



Autism and Girls

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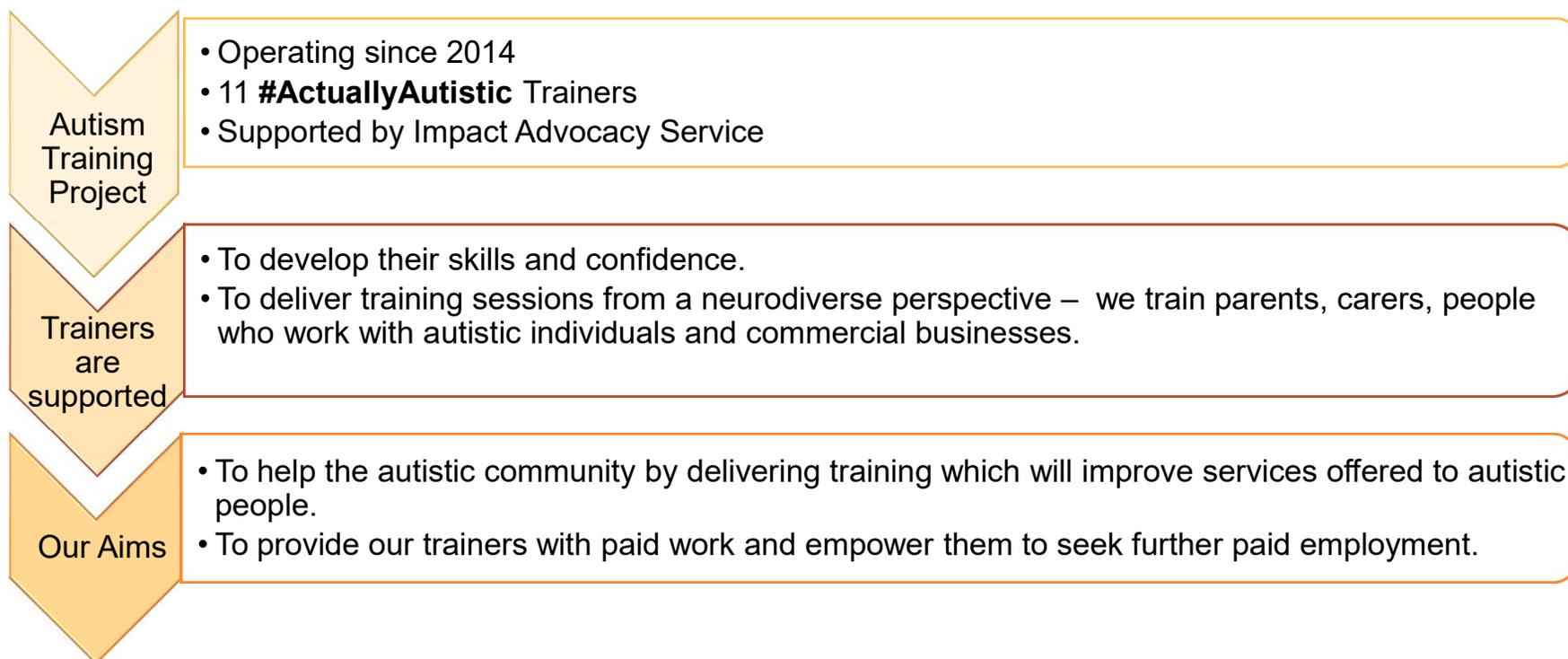


Today's online session

- If you have any comments or questions please type them in the group chat.
- To allow the trainer to concentrate and for the session to flow better, the session supporter will pass along questions to the trainer at the end of the session – where time will be set aside to answer them.
- If a question is particularly pertinent, the trainer will be notified so they can answer it there and then.
- You will be sent a full copy of the slides from today.



Introducing Aspie Trainers...



Terminology – what's in a name?

Aspie Trainers tend to use ASC, Autism or Asperger's interchangeably

- Many of our trainers were diagnosed with Asperger's prior to change in diagnostic criteria, but recognise that increasingly fewer diagnosis are made using this term
- 'Condition' is felt to be more positive
- **Neurotypical / NT** – means someone of the majority neurotype
- **Neurodiversity / ND** refers to a concept where neurological differences such as Autism, ADHD and Dyslexia, are recognised and respected as any other human variation.

