

A Critical Overview of How English Health and Social Care Publications

Represent Autistic Adults' Intimate Lives

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About SAAIL

Supporting Autistic Adults' Intimate Lives (SAAIL) explores how adult social care in England can better support Autistic Adults to enjoy fulfilling intimate lives.



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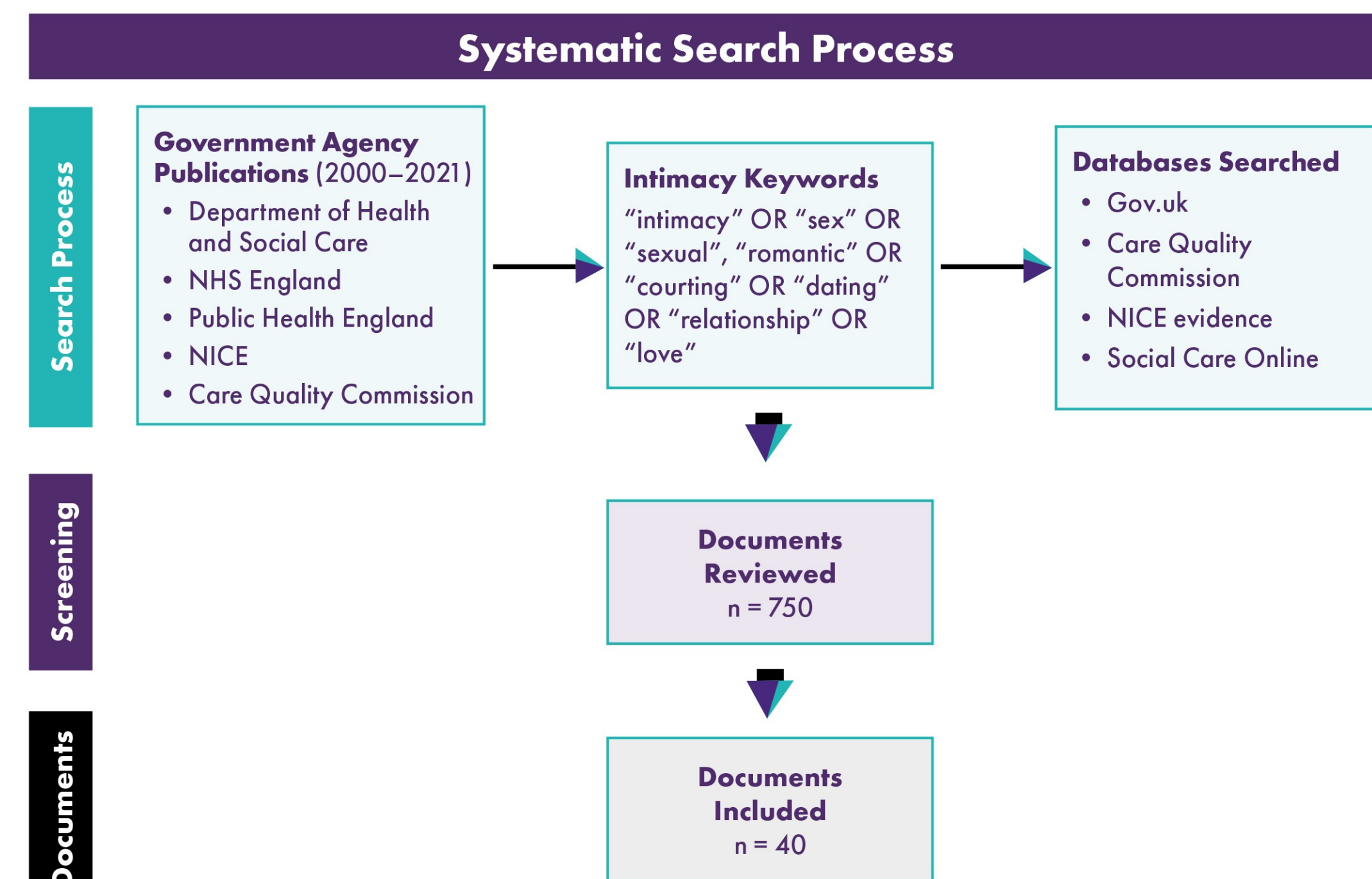


Methodology

Research aim: to investigate how autistic adults' intimate lives and needs are represented and prioritised within English national health and social care publications.

We used a systematic search methodology to identify all publicly available documents that mentioned autistic adults' intimate lives, published by English national health and social care agencies, 2000–2021.

Data analysis: thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), adapted for policy analysis.



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Key Findings

Autistic people's priorities are lost in policy-making

In public consultations for the Autism Strategy, autistic people raise the importance of supporting intimate relationships, but these priorities are not reflected in final policy documents.

No genuine reflection on equality and diversity

Equality and diversity issues are mentioned in a tokenistic way. There is little genuine recognition of how gender, sexuality, race, or ethnicity shape experiences and impact the support autistic people may need.

Key Findings

A failure to recognise intimate lives proportionally

The *National Strategy for Autistic Children, Young People and Adults: 2021 to 2026* is silent on autistic people's intimate relationships, with no government commitment to support intimate lives.

Other aspects of social life are addressed in detail, with a disproportionate focus on work. This makes it seem like sex, relationships, or starting a family are not important for autistic people, which is untrue.

Emphasis on risk

Clinical guidance documents emphasise the risks involved in intimate relationships with little focus on the benefits. The guidance focuses on practitioners' responsibility to mitigate these risks, but not their responsibility to support autistic people to access and enjoy intimate relationships.

Autism-specific needs are overlooked

There is little focus on autism-specific intimacy needs, such as sensory preferences, communication differences or social anxiety.

Many documents talk about autistic people and people with learning disabilities together, as if their needs are the same. This ignores autism-specific needs that autistic people with and without learning disabilities have.

Intimate Lives Matter

- Positive intimate relationships can mitigate loneliness and improve mental health outcomes and overall well-being.
- Most autistic adults want to engage in romantic and/or sexual intimate relationships.
- But, they face more barriers and experience more anxiety around intimate relationships in our majority neurotypical society.
- This leads to loneliness and social isolation.

Good Practice Example: The Core Capabilities Framework

- The *Core Capabilities Framework for supporting Autistic People* (2019) is the only autism-specific document that contains a section dedicated to supporting intimate relationships.
- It represents autistic adults' intimate lives in respectful ways, providing detailed, autism-specific guidance for practitioners.
- This document can guide future practice and publications.



Scan to download the Core Capabilities Framework

Suggestions for Future Government Publications

National health and social care policy and guidance must:

- **Recognise and prioritise intimate lives** proportionally.
- Include **Autism-specific support** around intimate lives.
- Take a **"whole life" approach to sex education**: people of all ages need age-appropriate education, resources and support.
- Include **balanced representations of risk** and intimacy, which recognise but are not driven by considerations of risk.
- Directly **involve autistic people** through genuine consultation and **co-production at all stages of policy making**.



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