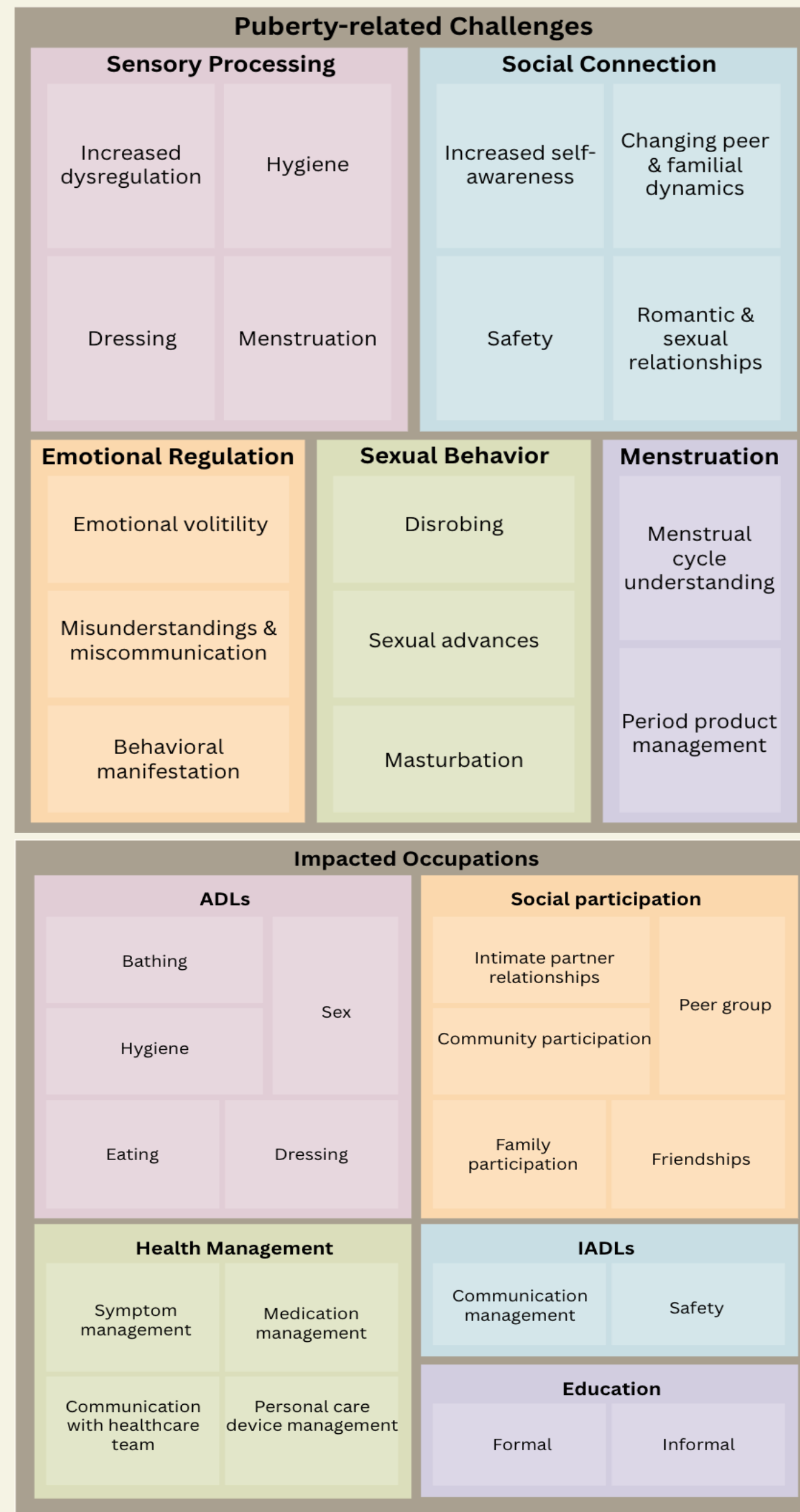




BACKGROUND

Insufficient sexual and reproductive health education (SRHE) combined with unique puberty-related challenges significantly impacts occupational engagement in neurodivergent (ND) adolescents.



Challenges: ND youth experience a unique set of challenges during puberty as pre-existing difficulties are exacerbated and new challenges arise (Cummins et al., 2018).

