



The National Autistic Society is part of

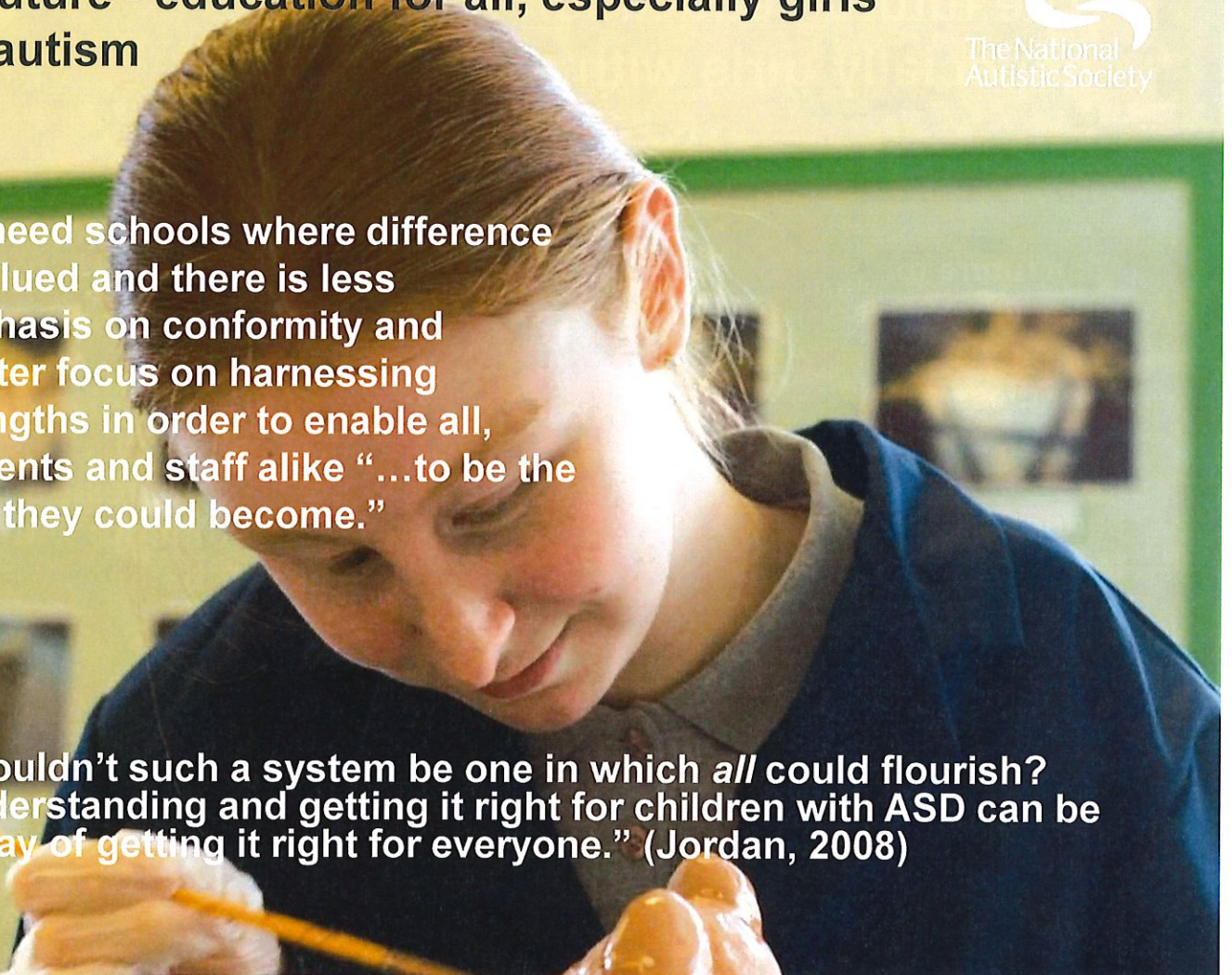
MyProgressTM

www.autism.org.uk/schools

The future - education for all, especially girls with autism



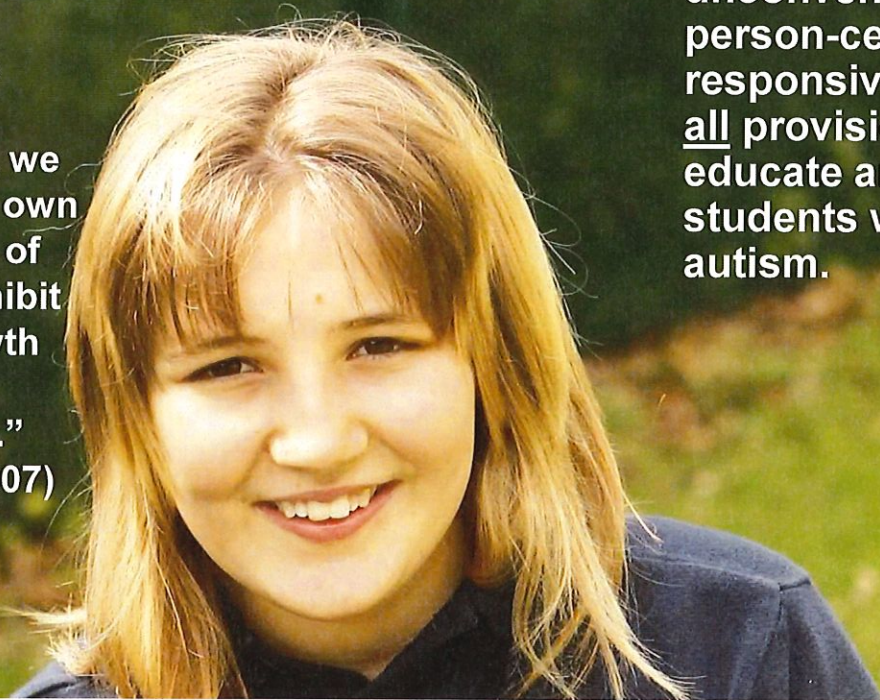
- We need schools where difference is valued and there is less emphasis on conformity and greater focus on harnessing strengths in order to enable all, students and staff alike “...to be the best they could become.”
- “Wouldn’t such a system be one in which *all* could flourish? Understanding and getting it right for children with ASD can be a way of getting it right for everyone.” (Jordan, 2008)



The future - education for all, especially girls with autism



- “The future for girls with ASD is unlimited and boundless. As parents and professionals, we cannot let our own fears and lack of knowledge inhibit our girl’s growth and independence.”
(Wagner, S. 2007)
- We need a flexible, unconventional, person-centred and responsive model in all provisions that educate and include students with autism.



Summary – educating girls with autism



Girls face unique challenges with regard to;

- Social and cultural expectations of behaviour
- Degree of vulnerability
- Obtaining independence
- Puberty and menstruation
- Opportunities for adulthood

Additional issues to be addressed and skills to be taught:

- Female friendships and girl bullying.
- Puberty.
- Hygiene and grooming.
- Sexuality development.
- Personal safety.
- Self-perception and confidence.
- Emotional well being and mental health.
- Coping with the culture of gender.
- Developing vocational interests
- Leisure