Asperger's

Autism

Autistic Spectrum
Disorder (ASD)

Autistic Spectrum
Condition (ASC)

Objectives

- Describe how girls on the autistic spectrum can present differently to boys
- Understand the diagnostic challenges for girls that can lead to misdiagnosis and late diagnosis
- Explain why girls on the autistic spectrum are more likely to mask their differences and how masking can impact mental health
- Explore suggestions to empower and support girls with ASC



Male or Female Autism characteristics?

Task: Behaviour stereotypes

Take a moment to consider this list of words. Which of these words do you feel **society** associates more with males and which words does **society** typically associate with females?

-
- | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| ➤ Logical | ➤ Technical |
| ➤ Aloof | ➤ Interest in celebrities or animals |
| ➤ Sociable | ➤ Creative |
| ➤ Interest in trains or sports statistics | ➤ Unemotional |
| ➤ Empathy | ➤ Strong verbal skills |
-

Gender behaviour stereotypes

MALE	FEMALE	AUTISTIC
Logical	Empathy	Logical
Unemotional	Creative	Unemotional
Aloof	Strong verbal skills	Aloof
Technical	Sociable	Technical
Interest in trains or sports statistics	Interest in celebrities or animals	Interest in trains or sports statistics

Gender behaviour stereotypes and autism

- Parallels between autism characteristics and the more general male stereotype.
- Autistic behaviour in women is often overlooked.
- Girls and boys are socialised differently.
- Different male and female behaviour and interests.



Gender Dysphoria

- Gender dysphoria is where a person experiences distress because their biological sex differs from their gender identity e.g.
 - They may have been assigned female at birth, but identify as a man (a trans man).
 - They may have been assigned female at birth, but identify as neither a man nor a woman (a non-binary person).
- There is some evidence that autistic people are *more likely* than other people to have gender dysphoria, but there is little evidence about the reason why.
- In considering gender stereotypes today please remember that gender is becoming increasingly fluid in our society which can make Autism diagnosis more challenging.

Autistic behaviour in females

- We use Masking to hide our differences and help us 'fit in'.
- We tend to use our words more carefully.
- We often create an elaborate fantasy world.
- We may have trouble understanding status.
- We are more likely to experience depression and anxiety.
- We often have fewer friends.
- We find teenage life particularly stressful.