Occupational impact: The challenges that ND youth face during puberty significantly impact engagement across a variety of occupations.

Support: Significant gaps in both support services and SRHE exist for ND youth. Available interventions are rooted in behaviorism and lack the holistic perspective occupational therapy (OT) should provide. SRHE curriculums are inaccessible to diverse learners and many ND youth are excluded from health classes (Larson et al., 2021).

OT's role: OTs are well positioned to address many puberty-related challenges through modification, prevention, and health promotion (Kurt et al., 2023).

Capstone site: Gather and Grow (G&G) is an outpatient therapy clinic serving neurodivergent individuals across the lifespan using neurodiversity-affirming and trauma-assumed approaches.

THEORETICAL BASIS

The Occupational Performance Process Model guided problem identification, goal setting, and intervention creation throughout the creation of ND & Puberty, ensuring the deliverables aligned with each client's unique needs and contexts (Fearing et al., 1997). The IMPROVE and CARE model supported the accessibility and usability of interventions for a variety of support needs (Walsh, 2000).

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The goal of ND & Puberty was to enhance the capacity of OTs at Gather & Grow to provide affirming, client-centered support to ND adolescents by improving understanding of puberty-related challenges, increasing access to educational resources, and developing interventions for a wide range of puberty-related occupational barriers.



ND & Puberty: Enhancing Occupational Therapy Support for Neurodivergent Adolescents During Puberty

ACTIVITIES & DELIVERABLES

Program Overview:

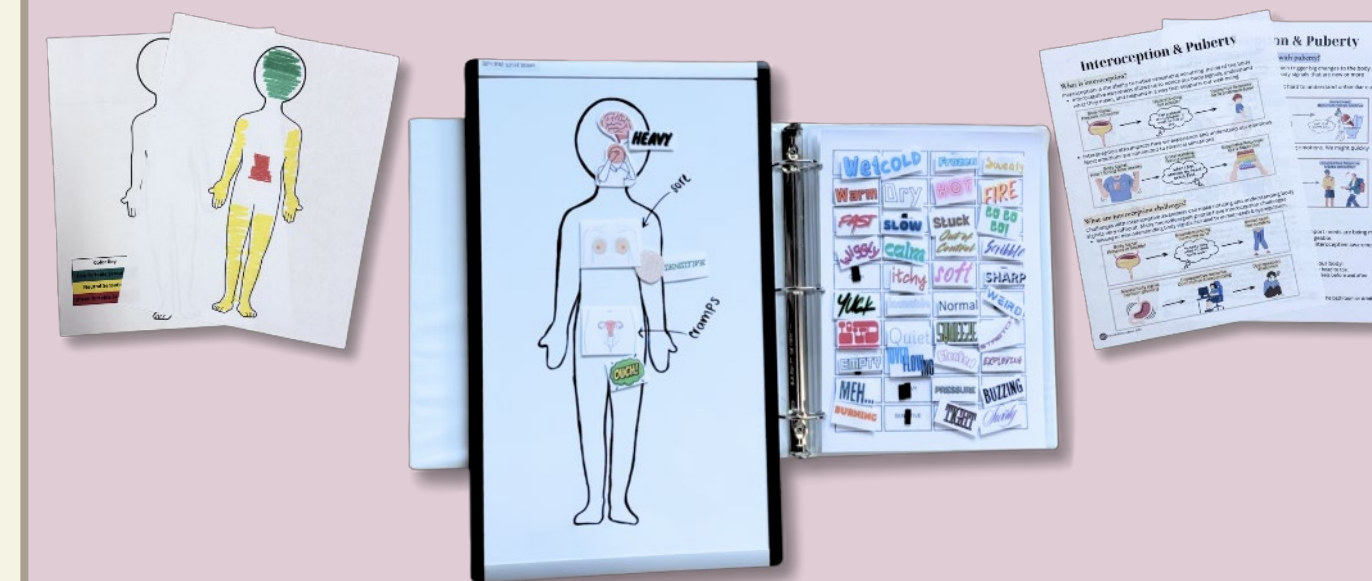
- Upon completion of service analysis and needs assessment, deliverables were developed to address identified challenges.
- ND & Puberty's associated website was developed to serve as a landing page for all deliverables created, in addition to an extensive collection of online resources.
- Deliverables include educational handouts and intervention guidelines with associated materials.