Girls with autism and bullying

- Girls tend to use social intimidation, threaten, name call and tease – more subtle.
- Includes social intimidation – you can't play with us, we won't be your friend etc.
- Girls with autism may not understand that they are being bullied due to language impairment and lack of social understanding, but when they do, it seems to upset them far more than boys.
- Girls bullied over time become depressed and emotionally traumatised (Miller, 2003) and more agitated at home and moody. (Gurian, 2002)
- When teaching a girls how to react to bullying – use role play (Gray, 2004) Use video to record the correct way to respond to bullying and play repeatedly.

Emotional wellbeing and fostering mental health



- “The emotional instability and moodiness of adolescent girls in general can be amplified for girls with ASD.” (Ernsperger & Wendel, 2007)
- It has been found that as children approached adolescence, increased signs of depression are also observed... and that females may be particularly vulnerable due to-
 - Hormonal changes (Brereton *et al*, 2006)
 - Greater expectations to succeed academically and socially (Cohen-Sandler 2005)
- Attwood states that girls with autism can be at a risk of reactive depression due to:
 - Coming to the realisation that they are different from their peers.
 - A general lack of acceptance by their peers and/or bullying.
 - A greater awareness of the daily social difficulties they experience.
- This can result in depression, negative self perception, de-motivation, feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness and self harm.

