

Girls and women on the autism spectrum

More boys and men have a diagnosis of autism than girls and women, but recent data tells us that the gender gap in prevalence might be smaller than previously thought. This information sheet describes the current understanding of the gender gap, the theories that might explain it and provides some insight into life experiences of girls and women on the autism spectrum.¹

Celebrating World Autism Understanding Day 2022

Aspect Recognition Award recipient 2021 Elise Muller

Does autism look different in girls and women?

There might be some ways in which girls and women differ in their behaviour than boys and men on the autism spectrum.

- ✓ Females might show more interest in social relations, e.g. girls choosing to play with peers rather than alone
- ✓ Girls and women might be better at demonstrating complex emotions
- ✓ Girls might show more flexibility in their interests and behaviours
- ✓ Girls and women might have special interests that more closely align with 'mainstream' interests of girls (e.g. animals, celebrities or literature); the difference might be the intensity of their interest (e.g. very interested in only one celebrity)
- ✓ Females might be less likely to show externalising behaviours (impulsivity or hyperactivity), and may be more likely to internalise (anxiety or depression)
- ✓ These behaviours might also resemble typical gender differences, but are exaggerated

Why is there a gender gap?

There are a few theories that might explain why more boys and men have a diagnosis of autism than girls and women.

- The way that autism is diagnosed is biased towards the 'conventional' (male) features, and needs to be modified to be more appropriate for women and girls
- Autism in women and girls is 'overshadowed' by a mental health (mis)diagnosis (e.g. anxiety, depression, eating disorders)
- Quietness or shyness in a girl is considered 'normal' due to stereotypical social expectations of females
- Females on the autism spectrum are more socially motivated to engage with peers leading to a missed diagnosis
- Women and girls on the autism spectrum are better able to camouflage or mask their challenges through social imitation which results in them not receiving a diagnosis
- Of course, it is also possible that autism may actually occur more frequently in males than females, as is the case for a number of developmental conditions; however the currently gender gap might be larger because of all the factors listed above

Life experiences of girls and women on the autism spectrum

It might not be the case that there is a unique female profile of autism, but rather that girls and women on the autism spectrum experience life in a range of subtle and subjective ways that differ from boys and men.

- The reaction to feeling 'different' may be to cope by learning to look like you fit in socially
- Having alone time may be especially important to re-charge from the exhaustion of masking
- High self-awareness, a very active 'inside world'
- Coping by apologising and appeasing others
- Feeling a tension between being their true self and their perceived pressure to conform societal expectations of females
- Feeling isolated because of not being believed when sharing their diagnosis of autism with others
- Difficulty understanding female neurotypical peers due to a lack of straightforwardness
- May receive a diagnosis later in life
- Feeling a sense of injustice as not receiving the support needed

Strategies to support the wellbeing of girls and women on the autism spectrum

- Provide support and education, especially regarding safety
- Create a space where you can talk openly about anything
- Provide structure and routine, and work together on strategies to help them to cope with life
- Understand and acknowledge strengths
- Recognise and openly discuss the challenges of being female on the autism spectrum, this can be very validating
- Consider seeking professional support for distress tolerance, mindfulness or cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)

Mental health of girls and women on the autism spectrum

It is important to recognise that girls and women on the autism spectrum may experience unique challenges that might have an impact on their mental health.

Some of these experiences could include:

- Feeling unheard or unsupported due to misdiagnosis or not receiving the support needed
- Stress, exhaustion and anxiety from camouflaging and masking, and the sense of being forced to be something you are not
- Strong feelings of needing to withdraw from social interaction to re-charge
- Victimization in relationships due to misunderstanding intentions
- Feeling isolated due to being discriminated against in the workplace
- Feeling exhausted due to not knowing that it is okay to have time alone
- Profound sense of inner turmoil

There are mental health professionals that can provide support for these feelings and work with you to develop strategies to help navigate these challenges and facilitate coping. Your GP is a good place to start, as they can provide a referral to an appropriate mental health professional.

#LifeOnTheAutismSpectrum

Celebrate World Autism Understanding Day 2 April 2022

To get involved use the hashtag or visit autismspectrum.org.au/WAUD

Resources

Books

Spectrum Women: Walking to the Beat of Autism edited by Barb Cook & Dr Michelle Garnett. 2018, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder - Understanding Life Experiences from Early Childhood to Old Age by Sarah Hendrickx. 2015. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Life on the Autism Spectrum - A Guide for Girls and Women by Karen McKibbin & Tony Attwood. 2015. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Camouflage: The Hidden Lives of Autistic Women by Sarah Bargiela. 2019. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Pretending to be Normal: Living with Asperger's Syndrome (Autism Spectrum Disorder) by Liane Holliday Willey (Foreword by Tony Attwood). 2014. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Asperger's and Girls by Tony Attwood (Edited by Temple Grandin). 2006. Future Horizons Incorporated, Arlington, US.

Been There. Done That. Try this! : An Aspie's Guide to Life on Earth edited by Graig Evans, Anita Lesko & Tony Attwood. 2014. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Web

Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN)
<https://www.autisticadvocacy.org>

I Can Network (for teens and adults)
<https://icannetwork.online/>

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