Sensory Processing

Interoception

- Body mapping intervention
- Interoception & puberty handout



Hygiene

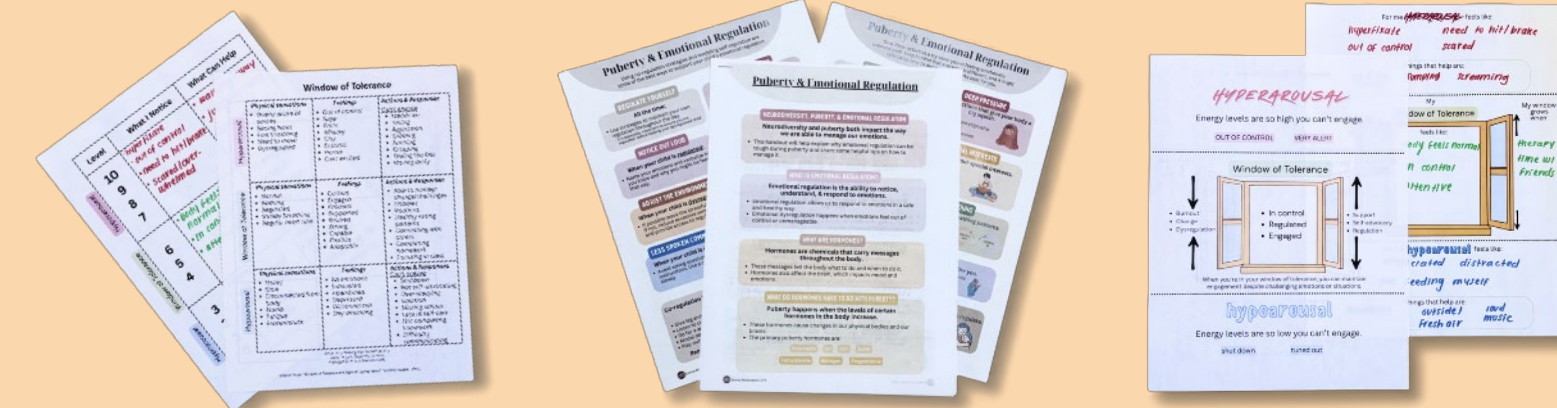
- Hygiene preferences intervention
- Hygiene accommodations handouts
 - Bathing, hair washing, deodorant, hair removal, menstrual hygiene



Emotional Regulation

Emotional Volatility

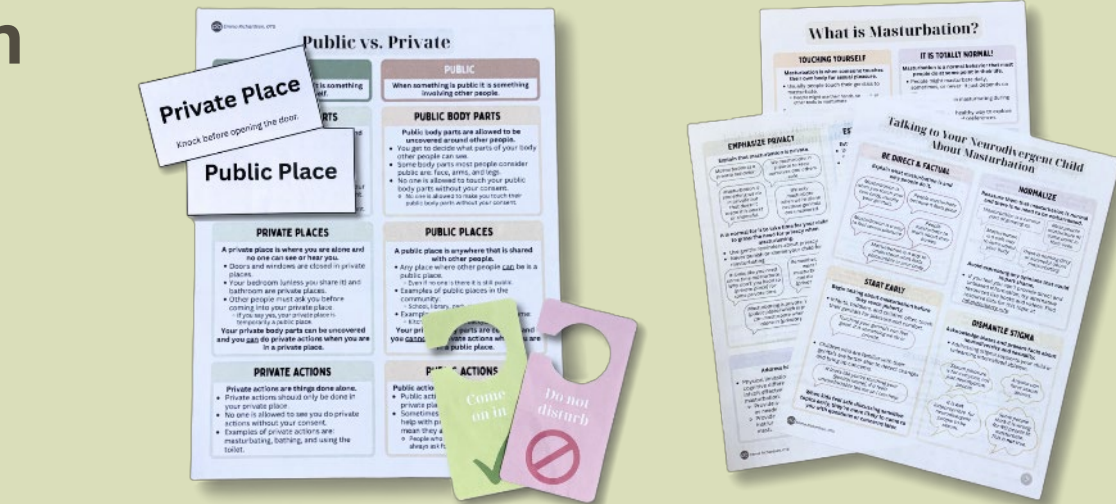
- Window of tolerance intervention
- Emotional regulation & puberty handouts



