

autism at-a-glance

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Autism at-a-Glance is a publication of the Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA).



Autism in Females

Autism at-a-Glance is a series of practitioner and family-friendly documents created by the Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA) designed for high school staff members supporting students on the autism spectrum, as well as family members of adolescents with autism. The purpose of the *Autism at-a-Glance* series is to provide a current summary of topics relevant to adolescents and young adults with autism as well as practical tips and resources for school and community personnel and family members.

This *Autism at-a-Glance* was designed to provide information to practitioners and family members about female adolescents and young adults on the autism spectrum.

Only one out of five individuals diagnosed with autism is female (Maenner, 2016). The signs of autism can be harder to spot in girls and women, contributing to some of the difficulties with diagnoses of females. Due to this difference in prevalence, much research on diagnosis, treatment and outcomes in autism has focused on males. The research that does exist finds that girls and young women with autism have unique experiences and express symptoms of autism that differ from those of boys and young men.

Why are Females with Autism Overlooked?

Modern diagnostic methods for autism tend to overlook girls. The criteria for diagnosing autism are based on behavioral data primarily derived from studies of boys, and researchers believe that girls and women are underdiagnosed because their symptoms may look different, their behaviors may be interpreted differently, and girls and women may be more likely to engage in “masking” which can hide some of their symptoms (see table on the next page). Girls with autism and co-occurring intellectual disability are more likely to be diagnosed at a young age due



Autistic Females

to the severity of their signs and symptoms. However, females with autism without co-occurring intellectual disability are harder to diagnose as their signs and symptoms may not be as obvious. In some cases, girls and women with autism may have such a high intelligence that their symptoms of autism are hidden altogether (Cridland et al., 2014). When this occurs, individuals can work to compensate for signs and symptoms that they detect as deficits, or they “mask” their symptoms. As a result, girls are often diagnosed later in life than boys (Begeer, 2013).

How are Females with Autism Misdiagnosed?

Considering that it can be difficult to diagnose autism in girls and women, some autism characteristics seen in females may lead to a misdiagnosis. When overlapping symptoms of depression, anxiety, self-harm, poor self-image, and sensory issues appear in girls with autism, a misdiagnosis can occur (Cridland et al., 2013). The isolation, confusion and stress caused by having undiagnosed autism can impact one’s mental health.

Common Misdiagnoses

- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Anorexia
- Depression or Mood Disorder
- Anxiety Disorder

Reasons for Underdiagnosis	Examples
Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher levels of functional and social behavior • Fewer repetitive behaviors • Decreased prevalence of hyperactivity and aggression (Halladay et al., 2015)
Behavioral Interpretations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restricted play can be interpreted as pretend play (Halladay et al., 2015) • Restricted interests tend to involve people or animals rather than objects or things so can be interpreted as typical interests (Lai et al., 2015) • Social imitation can be interpreted as typical social development • Social challenges can be interpreted as shyness
Masking Behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observing peers and adopting social roles • Following social scripts • Imitating social behaviors



Common Challenges for Girls and Young Women with Autism

Friendships & Social Communication

Many girls with autism experience difficulty communicating with other neurotypical peers due to the complexity of adolescent female relationships (Cridland et al., 2014). These complexities can include changing expectations around social communication and understanding social rules. Making friends can be challenging, and these difficulties may lead to feeling bullied or to social isolation in girls with autism (Sedgewick et al., 2018).

Mental Health

As a result of some social experiences, girls with autism can experience significant impacts on their mental health, including self-harm, depression, and anxiety (Sedgewick et al., 2018). Participants of one study examining the experiences of young women with autism shared that their mental health needs are often not adequately addressed by mental health professionals, and that the lack of female-specific support is a result of the gender imbalance in autism (Crane et al., 2017).

Puberty and Hygiene

As girls enter their pre-teenage and teenage years, personal hygiene becomes an important issue. As most girls begin puberty during this time, they must adapt to caring for their changing bodies. This requires learning new skills and establishing new routines around personal hygiene. In a small-scale

study, Cridland et al. (2014) found that while some adolescent girls with autism struggled with discretion around privacy and puberty, most managed the onset of menstruation well.

Tips for Parents of Females with Autism

Autism presents itself differently in everyone. Because research is finding further differences in how autism presents itself in males versus females, the approach to supporting girls and young women with autism should look different as well. Being aware of some of the gender differences in autism is the first step to supporting young girls who display early signs and behaviors. Look for differences in communication skills, social skills, and play behaviors. In addition, consider the following tips for supporting girls and young women with autism.

Social Support

It is important for parents to support girls with autism in learning essential social communication skills. Research shows that quality of life for girls and young women with autism is tied to friendships and relationships, making it important for parents to support safe and satisfying relationships (Sedgewick et al., 2018). The transition to high school is often accompanied by more complex social demands of female relationships and may also require differential support from parents.

Focused Interests

Encouraging and promoting areas of focused interest can ultimately have a benefit on social relationships, leading to reduced anxiety, acceptance, and mutual respect (Sedgewick et al., 2018). Girls with autism tend to form relationships based on their focused interests. They find peers who share similar interests and passions and use that as a basis for communicating, socializing, and eventually forming bonds.

Relationships

Open and honest discussions between parents and their daughter with autism about consent and healthy relationships are particularly important during adolescence as well (Sedgewick et al., 2018). Encouragingly, parents involved in this study reported improvements in their daughters' social experiences

as they aged. This was attributed to both increasing peer maturity and gains in social and communication skills (Sedgewick et al., 2018).

Promoting Positive Mental Health

Parents should be aware of the increase of mental health concerns for girls and young women with autism. In particular, observe for signs of depression, anxiety, eating disorders and self-harm. Girls can benefit from mental health support especially as they begin their transition into high school, as this is a time that can be especially challenging for any child with autism (Sedgewick et al., 2018).

Puberty and Hygiene

Because puberty is a time of significant change for adolescents, girls with autism can benefit from receiving explicit preparation for this change. Being clear and concrete about what to expect in terms of body changes and new hygiene routines can be especially beneficial to girls with autism. Also, clarify who can be a resource for help as well as clarify boundaries about how and with whom to discuss these discreet topics.

Resources

[11 Signs of Autism in Girls: Autism in Girls May Look Different from Autism in Boys](#)

[The Invisible Girls on the Autism Spectrum](#)

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