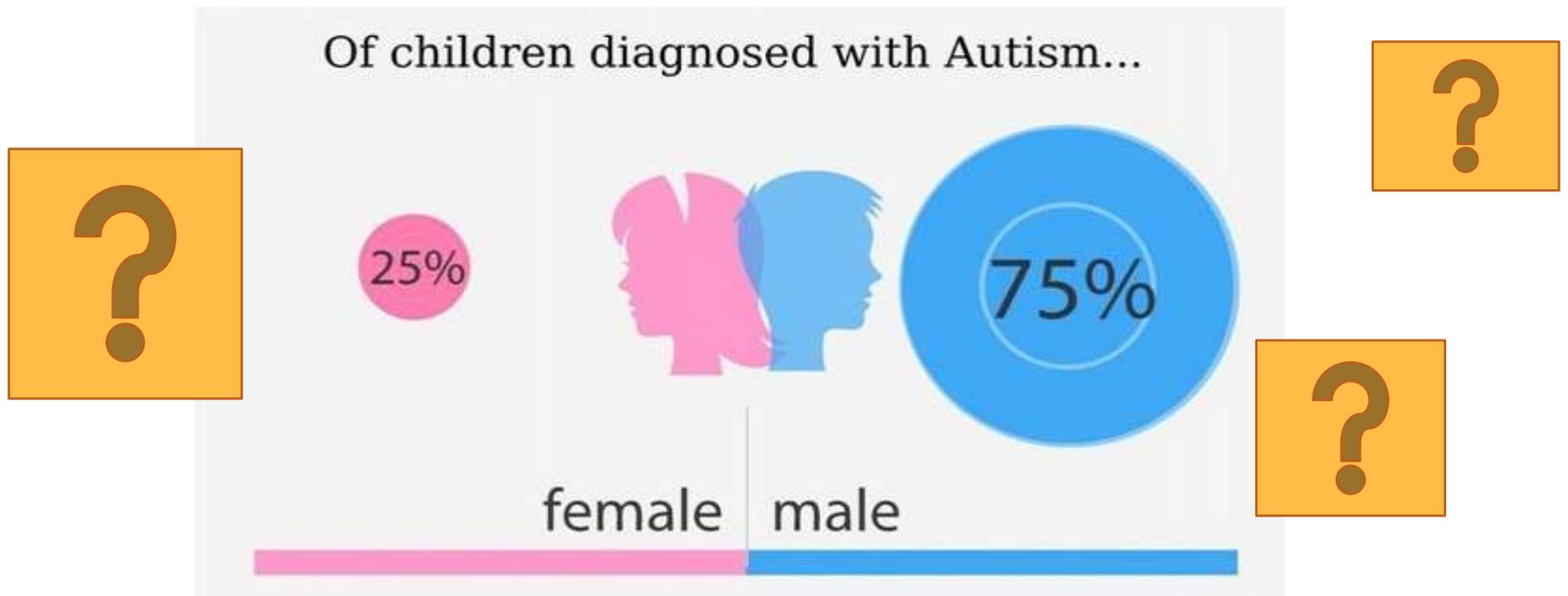


The effects of gender differences - late diagnosis

- No access to the support that they need in order to prevent mental health problems.
- They might blame themselves and believe that they are worthless.
- They might not suspect autism in themselves because of the assumption that it is a male condition.
- They often get given a diagnosis that is assumed to be more likely in women, such as depression or anxiety.



Misdiagnosis and late diagnosis*



*Data courtesy of The National Autistic Society

Understanding the diagnostic challenges...

- Original case studies of autistic people were all male.
- *Diagnostic tests are still heavily bias to the male presentation of Autism*
- Some speculate that autism is an exaggeration of normal gender differences i.e. females tend to be more empathic therefore autistic females can appear hyper empathic.
- Genetic differences may mean that girls are less likely to inherit autism than boys.
- Women and girls are better at masking or camouflaging their difficulties
- Autism traits in girls are under-reported by teachers.



Autistic behaviour in females – my experience

- Good vocabulary and strong verbal skills.
- Hyper empathic to other people and animals.
- Suffered with mental health problems (anxiety, OCD, depression) from a young age.
- In contrast to the male biased autism stereotype, I struggle with numbers and technical systems.
- Teachers loved me for being academic, hard working and well behaved.



Autistic behaviour in females – my experience

- I loved P.E but was clumsy and uncoordinated.
- I rarely confided my true feelings and fears to anyone – instead I would write it all down in a diary.
- Some sensory needs/ behaviours that became worse during puberty.
- Plagued with night terrors. Issues staying awake in class.
- When looking to secure a diagnosis it is not the presence of these traits alone but rather the **intensity and severity** of the traits that will be considered.



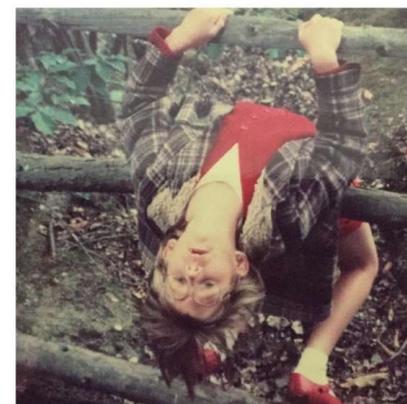
Masking and its impact on mental health

- Socialising for girls is more focused on small talk, feelings and relationships than it is for boys.
- The female teenage social world is incredibly complex.
- Some might try to blend in by being quietly invisible. Others will learn to mask...
- Masking helps us avoid ridicule and camouflages our differences.
- Mirroring or copying other peoples' behaviour is more common in girls with autism than it is in boys.
- **Masking can lead to identity confusion, underestimation of needs, and severe mental health problems.**



Masking in autistic females – my experience

- Masking is rarely a conscious act, its something you **instinctively** do to appear 'normal'.
- It can include mimicking dress, speech, hobbies and interests of those around you.
- In the especially vulnerable teenage years you may feel more pressure to participate in activities you don't want to including experimenting with alcohol, drugs and sex.
- Masking is exhausting. You are playing a role and eventually that mask will slip, leading to **meltdowns and shutdowns**.