Sexual Behavior

Masturbation

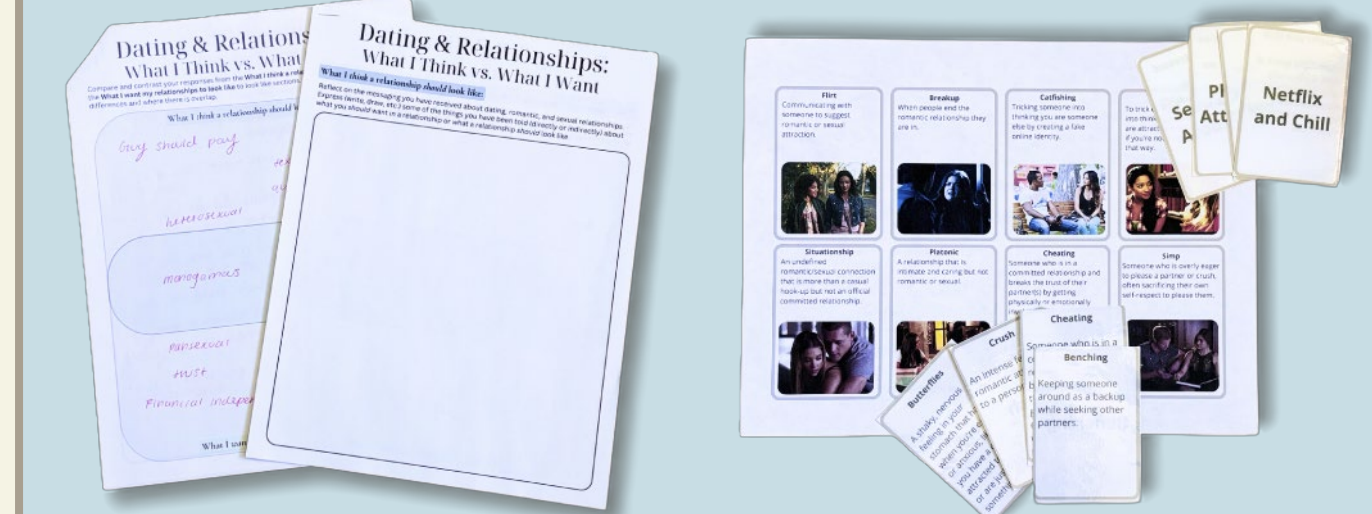
- OT guide to inappropriate masturbation
- Understanding masturbation handout
- Discussing masturbation handout
- Public vs. private handout
 - Door hang tags and room labels



Social Connection

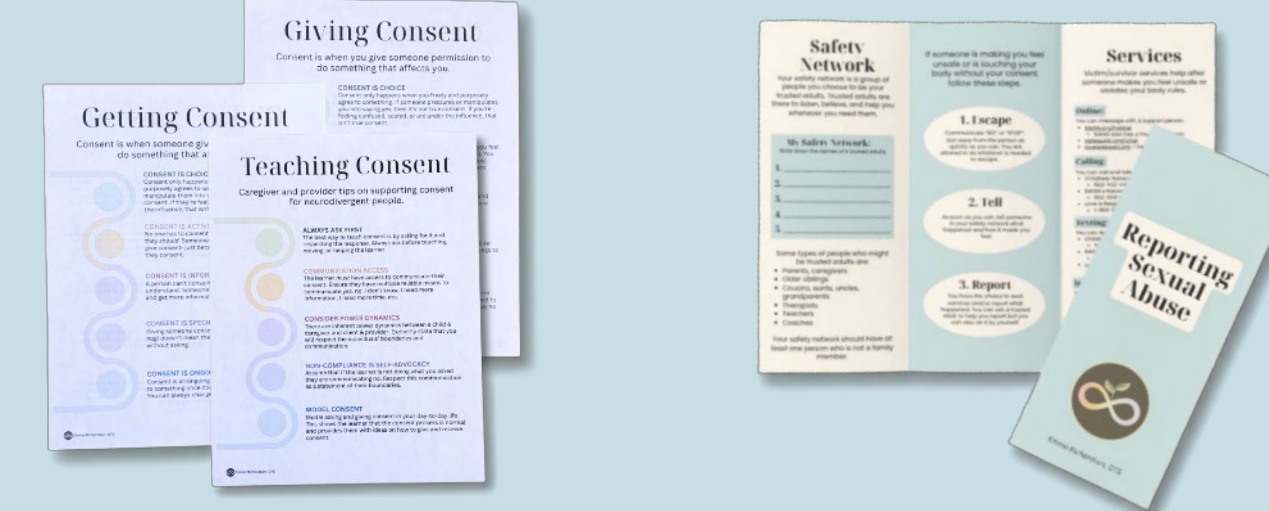
Dating & Relationships:

