OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

What's Love Got to Do with It?: Promoting Social Participation Through Dating for Neurodiverse Young Adults

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INTRODUCTION

- Dating and romantic relationships are fundamental human experiences that impact social and emotional well-being, personal fulfilment, and overall quality of life.
- Neurodiverse individuals express the same desire for romantic relationships as their neurotypical peers, but face stigmas and barriers.
- The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework recognizes "intimate partner relationships" as a key area of occupation that promotes well-being.
- Despite being in occupational therapy's scope of practice, it is often considered taboo and is overlooked. This leaves a significant gap in client identified goals and available occupational therapy interventions.

Intrinsic Barriers

- Communication differences and fear of "doing the wrong thing" lead to negative experiences or avoidance of dating (Kohn et al., 2026).
- Limited opportunities to meet partners and find compatible matches is an additional barrier (Svae et al., 2022; Charpentier & Carter, 2023).
- Early dating skills such as planning a date, social and romantic communication, and emotional reciprocity, are especially challenging due to executive functioning demands (Kohn et al., 2026; Young & Cocallis, 2023).
- Sensory differences can impact relationship and sexual experiences (Gray et al., 2021).
- Rejection sensitivity can limit confidence, initiation, and participation in dating (Rowney-Smith et al., 2026; Sandland 2025).

Systemic and Societal Barriers

- Neurodiverse individuals often face stigma that they are uninterested or incapable of romantic relationships, which leads to infantilization and desexualization (English et al., 2017).
- Cultural assumptions within healthcare and rehabilitation settings often deprioritizes relational and sexual needs (Charpentier & Carter, 2023).
- Caregivers may influence or control dating decisions, which limits autonomy and reinforces the idea that dating is not an available occupation (English et al., 2017; Charpentier & Carter, 2023; Kohn et al, 2026).
- Neurodivergent individuals report reviving less sexual and relationship education than their neurotypical peers (Smusz et al., 2024).
- Higher rates of sexual abuse and exploitation within this population may be linked to the limited education (Tomsa et al., 2021; Svae et al., 2022).

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The Person-Environment-Occupation-Performance Model (PEOP) was used to guide the development of the Dating Program because it emphasizes how person and environment factors influence performance and participation in dating. Using the PEOP supported consistent core content while allowing for adaptation based on factors that support or inhibit participation and performance.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The goal of this capstone project was to address gaps in occupational therapy practice by creating a comprehensive, interactive, and evidence-informed dating program that equips occupational therapists (OTs) with practical tools while supporting neurodiverse young adults in building the skills, knowledge, and confidence to navigate dating and maintaining romantic relationships.

- Gather information through a literature review, interviews with site mentor, and informal interviews with participants to ensure the program is evidence-based and relevant and useful for the people it is serving.
- Using the PEOP model as a guide, create six comprehensive, evidence-based dating modules for occupational therapists to use with neurodiverse clients that address key areas of dating.
- Pilot the dating program with interested participants in the Belong Program, Project Search, and other community programs.
- Collect feedback from participants and site mentors to use to update modules as needed.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

- The Dating Program was developed using scholarly and gray literature, participant interviews, and feedback from a site mentor, capstone student, and individual with live experience.
- The program consists of six modules that address the full dating experience. From self-understanding to navigating and ending relationships.
- The program is grounded in autonomy and neuro-affirming practice. The program emphasizes informed, individualized decision-making.
- Each topic within the modules incorporates discussion, activities, and reflective worksheets to promote engagement and skill development.
- The program was intentionally designed for flexibility. OTs can adapt pacing, depth, and materials to meet participants' needs, comfortability, and goals.
- A facilitator guide and FAQ section support effective and individualized program implementation.

UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF	THE BASICS	UNDERSTANDING RELATIONSHIP SIGNALS	STARTING A RELATIONSHIP	COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIP SKILLS	RELATIONSHIP TRANSITIONS
• What does dating mean to you? • Choosing partners • Setting boundaries and enforcing them • Relationship expectations and realities • How to disclose (if you want to)	• Consent • Colorado laws • Red flags • Safety • Outside Support	• Friends vs. romantic partners • Types of relationships • Flirting 101 • Interpreting friendly vs. friendly behavior • Pacing a relationship	• Where to meet people ◦ Making a dating profile • Expressing romantic interest in someone • Letting someone down • Planning a date • First date expectations • Handling rejection	• Communication in relationships • Handling conflict • Responding to different boundaries • Handling stress while dating • Emotional regulation	• When a relationship isn't working • Getting out of a relationship • Coping with breakups • Learning from experience • Maintaining dignity and respect

Scan to see full Dating Program

ACTIVIES

Literature review → Gather information from stakeholders → Develop program content →Ongoing Revisions

- Prior to the beginning the program, all six participants completed a 15-question knowledge survey (yes/no format) to assess existing dating skills.
  - "Yes" indicated they knew how to do the skill.
- Informal interviews with participants were also conducted to identify the most helpful topics to include.

Example Questions:

1. I know where to meet new people and potential partners.
2. I know how to flirt with a person I am romantically interested in.
3. I can express my feelings or interest in someone.
4. I can identify and enforce my boundaries with people I am dating.
5. I can tell when someone is romantically interested in me.

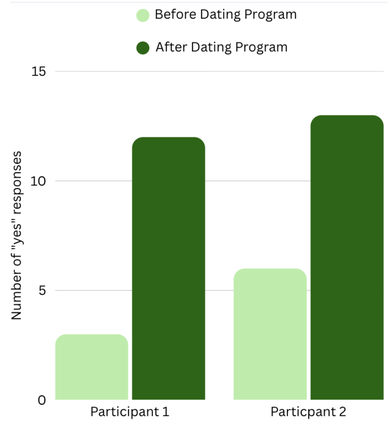
Participant responses during the interview:

- "It's hard to know if someone likes me."
- "I want to know how to talk about hard things. And when to bring them up."
- "I don't know what flirting is."
- "I want to know where to meet people."
- "What do I say if I don't like someone?"
- "What do you do on a date?"

EVALUATION METHODS

- Observational data was collected during pilot sessions.
  - Tracking engagement with content and materials, effective prompting strategies, and unclear or underdeveloped modules.
  - Tracking changes in participants' attitudes, beliefs, confidence, and engagement.
- The two participants that completed the program in full retook the same knowledge survey.

FINDINGS



- The post-program survey results indicated an increase in knowledge of dating skills.
- Although formal data was not collected on this outcome, the sessions consistently led to meaningful discussions. Over the course of the sessions there was a notable increase in participants' confidence, openness to considering different perspectives, and understanding that it is okay not to know everything.

"The program is feeling great and it's making me feel more confident" – Participant 1

DISCUSSION

This program indicates that structured, accessible programming in this area has the potential to positively impact client participation in dating and occupational therapy practice. This program can normalize and make addressing dating and relationship goals easier and more accessible for OTs while better preparing clients for the complexities of dating. Addressing dating within occupational therapy is not just an expansion of practice, it is a necessary step towards occupational justice.

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