



Autism in girls and women

The impact of gender on diagnosis and experiences

While autism is more commonly diagnosed in boys and men, research is starting to tell us that the number of Autistic women and girls may be higher than previously thought. In this information sheet, we explore some of the reasons behind this diagnosis 'gender gap', how autism can present in girls and women, and how to provide the right kind of support.

Our purpose
a different brilliant®

Understanding, engaging and celebrating the strengths, interests and aspirations of people on the autism spectrum.

Why is there a diagnosis gender gap in the first place?

There are a few possible reasons that may account for why autism has historically been diagnosed in more males than females.

- The way that autism is diagnosed is biased towards the 'conventional' (male) presentation, and may need to be modified to be more appropriate for women and girls.
- Autism in girls and women is often 'overshadowed' by a mental health (mis)diagnosis (e.g. anxiety, depression, eating disorders).
- Females on the autism spectrum may be more socially motivated to engage with peers, contributing to a missed diagnosis.
- Women and girls on the autism spectrum may be better able to camouflage or mask their challenges through social imitation.
- 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.

Does autism present differently in girls and women?

Girls and women may:

- Show more interest in socialising (such as playing with peers rather than alone).
- Be more flexible in their interests and behaviours.
- Have interests that are considered more 'mainstream' (such as animals, celebrities or literature) compared to those of Autistic boys and men.
- Use non-verbal communication (facial expressions, gestures) more effectively.
- Be more likely to internalise negative emotions (resulting in anxiety and depression) as opposed to expressing them externally (such as through impulsivity or hyperactivity).



What have we learned from talking to Autistic girls and women?

Research has identified some commonalities regarding the life experiences of Autistic girls and women.

- The reaction to feeling 'different' may be to cope by learning strategies to 'mask' in order to fit in socially.
- Having alone time may be especially important to recharge from the exhaustion of masking.
- There is disproportionately high rates of victimisation.
- There is a tendency to defer to others and engage in 'people pleasing'.
- Some feel a tension between being their true self and the perceived pressure to conform to societal expectations of females.
- They may feel isolated because of not being believed when sharing their diagnosis of autism with others.
- Many receive a late or delayed diagnosis.



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 they are not.
- Strong feelings of needing to withdraw from social interaction to re-charge.
- Trauma response due to violence or victimisation.
- Feeling isolated due to being discriminated against in the workplace.

It's important to remember that support and understanding are available. Mental health professionals specialise in providing compassionate assistance and can collaborate to develop personalised strategies for navigating these hurdles. These strategies are designed not only to help manage challenges, but also to embrace and celebrate their unique identity. A GP is a great place to start. They can provide guidance to the right mental health professionals tailored to the individual's specific needs.

What's the best way to show support?

Supporting the well-being of girls and women on the autism spectrum involves understanding, acceptance and taking action that acknowledges their unique experiences and strengths.

- **Embrace their unique perspective**
Recognise and celebrate their distinct way of experiencing the world. Encourage their interests and passions, which can be sources of joy and self-esteem.
- **Provide a safe and inclusive environment**
Offer a supportive space where they feel understood and accepted for who they are. This means being patient, listening actively and avoiding judgement. Be mindful of sensory sensitivities that can vary widely among individuals on the autism spectrum. Simple actions like reducing background noise or understanding preferences in social settings can make a significant difference in their comfort and wellbeing.
- **Foster open communication**
Encourage open dialogue about their needs and feelings. Ensure they know their voice is valued and respected, and make adjustments based on their feedback.
- **Educate yourself and others**
Continuously learn about autism, especially how it presents in girls and women. Share your knowledge with peers, family and community members to increase awareness and understanding.

Based on the idea of a different brilliant®, Aspect's approach:

- Respects difference and diversity
- Builds a person's skills based on their strengths, interests, aspirations and support needs
- Develops autism-friendly environments
- Supports others to understand and embrace autism and to develop respectful supportive interactions.

We are committed
to making life
better for people
on the spectrum.



Women and girls on the autism spectrum are better able to camouflage or mask their challenges, which can lead to missed opportunities for diagnosis.

Useful Resources

Books

**Spectrum Women:
Walking to the Beat of Autism**
edited by Barb Cook &
Dr Michelle Garnett.

**Women and Girls with
Autism Spectrum Disorder –
Understanding Life Experiences from
Early Childhood to Old Age**
by Sarah Hendrickx.

**Life on the Autism Spectrum –
A Guide for Girls and Women**
by Karen McKibbin & Tony Attwood.

**Camouflage:
The Hidden Lives of Autistic Women**
by Sarah Bargiela.

**Pretending to be Normal:
Living with Asperger's Syndrome
(Autism Spectrum Disorder)**
by Liane Holliday Willey.

Asperger's and Girls
by Tony Attwood.

**Been There. Done That. Try this!:
An Aspie's Guide to Life on Earth**
edited by Craig Evans, Anita Lesko
& Tony Attwood.

Web

**Autistic Self Advocacy Network
(ASAN):** autisticadvocacy.org

I CAN: icannetwork.online

Yellow Ladybugs: yellowladybugs.com.au