- What I think vs. what I want intervention
- Dating, relationship, and sex terms handout and flashcards



Consent

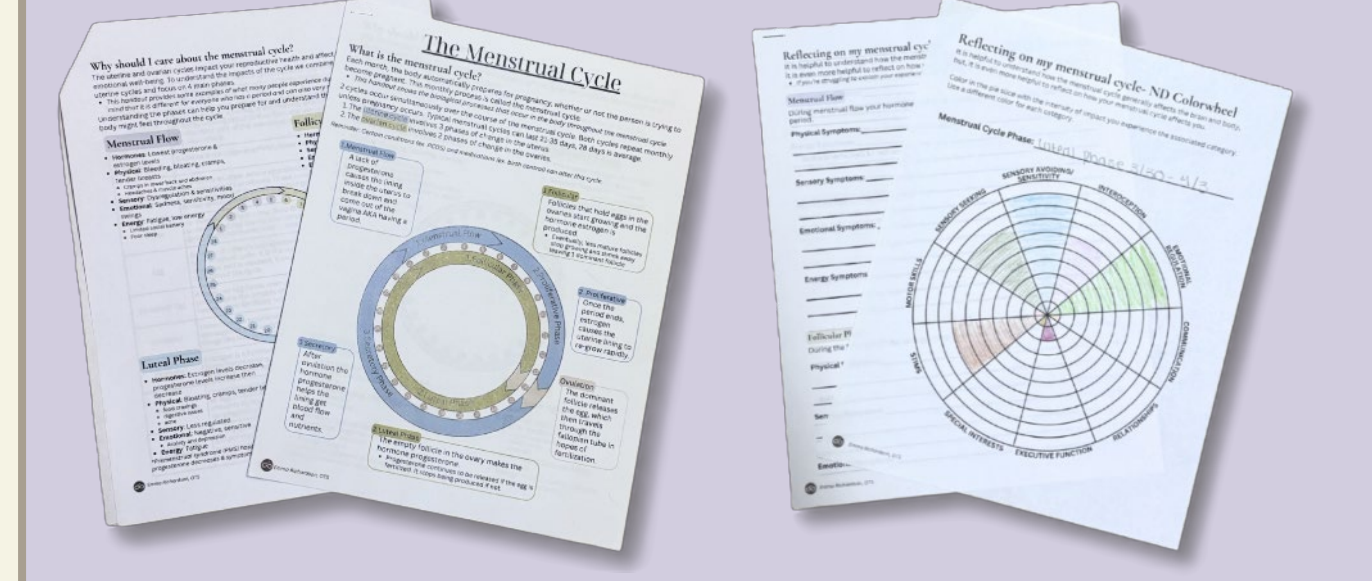
- OT guide to consent education
- Understanding consent handout
- Teaching consent handout
- Reporting sexual abuse handout



Menstruation

The Menstrual Cycle

- Menstrual cycle reflection intervention
- Menstrual cycle handout
- Period tracking handout