Gender and identity issues reported to be experienced by girls

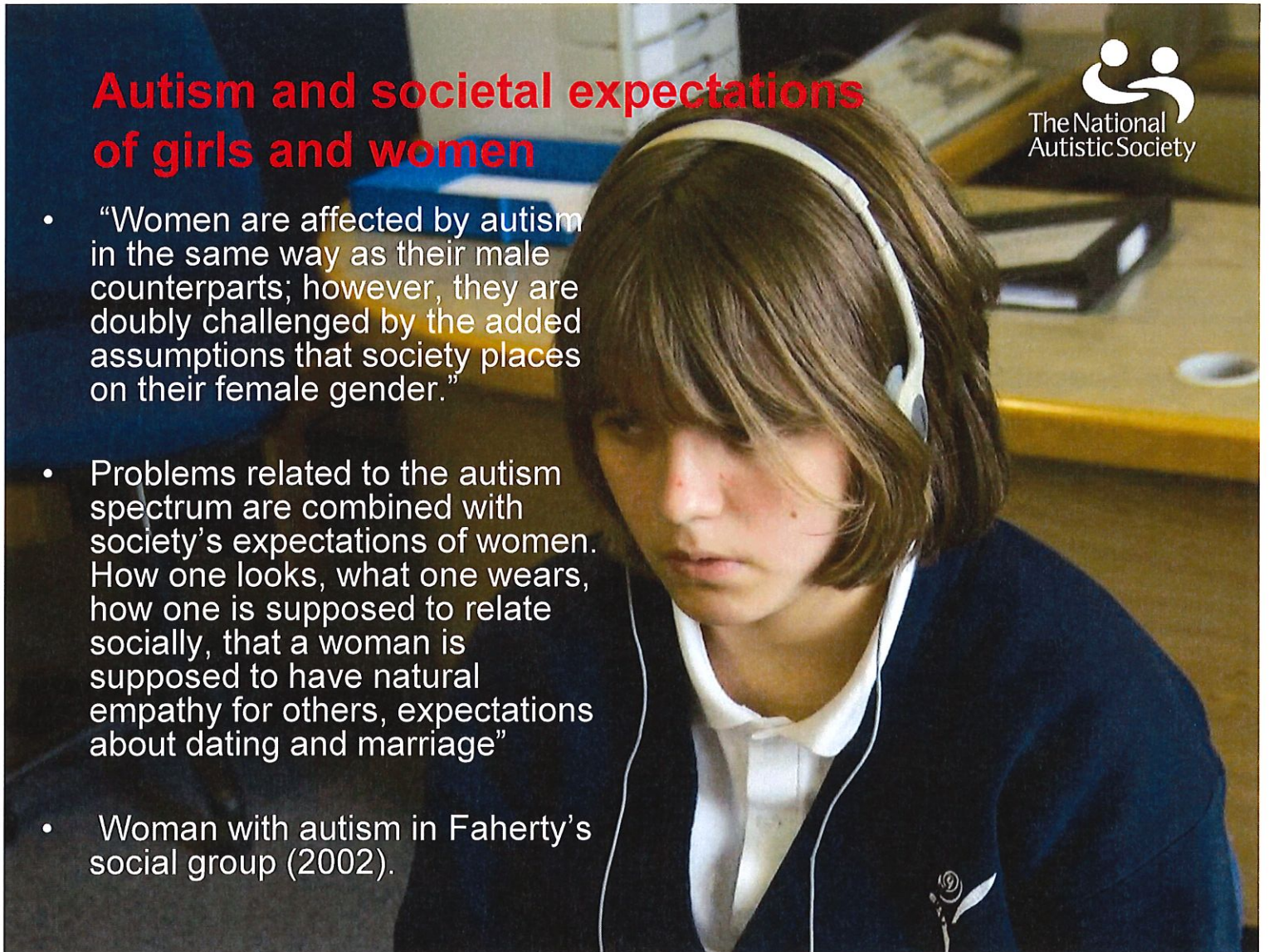


- Many women with autism report experiencing issues regarding gender identity but some can be very aware.
- “Most girls at 11 have developed gender identity and start relating to other girls differently from boys but this type of relating may be delayed or non-existent for girls with ASD.” (Gurian, 2002)
- “Many young women with ASD may appear to have more male-like characteristics, which consequently can separate them from bonding with other females.” (Zaks, 2006)
- “This conflict with gender identity can have a negative impact on the developing self esteem.” (Lonsdale, 1997)
- Many female writers believe that self esteem and identity are intrinsically linked.

Autism and societal expectations of girls and women



- “Women are affected by autism in the same way as their male counterparts; however, they are doubly challenged by the added assumptions that society places on their female gender.”
- Problems related to the autism spectrum are combined with society’s expectations of women. How one looks, what one wears, how one is supposed to relate socially, that a woman is supposed to have natural empathy for others, expectations about dating and marriage”
- Woman with autism in Faherty’s social group (2002).



Girls with autism - a minority group and issues around 'segregation'



- Many women as adults state the unique challenges of being a 'minority' within a unique group in society.
- Special Schools are male dominated – opportunities to meet girls with some common interests are far less common than boys.
- Minimal opportunities to meet ordinary girls and therefore do not develop the social skills needed to mix with mainstream peers. (Attwood, 2007)
- Women tend to learn from other women/girls yet there are not many of them so it becomes a 'double whammy'. (Faherty, 2007)
- Difficulty in reaching ASD girls potential and it is societal gender expectations that interfere with this. (Nichols, Tetenbaum & Perlis, 2009)

In conclusion – important teaching points for girls



Four important teaching points for girls with autism:

- **“Not being ‘typical’ is just fine – in fact, it can be/ is an asset!!**
- **The most important relationship skills are actually friendship skills, and the best basis for friendships is common interests.**
- **Common special interests are the most important social tool and basis for social contacts for people with AS.**
- **When it comes to the basic facts and problems with sex, ignorance is a very bad thing.”**
(McIlwee-Myers, 2007)

Developing social understanding in girls with autism



- What is the ideal social life for a girl with autism?
 - Only a small social life
 - Someone in my world
 - Time alone
 - 1-1 social contact
 - Shared interest talks
 - Email, texting, phone
- Starting block much lower – understanding friendships/relationships
 - What are they for?
 - What are the rules?
 - How do I get one?
 - What is a friend?
 - What's in it for me?
 - Is it worth it? (Hendrickx, 2008)

Social contact and friendship



- Despite being less interested than girls generally in having and maintaining friendships, many girls with autism **do** want social contact, especially with other girls.

“... who share the similar interests and experiences, understand their difficulties, are respectful, are appreciative of their strengths, and are tolerant of their weaknesses”. (Nichols *et al*, 2009)

- Friends are “...people I enjoyed passing a few hours or minutes with”. (Liane Holliday-Willey)
- They do not necessarily want to spend a lengthy time with a friend discussing serious topics or feelings, they would prefer to spend shorter periods of time talking about common interests such as art, TV, movies, music, books or favourite actors etc.

(Nicholls *et al*)

The complexity of female social relationships
*Give girls the skills and confidence to enable them
decide what is right for them*



- All girls with autism are different.
- Some are more motivated to spend time with peers and make connections.
- Some want a single friend to talk to.
- Others may only want to play a computer game wordlessly, beside a peer.
- Girls need the support to develop the skills needed to achieve her own potential and individual social interests.
- For girls with autism, book groups and hobby related clubs let girls socialise in their own way and their own time.

Social understanding - Why is it more difficult for girls with autism to acquire these skills despite greater social abilities than boys?



- Typical girls relationships are more complex than typical boys generally
 - **Teenage girls relationships - primarily based on 'talking' and intimate social communication**
 - **Boys relationships - more often based so on 'doing'**
 - **Girls with ASD's are going to have a much harder time with the level of communicative skill and social understanding required to fit in with female social groups."** (Nichols *et al*, 2009.)
 - **Girls and boys also fight and bully differently e.g. gossiping or exclusion.**
 - **Three is not company for girls!!**
- As girls with autism are in the minority, the likelihood is that they will try to make friends with 'non-autistic' girls.

Important issues in the education of girls with autism



- **Schools to be more 'girl friendly'**
 - **Better trained staff to recognise them and their needs**
 - **Peer support programmes**
- **Girl orientated social skills classes**
 - **All aspects of female roles and relationships**
 - **Peer programmes**
 - **The 'hidden' curriculum**
 - The unwritten rules of girl's social interactions.(Myles, Trautman & Schelvan, 2004)
- **Girl orientated PSHE (Personal, social, health education)**
 - **Personal development and hygiene**
 - **Sex education**
 - **Relationships – friends, adult relationships**

Are girls different academically?

