

# Autism Women & Girls

## Is autism different in girls?

The idea that there is a particular female presentation of autism is widely debated. There are biases in how we currently understand autism. Those brought up as girls are more likely to have an internalised profile of autism. However internal presentations of autism can apply to boys and non-binary people too. Individuals with more internalised profiles often miss out on being diagnosed early or being diagnosed at all.

## The specific differences you may see in many autistic girls:

- **Social interaction and communication** can be confusing, stressful, and exhausting for autistic girls. Friendships may however be very important to them, and they can try very hard to fit in. They may try to learn social codes and put a lot of effort into understanding body language, whilst making sure they try to do and say the right things. Their friendship difficulties can go unnoticed because they may be on the periphery of a friendship group, or they may have very intense friendships which are vulnerable to regular conflicts.
- They may **internalise their emotions** by suppressing feelings, being unable to communicate feelings or denying them, and their anxiety may show itself in physical symptoms such as stomach aches or headaches.
- Autistic girls may engage in less obvious or more **socially acceptable repetitive behaviours** such as rewatching the same film over and over or re-reading the same book.

- Autistic girls may have **socially acceptable focused interests** which are less recognisable as autistic characteristics, such as researching animals or knowing everything about a particular celebrity.

## What makes it harder for girls to be diagnosed?

Boys are 3 times more likely to be diagnosed than girls and girls are more likely to be diagnosed later in life than boys.

- The current diagnostic criteria and assessment tools are **biased** towards white males and are based on research from predominantly white male samples.
- Autism is currently often diagnosed with a focus on **externalised and distressed behaviours**. Girls are more likely to have an internalised presentation of autism which could include conscious or unconscious masking of their autism. This means more internalised behaviour such as withdrawing or being unable to communicate can go unnoticed and referrals for an autism assessment not made. Individuals are often not referred until their behaviours become more externalised and they become more obviously distressed with mental health difficulties.
- Girls are subject to different **social expectations** which can create barriers in identifying and understanding autistic girls. For example, they may be socialised differently from a young age and can be expected to communicate differently to boys. They may be encouraged to talk more than boys, to be accommodating of people and to express their emotions more obviously.
- Autistic girls can be **mis-diagnosed** with other conditions such as personality and conduct disorders.

## What are the consequences of this?

- Autistic girls are at particular **risk of abuse** due to their social vulnerability.
- **Mental health difficulties** can be common in autistic girls, such as depression, anxiety, and OCD. They may develop unhelpful coping strategies such as self-harm, eating disorders and may self-medicate with drugs or alcohol.
- Autistic girls can have **difficulties engaging with education** with some being unable to attend school due to anxiety from unmet needs.
- Undiagnosed autistic women may be unaware of their autism and have limited self-understanding, self-compassion and self-advocacy. This may lead to ongoing difficulties in their relationships, frequent masking, and possible eventual autistic burnout.

## What can we do now?

Encouragingly there is lots of current research and resources being produced around supporting autistic girls. The most important things to do are to identify, understand, validate, and accept autistic girls. Part of this journey may be seeking a diagnosis and the appropriate support required. The resources below may be helpful.

## Resources

Websites and social media:

**Autistic Girls Network – YouTube, Facebook, Blog**  
**[www.autisticgirlsnetwork.org](http://www.autisticgirlsnetwork.org)**

Books:

***The Spectrum Girls Survival Guide: How to Grow Up Awesome and Autistic by Siena Castellon***

***Supporting Spectacular Girls by Helen Clarke***

***Women and Girls on the Autism Spectrum, Second Edition: Understanding Life Experiences from Early Childhood to Old Age by Sarah and Jess Hendrickx***

***Odd Girl Out: An Autistic Women in a Neurotypical World by Laura James***