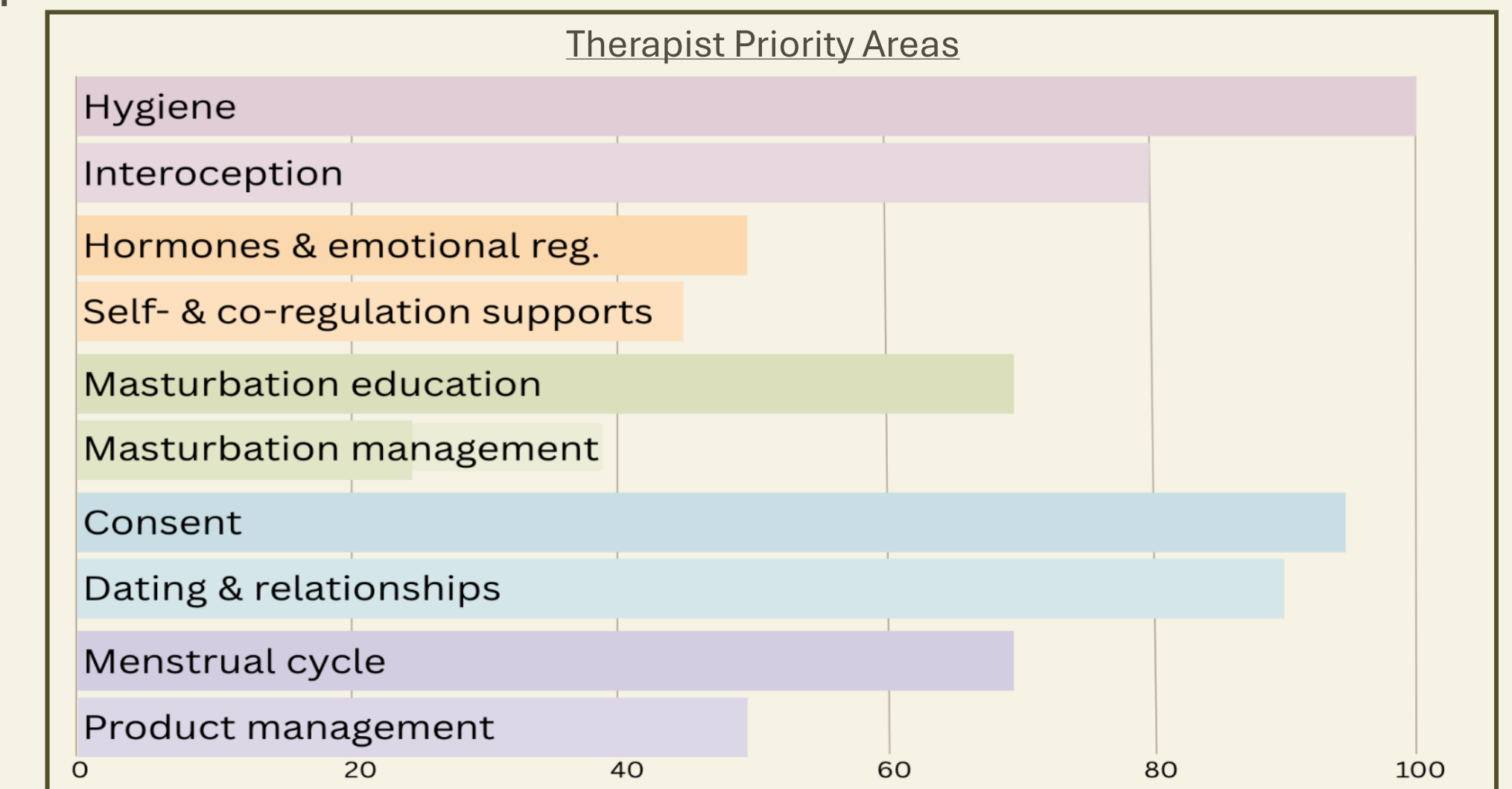
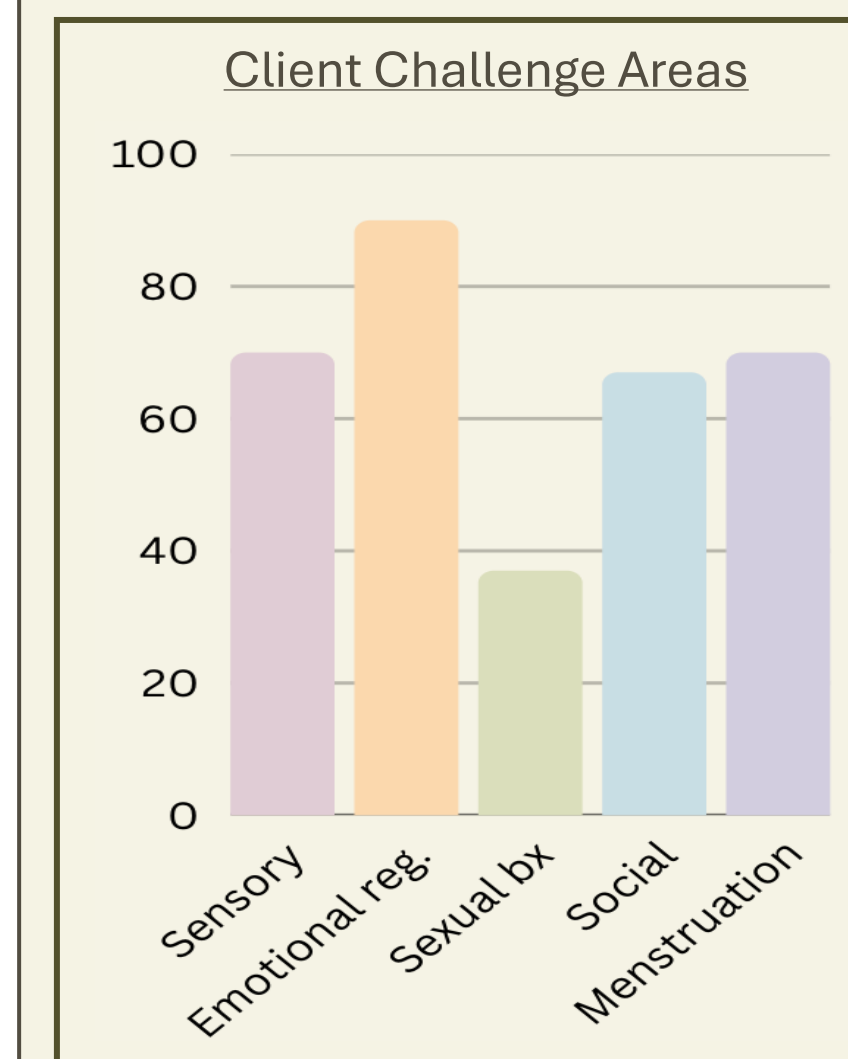
Menstrual Products

