

Since autism was first described, there have always been more boys diagnosed with the condition than girls. This information sheet explores the possible reasons for this and how boys and girls with autism are different from each other.

Key facts and figures



Some conditions, like Fragile X syndrome, do affect more people of one sex than other, so it is possible that autism could also be more common in boys. However, some researchers feel that these facts and figures are clues that girls might be missing out on diagnosis altogether.

Features of autism in girls compared to boys

Why does it seem easier to diagnose boys than girls? To find out, researchers and professionals who diagnose autism have looked at the core features of autism, and whether there are differences in the characteristics of boys and girls with autism.

Social communication

- 'Delayed speech' is one of the key features that can be used to diagnose autism. However, girls tend to learn to speak earlier than boys, and use new words straight away. This means that their speech may not be qualified as 'delayed'.
- How a child uses language is also a key feature of autism. Some children do not speak much, or at all. Others talk a lot but may not understand how a conversation works, or may talk a lot about their special interest. Girls with autism often use language differently to boys with autism. Their speech may appear more neurotypical, but they do not tend to engage in more 'meaningless' chatter. This can be a problem when they interact with other girls during childhood and adolescence.

Social interaction

- In primary school, girls with autism tend to be included in groups by neurotypical girls, and 'mothered'. In other words, neurotypical girls may take a girl with autism under their wing. Boys with autism, on the other hand, tend to spend time alone and are more likely to be bullied in primary school. Because girls with autism seem to be part of a group (although they tend to stay in the periphery of the group), teachers may not recognise that the girl is having difficulties.
- As girls enter the teenage years, the social dynamics of being a teenage girl become more complex, making it more difficult for the girl with autism to cope. This is why some girls are diagnosed in their teenage years.

Repetitive behaviours

- Girls tend to show fewer repetitive behaviours than boys. Repetitive behaviours are very visible, so they are easily noticed by professionals. A girl who shows fewer behaviours, or has more discreet behaviours, may not be noticed as quickly.

Special interests

- When we think of special interests in autism, we think of trains, Lego and Doctor Who. These are generally thought to be more 'male' interests (even though some girls are also interested in these).
- Girls with autism tend to have special interests that are quite similar to those of neurotypical girls – horses, dolls and celebrities for example. Because these interests are not what we expect autism special interests to be, a girl may not be recognised by her special interests.
- The intensity of her interests is what makes her different from neurotypical girls.

Social understanding

In many cases, it appears that girls have more social understanding than boys, and more of a desire to be social. This may in part be due to our social expectations of girls. We expect girls to be more sociable than boys. This affects how we interact with them from birth, but also puts pressure on girls with autism to behave in a certain way. A girl's social understanding and motivation means that they can blend in with other girls, and mask their difficulties. But it also comes with a price. Often girls are exhausted at the end of the day, and sometimes wait until they are in the safety of their own home before they let it all out. Their social understanding can also lead them to be aware of their differences and the effort they need to put in to being social, which can lead to an increased risk of mental health problems.

Diagnostic and support services

Why is diagnosis important?

Access to diagnosis is important for people with autism as it leads to a better understanding of a person's own characteristics, allows for access to support and helps others to know how to support them. This can reduce the risk of mental health problems, and allow them to access services which are more suited to them.

What can make it harder for a girl to be diagnosed?

- Since autism has historically been seen as a 'male' condition, there have been cases where girls have missed out on diagnosis because their doctor did not know autism could affect girls. Thankfully, as autism awareness increases, this is becoming rarer.
- Diagnostic tools and criteria have been designed around our understanding of boys with autism. This means that it can be much more difficult to diagnose girls using the current tools. There is a move now towards adapting tools to be more suited to girls.

What are the consequences of girls missing out on diagnosis?

- Girls with autism are more likely to have mental health problems like anxiety and depression. Many girls are diagnosed with other conditions first, before being diagnosed with autism.
- Girls with autism are at particular risk of abuse, and being in abusive relationships. This is because some girls have the social desire to be included, so will accept attention from men who do not want what is best for them.
- Diagnosis gives girls with autism a chance to access the right interventions, and get support and understanding.

Research

It is important for girls to be recognised and diagnosed for research purposes. Currently, our understanding of autism is based on studies which use many more boys than girls. However, recent research has shown differences in boys and girls with autism. We will only fully understand autism when we look at autism in boys and girls. Currently, some genetics studies seem to show that girls may have some form of protection, meaning it is harder for them to develop autism. However, there is still a long way to go in this research. It is only when we have a better understanding of boys and girls with autism that we will be able to know for sure whether or not there really are more boys with autism than girls.

Useful resources

www.autismwomensnetwork.org

www.musingsofanaspie.com

Ultraviolet Voices: Stories of Women on the Spectrum - edited by Dr Elisabeth Hurley.
Available at shop.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/collections/books-resources/products/ultraviolet-voices