



Girls and young women on the autism spectrum

Diagnosis - why don't some girls get diagnosed?

There could be many reasons for this, including; the belief that autism is a 'male condition', a belief that girls are more likely to 'grow out of' their difficulties and the lack of professional understanding of how autism presents in girls and women (Whitlock et al., 2020). It may also be the case that girls are diagnosed with anxiety or other mental health conditions rather than the professional or family considering autism.

For those girls and women whose autism goes undetected, the negative consequences can be far reaching. Autistic people who have lived without a diagnosis report that this results in greater social isolation and bullying, as well as feelings of being misunderstood or "not fitting in" (Bargiela, Steward, & Mandy, 2016; Portway & Johnson, 2003, 2005; Punshon, Skirrow, & Murphy, 2009 cited in Whitlock et al., 2020).

Can girls be autistic?

The current ratio of girls to boys with an autism diagnosis is 1:4, but research shows that some girls are being missed so the rate should be 1:3, girls to boys (Whitlock et al., 2020).

Women experience life on the autism spectrum in a range of ways that can be different from the experiences of men who are on the autism spectrum.

Some autistic girls and women may go unrecognised because they do not fit current, male-centric views of autism (Whitlock et al., 2020).



Autistic girls

- may have a great attention to detail
- may interpret language literally
- may be able to camouflage or mask their challenges which means they are not recognised or identified by others
- may or may not have additional disabilities or learning needs
- may experience much higher social communication expectations as they enter their teens and their difficulties in these areas may only be noticed at this point (Geelhand et al., 2019)
- autistic girls and women are more likely to internalise their difficulties which can result in anxiety and depression (Whitlock et al., 2020)



'The closest I can come to explaining masking to non-autistics is, it's like being on your 'best behaviour' when you are at a job interview and then being relaxed with your best friend. You are two different people in each of those situations, and neither is completely forced or conscious.' Dr Emma Goodall (autistic, author, researcher and parent)



Tips & strategies to support autistic girls and young women

- Get to know the young person you are supporting and find out the ways they like to be supported.
- Create a safe space in your home or at school where the young person can go to feel safe and secure when feeling anxious, upset or needing to get away from sensory input.
- Provide explicit teaching for how to make and maintain friendships. Support them to join in on groups or find peers with similar interests.
- At clubs and sports events, or in school, allocate groups and teams rather than asking the young people to put themselves in groups or choose groups.
- Regularly check for understanding of verbal instructions and written tasks, provide visual supports and scaffolding to support remaining on task and focused.
- Be clear, explicit and consistent. Explain any unwritten rules.