- Period product exploration intervention
- Period products overview handout
- Period product visual aids & schedules



EVALUATION & FINDINGS

The results of an informal needs assessment surveying clients' primary puberty-related challenges and therapists' priority areas were used to inform the topics addressed in this program. The data gathered guided formative and summative evaluation processes.



Formative evaluation:

Weekly feedback sessions with site mentor and the use of a development matrix ensured deliverables continually met client and therapist needs and objectives outlined.

Summative evaluation:

Review of all deliverables with site mentor ensured program goal was met. Program evaluation by G&G staff revealed the sustainability and effectiveness of ND & Puberty:

- Of the 8 therapists that completed the survey, **100%** reported the program **exceeded their needs and expectations** and **100%** reported the program was **very sustainable**.
- 7/8 therapists** reported they would feel **comfortable utilizing the deliverables** to support puberty related treatment and education in their clients.

"This was really needed and so helpful. I feel much more confident supporting my clients in this area now! I really appreciate how easy it is to access too!"

"Amazing resources, so comprehensive and well organized"

"You went so above and beyond what we imagined for these products and I can see how all of these will be used with clients, caregiver, etc."

CONCLUSION

Immediate outcomes:

- G&G staff and clients receive physical and digital access to 23 educational handouts, six intervention guidelines with associated exploration kits and worksheets, two therapist guides, and one website.

Long-term impact:

- G&G staff gain insight into puberty-related challenges experienced by the client population they serve.
- Interventions targeting puberty-related challenges are improved and puberty-aged clients receive more holistic care.
- Clients and support networks gain increased access to puberty-related resources.

Sustainability:

- Use of data from needs assessment to inform topic choices ensures all aspects of the program meet the needs of clients and therapists at G&G.
- Creation of a website as a landing page to access deliverables and additional resource lists expands access of tools to a larger population.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The development of ND & Puberty would not have been possible without the following support:

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- Larson, S. K., Nielsen, S., Hemberger, K., & Klug, M. G. (2021). Addressing Puberty Challenges for Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Survey of Occupational Therapy Practice Trends. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 75(3). <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2021.040105>

Additional References:

