

## Autistic Girls (internalised autism)

### Overview

For a long time, the diagnostic system and stereotypes around autism have been based on typically male presentation of autistic traits (Dworzynski, Ronald, Bolton, & Happe, 2012). Autistic females may present differently and, as a result in the past, many autistic females have not received a diagnosis and some have instead been diagnosed with mental health difficulties without autism being considered as a factor (Lai & Baron-Cohen, 2015). While autism research is slowly changing professional practice in this area, it is important to know that the female phenotype is often less recognised within society as many traits are internalised or present differently.

Internalised autism refers to autistic people who are able to mask their traits by mirroring the behaviour of those around them so they come across in the same way most Neurotypical people do. Internalised autism is often associated with autistic girls as typically they are able to mask their behaviour. However, internalised autism is not exclusive to females, some males may also have learnt to internalise their autistic traits.

Examples of differing female social communication characteristics include (but are not limited to):

Particularly good at mirroring behaviour, also known as masking

Repetitive behaviours such as twirling hair, re-reading books, etc.

Difficulties understanding conflict within friendship

Show signs of anxiety, depression and other mental health difficulties

More likely to have socially acceptable interest

Traits such as 'shyness' are more socially acceptable in girls than boys

Camouflaging behaviour at school and releasing it at home

Difficulties respecting authority and the school hierarchy

References: (National Autistic society, 2023) (Rudy, 2021)

### Autism and anxiety

Anxiety can be a major part of an autistic girl's everyday life, especially when they are masking and trying their best to fit in. This build-up of anxiety can cause anxiety-based school avoidance or selective mutism. Friendships are often very important to autistic girls but can also cause a great deal of anxiety, especially if there is conflict. It is common for them to have one or two strong friendships, but they may struggle socialising in groups. In adulthood some autistic women have described a general feeling of 'not fitting in' despite great efforts on their part to do

so. Navigating social dynamics can feel exhausting in addition to managing sensory differences and attempting to understand and cope within educational systems and structures.

### **Autism and behaviour**

Providing students with a safe location within their educational setting to go where they can relax and don't feel they have to 'mask' may help reduce the stress and anxiety students face within school or college. Some autistic girls become very tired from masking all day which can result in a dysregulated behaviour when they get home from school or college. Providing a safe space and trusted accepting adult in school may help to reduced the dysregulated behaviour at home.

### **What can educational settings do to support autistic girls or those with an internalised presentation of autism?**

Effective support for autistic girls is underpinned by an inclusive and person-centred ethos. By ensuring each student understands their diagnosis it will allow for them to express what they feel might help them within their educational setting. Schools and colleges should take into consideration that a student presenting with mental health difficulties may have undiagnosed autism. Further information should be gathered before an assumption about behaviour is made.

#### ***Extra: preparing autistic girls before the first day of school***

- Ensure that all staff are aware of the different traits that autistic girls can display
- Speak to the student and explore how they understand their diagnosis and what they feel would help. Many autistic girls have become so good at masking their difficulties that they'd prefer support not to be put in place out of fear of appearing different.
- Ensure the student knows who their trusted adult is and where they can go if they need a break from lessons and/or social time.

#### ***Extra: Strategies to use all year***

- Ensure the students trusted adult meets with the student regularly to check in and support the student as required.
- Engage in regular communication with parents about what is happening in school/college and at home. This is important given the behaviour might present very differently at home.
- Discuss with the student how they'd prefer work to be presented to them. Some might need/want manageable chunks, for others this could cause more anxiety because it highlights difference.

- Try 'low profile' strategies to allow the student to indicate she needs help in class – for example, blue pen for ok, green pen for help.
- For group work, try to provide the opportunity for pair rather than large group work or arrange the groups so the student has a trusted friend in the same group as this can reduce anxiety.
- Help reduce anxiety by adapting how you teach – for example try not to put a student 'on the spot', rush them, give too many instructions or change a task without warning as this often increases stress.
- Provide ways the student can let a key adult know how she is feeling – for example, maybe a thoughts book or ratings scale that thoughts can be noted down during the day/evening, if she finds it difficult to articulate her feelings/thoughts in the moment.
- Share literature and resources that provide autistic girls (and other autistic children) with opportunities to read stories about real or fictional characters who are also autistic, validating their own experiences.
- If a student is struggling with hierarchy and rules ask a supportive member of SLT to sit down with them and answer any questions they may have.

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Tips!

Young people may want to learn more about their ASC diagnosis and understand how they can manage in a society that is designed for neuro-typical people. It is important to support them to accept themselves: masking is exhausting and being themselves will help them to be happier throughout their life. There are a range of books and podcasts that are often written by or delivered by autistic people for example:

Rudy Simone's Aspergirls book is described as empowering and affirmative. Chapters like 'Why smart girls sometimes hate school' ... can be dipped into. (Jessica Kingsley) OR Aspergirls book of secret social rules by Jennifer Cooke O'Toole - or anything by Jennifer Cooke O'Toole

## References

Dworzynski, K., Ronald, A., Bolton, P., & Happe, F. (2012). How different are girls and boys above and below the diagnostic threshold for autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 51(8), 788-797.

Lai, M. C., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2015). Identifying the lost generation of adults with autism spectrum condition. *Lancet Psychiatry*, 1013-27.

National Autistic society. (2023). Autistic women and girls. Retrieved from National Autistic Society: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism/autistic-women-and-girls>

Rudy, L. J. (2021, December 07). Women With Autism: How Autistic Traits May Differ. Retrieved from Verywell health: <https://www.verywellhealth.com/autism-in-women-5209272>

## Resources and Signposting

### Useful websites:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/girls-wellbeing>

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/autistic-girls-education>

<https://autisticgirlsnetwork.org/reasonable-adjustments-possible-at-school/>

<https://senmagazine.co.uk/content/specific-needs/autism-asd/7757/teaching-girls-with-autism/>

<https://nasen.org.uk/resources/girls-and-autism-flying-under-radar>

<https://my.optimus-education.com/empowering-girls-autism-advice-mainstream-schools>

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism/autistic-women-and-girls>

### Staff Training:

The National Autistic Society provides online training:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/professional-development/training-and-conferences/online/women-and-girls>

### Recommended books:

- Supporting Spectacular Girls: A Practical Guide to Developing Autistic Girls' Wellbeing and Self-Esteem, by Helen Clarke
- Education and Girls on the Autism Spectrum: Developing an Integrated Approach by Hebron and Bond

### Books for students

- The Spectrum Girl's Survival Guide: How to Grow Up Awesome and Autistic by Siena Castellon
- The Awesome Autistic Go-To Guide: A Practical Handbook for Autistic Teens and Tweens, by Purkis and Masterman
- The Awesome Autistic Guide for Trans Teens, by Purkis and Rose
- The Autism-Friendly Guide to Periods, by Steward
- The Growing Up Guide for Girls: What Girls on the Autism Spectrum Need to Know! by Davida Hartman