

GENDER DIFFERENCES ASSOCIATED WITH AUTISM AND ADHD



There are some gender differences associated with Autism and ADHD. More boys than girls are diagnosed with Autism and ADHD. There is no typical clinical profile for any boy or girl diagnosed with ASD or ADHD. Some girls will look more like the majority of boys, and some boys will look more like the majority of girls. Since the diagnostic criteria was developed through research with more males than females, Autism might likely present differently in girls.

There is much to learn about what Autism looks like in girls. Some autistic girls develop mental health difficulties. When they are treated for these difficulties, the underlying Autism may be overshadowed by the presenting symptoms of a mental health disorder. Research is needed to understand better the most effective support strategies that may benefit autistic girls. Support strategies may help develop their understanding of social behaviour. Learning skills to manage intense emotions and uncomfortable sensory responses and opportunities to develop their interests is likely to create more opportunities for expressing their strengths and succeeding in reaching their goals.

It is worth noting that ND individuals are more likely to experience Gender Dysphoria than their Neurotypical counterparts. This is where the individual feels like there is a mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity. They may choose to either live their life as the gender they identify with or as gender-neutral, where they do not wish to be defined by either gender.

AUTISM

The information in this section was gained from lived experiences of 500 Autistic women and girls via surveys and conversations

Why are girls harder to diagnose than boys?

It is more challenging to recognise Autism in girls because the criteria used to identify Autism relies on lists of criteria in a diagnostic system that may not account for the expression of the characteristics in girls. A diagnosis relies on the clinician to judge whether the observed and reported behaviours are different in quality or quantity/intensity from those expected in typical development. For example, an autistic girl's special interests may seem to differ less from her peers than the autistic boy's special interests. Careful questioning of interests and routines can reveal the unusual quality and intensity of the autistic girl's interests.

Some autistic children and young people are described as “masking” their Autism. It is thought that more girls than boys mask in large group situations like school. Those autistics who are masking can copy the behaviour of their peers successfully. They may appear to behave like their peers. Yet, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that there is some difficulty understanding and adapting their responses in social exchanges when there are slight changes to familiar patterns of social interaction. They may find it difficult to describe why they have responded to a situation in a particular way because they are following a learned social rule and can recite the rule without understanding the social basis for the rule. They tend to follow social rules more rigidly and find it difficult to adapt these rules if something about the situation changes. Their language lacks the spontaneity and creativity that you would expect for their age. They will use phrases and engage in conversation using learned responses rather than understanding and reacting to what has been said naturally. It can be very difficult to recognise the autistic person who masks their autistic characteristics.

Some Autistic girls and boys learn from a young age how to mask and mimic neurotypical (those whose neurodevelopment is typical in society) social behaviour and use social scripts. They mask most often when anxious or in situations that may not feel safe, such as in assessments or Paediatrician appointments. This is more likely for those Autistic girls and boys who have well developed cognitive skills. Confirming a diagnosis of Autism can be difficult when a clinician has not directly observed atypical behaviour when meeting the child/young person.

Do girls and boys express their special interests differently?

Male autistics are often referred to as ‘little engineers’ and female autistics as ‘little psychologists’ because they are fascinated with how people tick, how their brains process information and why they think the way they do. It is very common for female autistics to have a special interest that may seem morbid, like true crime, but the psychological aspect is fascinating rather than the actual morbid part.

Socialising and Friendships

Socialising and being around people is exhausting for autistic girls and women (this is like a shutdown, but not all-encompassing), especially with those who are not also autistic. When you do not understand social and conversation rules, you spend a lot of energy, time, and anxiety trying to keep up with the conversation and work out what social rules and scripts apply. Many female autistics find it hard to know when it is their turn to talk and often talk over the other person.

Girls spend a lot of time observing others interacting and have, subconsciously, trained themselves how to socialise, what the rules are and what social script to use. In contrast, Neurotypical girls and women develop this naturally. Many female autistics have said that they often feel like they are trying to communicate 'correctly' rather than naturally going along with the flow.

They often have difficulty understanding the rules regarding accurate eye contact, tone of voice, the proximity of their body to the person they are talking to, and what stance or posture their bodies should be in.