- Love reading, especially poetry and fantasy books.
- Girls are strong systemisers as boys are. (Baron-Cohen)
- Drawing, colouring in and handwriting difficulties. (Wagner in Attwood, 2007)
- Tend to find males more compatible as they have similar thought patterns – linear step by step form of thinking and conversation. (Lord, 2007)
- Tend to choose traditionally ‘Male’ orientated professions – electrical engineering. (Lord, 2007)
- Does this have an impact on how and what we teach girls and how we approach vocational guidance?

Are girls different? Play and Imagination



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- Imaginary friends
- Elaborate doll play but copied from other girls.
- When indulging in solitary doll play, has a 'script' and is in full control, often reproducing a real event or a scene from a book. (Attwood, 1999)
- Lack reciprocity in their natural social play and can be too controlling.
- The dominance and intensity of play is out of the norm for a young girl. (Attwood, 1999)
- **Girls have better imagination and greater pretend play. (Knickmeyer)**

Are girls different? Social understanding



- As girls have amazing memories, this can include reciting the dialogue for a number of characters in a play or memorising 'scripts' of real life conversations – acting could be a good career option for these women. (Attwood, 2007)
- “ I was an avid observer. I was enthralled at the nuances of people’s actions. In fact, I often found it desirable to become the other person.....At times I literally copied someone’s looks and their actions. I was uncanny in my ability to copy accents, vocal inflections, facial expressions, hand movements, gaits and tiny gestures. It was as if I became the person I was emulating.”

(Liane Holliday-Willey: Pretending to be normal.)

Are girls different? Social understanding



- Social skills development – More motivated to learn and quicker to understand key concepts than boys of equivalent cognitive ability. (Attwood, 2007)
- Parents reported more problems for high functioning girls involving peer relationships, maturity, social independence and attention.
- Demonstrate a form of 'social echolalia'. Mirroring others and acquires a superficial social competence by acting the part of another person.
- Girls are more likely to be enrolled in Speech and Drama lessons – this provides an ideal and socially acceptable opportunity for coaching in body language.



Are girls different? Social understanding



- Many girls care what their peers think and worry about this.
- Imitate other girls in order to initiate social contact but can't hold reciprocal friendships which is distressing.
- Many girls are not good at empathy and conversation and they find themselves locked out, more so than boys. (Lainhart, 2009)
- Many girls want to connect with people outside their families.
- Some girls tend to 'over emphasise' and can't disassociate from other's grief, anger, anxiety or joy.

Are girls different? Social understanding



- In Primary school, girls are more likely to get 'mothered' by other girls and are supported and included by peers as opposed to being bullied as many boys are.
- Girls tend to be passive and present as shy
 - outsiders
 - can't mix well
 - avoid other children
 - tend to stay on the periphery of a group – therefore teachers don't realise there is a problem.
- Boys are not as socially inclined and many have no friends whereas girls are, and many have one special friend. (Attwood, 2008)



Are girls different? Social understanding



- “Boys tended to have more serious social and communication impairments in earlier in life whereas girls displayed more impairments in social interaction during adolescence.”
(Lord & Schopler, 1993)
- Girls with higher IQ, especially verbal girls, are able to mask or compensate for their condition.
(Skuse, 2007)
- Girls with autism are often much more socially immature and reticent than their peers.
- Communication difficulties become more obvious in secondary school

Are girls different? Communication



- **Speech acquisition – Girls use new words as soon as they learn them.**
(Gillberg, 2005)
- **Girls generally have superior linguistic abilities to boys of the same cognitive level.** (Attwood, 2008)
- **“Boy’s abnormal communication decreased as IQ rose, Girl’s does not”.**
(Loveland, 2007)
- **“ Girls that present with more subtle ASD’s are often eventually able to answer questions about social situations, social communication and friendships that boys at the same level of functioning would not, but the answers tended not to come quickly and naturally and the time to process information is longer – very difficult to keep up with chatty teenage girls.” (Nicholls *et al*, 2009)]**

