



## Autism & Girls

Increasing numbers of girls are being diagnosed with autism. In the past the difficulties they have experienced may have been overlooked as autism presents differently in girls than it does in boys.

### Social Communication

Girls are often diagnosed in a secondary school setting. This could be because they are often able to engage more in social activities than boys, being more motivated to 'fit in'. Autistic girls will often carefully observe their peers to learn how to behave and respond, with varied success. They tend to have a surface-level social understanding compared with other girls, though, and tend to be on the periphery of any friendship groups. It's only when they encounter the more sophisticated socialisation of girls in senior schools that they become unable to cope and an autism diagnosis is considered.

Social communication difficulties in girls often show in their struggling to engage with friendship groups – they can seem awkward and feel like an 'outsider'. They may choose one girl that they want to be best friends with but can become very possessive and upset if their friend spends time with anyone else. This needs to be handled sensitively and it may be hard for the autistic girl to accept that her friend needs to spend time with others but still needs and values their friendship.



### Masking

Both boys and girls on the spectrum will 'mask' their autism by working very hard to be the 'perfect pupil' in school. This is partly due to their heightened anxiety, but the result of their effort in maintaining this perfection in school and keeping everything hidden is that they will often become very distressed and upset once they are home. Girls seem to be more motivated to fit in and avoid conflict in schools than boys and so masking is more prevalent with them. In addition, because they don't show their neuro-diverse characteristics in the school setting they can miss out on assessment and support.



## Preference for Sameness

(Called RRBs or Rigid Repetitive Behaviours in the DSM-5 diagnostic manual)

Girls show this in very different ways to boys: their play is often less restricted and repetitive than that of boys and research shows that girls may not demonstrate the same level of restricted interests as boys do. However, obsessive behaviour is still a major problem and can be based around more outwardly social subjects or on people – they will often have collections of things that are extremely important to them such as shells or collectable toys like ‘My Little Pony’.

Examples of special interests are celebrities, soap operas, animé, horses – all things that their peers are interested in, but to a more intense level. A girl may want to be their chosen celebrity; dress like them, talk like them, have an encyclopedic knowledge of facts about them.

Some autistic girls are less concerned about the gender-bias of activities and interests so will choose hobbies that are more usually pursued by boys which can be rewarding for them and inspiring for others!



Both girls and boys will take what is said to them very literally and often ‘think in pictures’ or video clips rather than in words. Something to bear in mind to facilitate better communication.



## Sensory Processing Difficulties

Girls with autism often struggle with sensory processing difficulties and being aware of their sensory sensitivities can help us to modify their environment and reduce their stress and discomfort. It may be that they need additional help from an occupational therapist trained in sensory integration.

*See our additional resources on sensory processing difficulties, preparation for periods and the CYP area of our website for resources written specifically for children and young people with neurodevelopmental conditions.*

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