

Autistic Women and Girls

Resources for Professionals

Education: Part 1

These resources have been collated from information collected through an online questionnaire, focus groups, interviews with individual practitioners and autistic women, and other recent research studies. Our aim is to summarise all this information, to present it in a succinct and useful form for busy professionals. Each resource contains a summary of key points, with links to appropriate items within the Right Click programme itself and other resources, from websites, online information and books. If you'd like more information on any of the areas covered, or have a specific enquiry, please contact us at rightclick@scottishautism.org

Autistic girls have been described as being like swans, appearing to glide smoothly across the surface of life but paddling desperately under the surface just to keep afloat. They don't always present as might be expected, they may make eye contact, they may appear to have similar interests to their peers. They may be the quiet girl in the corner, they may even be the 'class clown'! However, look under the surface and they will be working very, very hard to cope, and to 'fit in'.

Girls are often highly able in many ways, for example, academically, in practical crafts, in sports, in expressive arts, music (or all!). They may describe themselves as having friends (although the quality of those friendships may be variable). Along with making eye contact, these things are not exclusive of a diagnosis of autism.

Autistic girls find many barriers to accessing their education and may fail to achieve to the levels of their abilities.

The school environment itself can be highly challenging for autistic young people; noise, chaos, unpredictability (including casual physical contact and bullying) in corridors and all communal areas can cause high levels of stress and anxiety, leading to school refusal and many somatic/physical symptoms.

These include:

- insomnia
- headaches
- 'fuzzy head' and inability to concentrate
- flitting pains
- gastrointestinal disturbance
- mental health issues

Same but different? Autistic girls are sometimes described as being "the same but different", that is, they have the same interests as their non-autistic peers, but are more intense and focused.

But this is not always the case. Girls are under a great amount of pressure to conform to societal expectations of femininity: appearance, mannerisms, interests, language etc. Adult autistic women have reported feeling different and judged for being 'too masculine' or manifesting 'unfeminine' traits.

From the age of 8 or 9 upwards, with increasing severity and impact, autistic girls may experience varying forms of bullying, including name-calling, exclusion, harassment and physical assault. They may be targeted for being too 'swotty', disliked for being too blunt, excluded for being 'weird' or vulnerable to manipulation and emotional abuse. Social exclusion or targeting is likely to increase as they get older, with the transition to high school particularly difficult.

Autistic girls may develop the ability to imitate or to mask their difficulties. It is understood that some autistic boys also mask; it's possible that girls may be better at masking or it may be that social expectations on girls promote the motivation and the tools for masking as a coping strategy. High masking abilities are associated with poor mental health in adulthood. Autistic girls may internalise their difficulties more, leading to the development of serious mental health problems including:

- anxiety
- depression
- self-harming
- high risk behaviours
- suicidality
- eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa

What Helps?

“Awareness that some brains are very different”

“Quiet space inside at playtime that didn't single my child out as different”

“Daughter attends high school part-time (& studies at home too) - this works very well”

“Specialised expert training for all members of the school, teaching, support & admin staff as well as other students”

Building a Culture of Genuine Acceptance, Equality and Inclusion

1. Improve understanding in schools of the impact of noise and disruption in the classroom.
2. Issues of safety are paramount; reassurance and protection should be provided around the school, in the corridors, changing rooms and as the students move from class to class.
3. Young autistic people may realise the implications and resent the idea of ‘buddies’ or ‘false friends’ but fostering a culture of ‘mentoring’ within environments such as school or work can be highly positive (see Cygnet Mentoring project at www.researchautism.net/cygnet-project).
4. Find areas of excellence and specific skills whatever they are (i.e ‘typical’ for girls or not): build on them as paths to further learning which may lead to increased self esteem and improved position within peer groups.
5. Support self-directed learning.
6. Each student should have a tablet/laptop and a quiet place in the school to work when things become overwhelming.
7. Research best support apps for learning, study, time management and so on.
8. Look at possibilities for giving autistic students defined jobs to do, e.g. helping the teachers prepare for art or physics classes.
9. Clear language and specific instructions.
10. After school activities made more autism friendly e.g. invite spectrum pupils to come early to a drama class to allow for a ‘settling in’ period before others arrive.

To learn more about autism in women and girls, register for our Right Click Women and Girls programme where there are in-depth discussions on education from the perspective of autistic people and professionals.

Resources

Stewart, C. (2011). Hermeneutical phenomenology: experiences of girls with Asperger’s syndrome and anxiety. PhD Thesis Edinburgh: Edinburgh Napier University

Stewart, C. (2012). ‘Where can we be what we are?’: the experiences of girls with Asperger Syndrome and their mothers. Good Autism Practice Journal, 13, 1, pp 40-48

Scottish Women's Autism Network: www.swanscotland.org

Limpsfield Grange School: www.limpsfieldgrange.co.uk



Resources Continued

Autism Toolbox: www.autismtoolbox.co.uk

Enquire: www.enquire.org.uk

Right Click for Women and Girls: www.scottishautism.org/womenandgirls

Spectrum Women: Walking to the beat of Autism <https://www.jkp.com/uk/spectrum-women-1.html>

Colouring Outside the Lines, Edinburgh: Peer support for families of autistic girls
www.colouringoutsidethelines.org

Debi Brown website: www.aspiedebebi.com

Alis Rowe, The Curly Haired Girl Project: <https://thegirlwiththecurlyhair.co.uk>

National Autism Project: <https://nationalautismproject.org.uk/the-report>

National Autistic Task Force: <http://nationalautistictaskforce.org.uk/an-independent-guide-to-quality-care-for-autistic-people/>

National Autism Project: <http://nationalautismproject.org.uk/the-future-id-like-to-see-dr-catriona-stewart>

Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved: A report on the experiences of autistic children missing school by Children in Scotland, National Autistic Society and Scottish Autism:
www.notengaged.com