Autistic girls can be social chameleons and often adapt how they behave around different people. This does not mean that they are insincere at all. They are usually trying desperately to avoid ridicule or rejection. They are often trapped between wanting to be themselves and wanting to fit in with those around them.

They often lack danger sense and can get drawn into dangerous or inappropriate social situations because they do not understand that they could get in trouble. They are honest and often speak extremely frankly. Their way of thinking is incredibly straightforward (often literal), and they can be very trusting, so it can be hard to understand or recognise when others are dishonest, and it hurts them a great deal when they are. Betrayal has the same effect.

Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria is common with Autistic girls. This is where they can fear other people's opinions, criticism, and judgement to a nearly phobic level. They take these very much to heart, and it is almost a validation that they are different, incapable, and don't belong, which is a very common self-belief with Autistic girls. They tend to hold many thoughts and feelings inside, where they are safe from judgement or misunderstanding. They are often quite emotionally sensitive, so any form of rejection is felt very deeply.

Oversharing is very common with Autistic girls, equally with strangers or someone they know. This is due to not understanding what is socially acceptable to share and what not to. It is common for autistic girls to struggle to understand peer interests, which can be isolating and confusing.

They tend to have their own sense of style, usually based on comfort and fulfilling sensory needs, rather than following any fashion trend. They often decide who they want to be friends with but don't know how that person may think or feel about being their friend. When they try to befriend that person, they often don't understand why their friendship has been rejected.

Personal Hygiene

Personal hygiene is not something that they usually pick up naturally – they need to learn it. This can be problematic when they hit puberty and start sweating more; getting body odour and physical appearance becomes more important to their peers. This can lead to them being bullied or excluded. Due to changes in peer interests, personal hygiene needs, body and emotional changes, teenage years can be very hard on autistic girls. Plus, this is usually the age that girls start to get interested in boys, and there is a new set of social rules to make sense of and learn.

Can female Autistics understand emotions?

Alexithymia is a common co-morbidity with girls, where you are unable or have great difficulty recognising or understanding your own or other people's emotions. Some can only identify their emotions as colours – this is known as emotional synesthesia. This does not mean that they don't feel emotions, they more often feel things very deeply, but they can struggle with understanding which emotion they or someone else is feeling.

ADHD GIRLS TEND NOT TO HAVE THE SAME HYPERACTIVITY AS ADHD BOYS DO

Why are girls harder to diagnose than boys?

With boys, ADHD is usually more easily recognisable as their characteristics are generally externalised; high energy, bouncing off the walls, behavioural issues, unable to sit still in class, etc. In comparison, the characteristics in girls tend to be internalised, which, sadly, means that ADHD in girls can often be missed. This is also true for dealing with frustration or upset; boys typically externalise their frustration with shouting, lashing out, etc. Whereas girls internalise it; bury it within themselves, leading to mental health issues such as depression, increased anxiety, and eating disorders, as they cannot release their pent-up feelings. If they do become aggressive, it is most often that they are verbally so, rather than boys who tend to become more physically aggressive.

Are ADHD girls hyperactive?

ADHD girls tend not to have the same hyperactivity as ADHD boys do. They still have that aspect, but it can appear pushy, hyper talkative, or over-emotional. It is often described as, mentally, having 40 different thoughts at the same time, and your brain is rushing through them all at 100 miles per hour.

Socialising

They are more often aware of social expectations than their male counterparts or have a greater desire to form friendships. Some girls may be able to mimic or mirror others well enough to be considered socially able.

However, those who are more impulsive can struggle with social appropriateness and can have trouble making or keeping friends, leading to self-esteem issues and a higher risk of mental health issues.



Impulsiveness

When ADHD girls and women have an idea to do something, they tend to throw themselves entirely into it; it becomes the 'best idea they have ever had!' before they have considered the consequences, any responsibility around it, how much work it will entail (if it is a more extended project or a social project), or how they will feel when doing the activity/project/trip/etc.

It is often only when the excitement has dimmed, when others have committed to it, or when the reality of the above occurs that they realise that it probably wasn't a good idea. They may start looking for a way out of it or panic that they are out of their depth. This can lead to self-doubt around their decision making.

This is not the case for every impulsive decision or project – many wonderful things have happened through ADHD impulsiveness!