals on the spectrum also have a different sensory profile. This can be experienced as heightened attention, strong aversions to tastes, smells, sights, sounds, touch, and struggles with balance in everyday experiences. Such difficulties in sensory processing, coupled with limitations in communication and social interactions, may come with high levels of anxiety, specifically around new situations or groups of people.

After 35 years of working with adults and children on the spectrum or with disabilities, Nancy Nowell, MPA, MEd, has a first-hand grasp of students' diverse needs and challenges. With her filmmaker son, Nowell founded the company Social Signals and began developing audiovisual educational material to teach social skills to students on the autism spectrum. While several books already existed about Asperger's syndrome and intimate relationships, the Social Signals curriculum and DVD, *Mike's Crush*, is the first of its kind, using an audiovisual format to address the very subtle skills people need to form close friendships and intimate relationships.

The *Mike's Crush* DVD is composed of professionally filmed short video narratives, which provide viewers an opportunity to watch others' social behaviors in various real life situations and to learn from their actions. The complete *Mike's Crush* curriculum comes with two video stories on DVD (one "good" day and one "bad" day) and an accompanying binder of lesson plans covering appearance, relationships, body language, conversation, and some of the rules of relationships.

Mike's Crush illustrates, through exaggerated examples, how one might incorrectly "read" a social situation and how one can accurately read one and respond accordingly. Through such videos, the curriculum presents all the pieces to the social interaction puzzle, including communication, body language, friendship, hygiene, and personal space. Its central themes include different kinds of relationships, and healthy and unhealthy boundaries. It aims not only to help people on the autism spectrum form healthy relation-

ships but also to teach them about the social and legal lines that must not be crossed.

Nowell's lessons and videos help teens and young adults target specific issues about initiating and maintaining healthy social connections, which are often especially challenging for those on the autism spectrum. Nowell's curriculum is designed in a user-friendly format for just about anyone in a classroom or one-on-one setting to address these difficult situations. Her program helps foster awareness about the subtleties of relationships and helps students target their own areas of anxiety and difficulties upon which to improve. Additional videos and curricula are now in development. Connecting to a peer group is an important element of life for most. We all have the need to feel valued and appreciated by others, to varying degrees. During adolescence, individuals on the spectrum may or may not have the same desire to experience peer groups and dating, but repeatedly the invisible "rules" of social behaviors can be puzzling or overwhelming.

The *Mike's Crush* DVD and curriculum may be the missing piece for teens and young adults with difficulty in social skills. The lessons are written to be adaptable to all students with a range of abilities, ages, and knowledge. I would even argue that this material offers invaluable information to all members of society who wish to improve their skills in the areas of friendship and romance; we are all frequently involved in social interactions, but we rarely stop to analyze subtle cues and attempt to adapt what we learn to our own lives. For all teachers and caregivers, *Mike's Crush* is an excellent curriculum to address these subjects effectively. For those working with students on the spectrum, *Mike's Crush* is essential.

To get more information on this resource or to purchase a copy, please visit www.socialsignaled.com. This curriculum is also available at www.sexpressions.com.