

GIVING PSYCHOLOGY AWAY

WANDSWORTH SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY SERVICE



Thinking about Autism and Girls

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Recent large-scale research has found that in the UK around 1 in 57 children are on the autistic spectrum, with around four boys being diagnosed for every one girl (4:1)[i]. Autism has long been thought to be much more prevalent in males than females, but new research suggests that the prevalence in females may be much higher than we previously thought[ii].



When considering the presentation of autism in girls and women, it is important to note that the key diagnostic criteria for autism remains true:

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by:

- a) Persistent difficulties in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts
- b) Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities

However, what research is now telling us is that there are some key gender differences in the presentation of autism when comparing male and female individuals. Autistic females appear to present with more subtle difficulties and can appear more similar to their neurotypical peers[i]. This is leading to many girls having their needs inaccurately identified and missing out on timely support.

Difficulties with social communication and interaction



Research has shown that autistic girls have a greater need for social contact and interaction with peers[i],[ii]. They tend to form meaningful friendships and enjoy spending time with peers at social times in the school day. However, looking closer at these relationships may highlight some key challenges. For example, autistic girls are more likely to be on the periphery of social groups, may be more passive and struggle with initiating social interactions, have higher rates of conflict management and be more at risk of social isolation at school.

Research has also found that autistic girls are more likely to engage in 'camouflaging' behaviours, which enable them to present with superficial social skills and mask (or hide) their autistic differences[i]. This means that although many autistic girls may have learnt how to appear more sociable through observing and copying their peers, as social skills become more advantaged and nuanced, many autistic girls experience increased challenge due to their underlying social communication needs. The impact of this can be feelings of overwhelm, fatigue and emotional dysregulation, which are often internalised or only seen at home[ii].



Restricted, repetitive pattern of behaviour, interests or activities

Similarly, differences with restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviours, interests or activities can be much more subtle for autistic girls[i]. Autistic girls tend to have typical interests for their age e.g. animals, music, books, TV series, art and drama etc., but the intensity of this interest is atypical. For example, they may want to talk about their special interest for long periods of time, favour their special interest over social interaction or begin to identify as a character they are interested in. Repetitive patterns of behaviour, or 'stimming', whereby an individual engages in repetitive movements to regulate themselves may also be more subtle in girls e.g. twirling their hair, shaking their leg, playing with a piece of blue tac in class, meaning that for teachers to notice that this child is feeling dysregulated is tricky.

How staff can support autistic female pupils at school

- Be aware of gender differences in autism and look out for more subtle social communication differences in girls
- Provide timely support for autistic female pupils in school
- Provide explicit teaching of social skills and conflict management skills
- Engage pupil's special interests for motivation
- Support emotional regulation throughout the school day
- Support sensory differences within the school environment
- Display positive female autistic role models in school
- Maintain good communication between home and school
- Discuss individual pupils who you are concerned about with your link Educational Psychologist



References

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