Are girls different? Special interests



- Girls escape into fiction, have imaginary friends, live in another world with fairies and witches, obsessively watch soap operas, intense interest with celebrities.
- Demonstrate 'pretend play' – enamoured with princesses, fantasy kingdoms, unicorns.
- “Hobbies such as compiling books of people’s names, colour of hair etc. but don’t actually interact with these people as opposed to boys whose hobbies are mainly technical or maths related.”
(Gillberg, 2007)
- “Girls obsessional interests are centred around relationships and people.” (Great Ormond Street)



Are girls different? - Special interests

- Boys - hyperactive and aggressive and have interests in technical hobbies and facts
- Girls - more passive and collect information on people rather than things.
- Interests the same as other girls - animals, horses, classic literature –but the intensity of these often is.
- Shakespeare, celebrities, Broadway films, Disney, people, soap operas.

Girls without a diagnosis of autism in the education system



Large numbers of undiagnosed girls going through the education system.

The problems they encounter are:

- » Lack of identification
- » Lack of appropriate support
- » Lack of appropriately trained teachers/ staff

This results in :

- | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| • Social isolation | Lowered grades |
| • Loneliness | Confusion |
| • Depression
opportunities | Reduced future prognosis and |

If the diagnosis had come earlier in her life, as a girl Postgate believes she would have been a lot more successful.

“ At school I was bright, but eccentric. If I had been a boy, that would have been tolerated more. I’d have gone into science, I’m sure – I might have gone on to be a nuclear physicist.” (Orr, 2008)

Why are girls with autism not being identified at school?



- Boys - disruptive behaviour is more common
- Boy's behaviour has a different purpose— to gain an object whereas girls want to gain attention from another.
(Reese *et al*, 2005)
- Girls - more able in social play and have a more even profile of social skills.
- Girls had better visual reception (non verbal) skills than boys.
(Carter *et al*, 2007)
- Girls – "...more able to follow social actions by delayed imitation because they observe other children and copy them, perhaps masking the symptoms of Aspergers Syndrome."
(Attwood, 2007)

Why are autistic girls not being identified at school?



- Passive personalities, compliant – do not come across as having social impairments.
- Shy, coy embarrassed, naïve, innocent and unassuming – people may assume this is why they avoid eye contact.
- Not disruptive and don't draw attention to themselves as boys do.
- They camouflage their difficulties.
- Boys externalise their problems whereas girls 'suffer in silence' & become passive-aggressive.
- Appease and apologise. (Attwood, 2007)

Autism in girls - Are there symptomatic differences (girls vs boys)?



According to the ASSQ-REV, 45-item extended version of the ASSQ there are some (Gillberg and Kopp 2010)

- Different voice or speech (50% girls, 20% boys)
- Motor tics (40% girls vs 15% of boys)
- Deviant style of gaze (50% girls vs 30% of boys)
- Lacks best friend (30% girls vs 70% of boys)
- Difficulty completing activities (30% girls vs 5% of boys)

- Follows other children like a shadow (40% girls vs 10% of boys)
- Demand avoidance (65% girls vs 20% of boys)

Missed or Mis-diagnosis



Many girls with autism are not being identified and diagnosed

Gillberg 2010 - without the skills of an experienced clinician the diagnostic criteria used may not pick up girls

Autism & LD - 4 boys to 1 girl, should be 1.5 boys to 1 girl?

'Asperger' type - 12 boys to 1 girl, should be 4 boys to 1 girl?

PDA - Equal number of boys and girls diagnosed?



“I want to go to another school”



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**Girls with autism – in mainstream, often
undiagnosed**

Girls with autism –
often in special
schools – male
dominated (4-1 or 10-1)

**“No matter which school I went to,
I would either feel frustrated by the chaotic
mainstream world or suffocated by special
schooling.” Orr.**

“...this is a boy's school”

Diagnosing and Educating girls with autism



- a very under-researched field
- Very few 'diagnosed' girls go through the education system compared to boys.
- “Tentative suggestions and extracts from literature to substantiate anecdotal assumptions that still have to be validated by academic research.
- “Being an autistic woman has been pivotal to everything that’s happened to me. If I’d been an autistic man, my story could have been very different.” (Postgate)



The identification and support of girls & young women with autism

Dr Jacqui Ashton Smith.
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The National Autistic Society