How to empower and support Autistic girls

- Recognise their anxiety. Become aware of the things that heighten anxiety like homework or the threat of detention. Autistic girls hate getting it wrong – they want to be seen as smart and popular.
- Most teenage Autistic girls will want to wear make-up and will be obsessed with social media and celebrity just like their friends... help them get it right, show them how and be a sounding board when they don't understand the nuances of their friends conversations.
- Talk to them about social skills and forming and maintaining friendships. Model the right behaviours and listen to their struggles.
- If an Autistic girl is uncomfortable talking, encourage them to write down their thoughts. It's up to them if they share what they've written but just the act of journaling is hugely cathartic and can help them reflect and make decisions.

How to empower and support Autistic girls

- Don't fall into the trap of thinking they're ok because they look or act 'normal'. Take a holistic snapshot of their life. How well do they eat? Are they sleeping? Do they take regular exercise? Do they need help with study techniques?
- Executive function (or rather dysfunction) will increasingly become a problem as they get older and there is a greater expectation on them for independent study and travel. Help them learn to plan and prioritise, use reminders and calendars and share techniques to manage their emotions (exercise, breathing exercises).
- Your Autistic girl will need private time on a daily basis to recharge her social energy battery which has been drained from being at school/ college. Be supportive of her pursuing her special interest as this is often the best way to recharge.
- Be open and honest about 'tricky' subjects like dating, drinking and intimacy. Autistic girls can be more naïve and immature so are more at risk of exploitation.

How to empower and support Autistic girls

- Help them make meaningful friendships by identifying ways to meet other young people with similar special interests. It's much easier to engage with people who are passionate about the same things and reduces the pressure to mask.
- Pay attention to their mental health needs. Identify when a meltdown or shutdown is coming and take steps to prevent this where possible.
- Don't be afraid to seek support from the relevant GP or school nurse. Leverage the SENCO at school or college. Talk to the pastoral team. Find out what support is available with regards to study AND social skill development.
- Finally, embrace and celebrate their strengths. Autism comes with many gifts. Intellectually able females with ASC are often well qualified, motivated and ambitious. They are passionate perfectionists with strong creativity and the ability to hyper focus on the task at hand.

Useful Resources

LATEST NEWS > [January 6, 2021] How Self Care, Interoception & Co-Regulation has Increased Peace in Our Family Life by Christina Keeble > EDUCATION f t in



encompassing
gender diversity
& LGBTQIA+

- HOME
- SERVICES/RESOURCES
- EVENTS
- FEATURED
- INTERVIEWS
- OPINION PIECE
- COLUMN WITH LISA MORGAN
- PARENTING
- RELATIONSHIPS
- WELLBEING
- SPECTRUM WOMEN AUTHORS
- VIDEOS
- REVIEWS
- RESEARCH
- SUBMISSIONS
- CONTACT US

Home > Advocacy > When so Little was Known of Autism by Lisa Morgan M.Ed. CAS

When so Little was Known of Autism by Lisa Morgan M.Ed. CAS

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YouTube





National Autistic Society

- [Gender and Autism](#)
- [Women and Girls](#)

Further organisations & resources

- [Aucademy](#) – Online and offline education for and about Autistic people and their experiences, from Autistic educators ([Aucademy on Facebook](#))
- [Colouring Outside The Lines](#)
- [Fighting Inequality for Girls on the Spectrum \(FIGS\) \(Autistic Girls Network Group on Facebook\)](#)
- [Limpsfield Grange Information on Autistic Girls and Education](#)
- [NAHT Autism and Girls Forum](#)
- [Samantha Craft's Unofficial Checklist for Autistic Women](#)

**University of Kent compilation of resources



- [Scottish Autism Online support for Autistic Women and Girls](#)
- [Scottish Women's Autism Network \(SWAN\)](#)
- [Yellow Ladybugs](#)

Limpsfield Grange School Books

- [*M is for Autism*](#): The students of Limpsfield Grange and Vicky Martin
- [*M in the Middle*](#): The students of Limpsfield Grange and Vicky Martin

Books by autistic women

- [*Autism in Heels: the untold story of a female life on the spectrum*](#): Cook, O'Toole, J (2018), Skyhorse publishing
- [*Odd Girl Out*](#) by Laura James
- [*The Electricity of Every Living Thing*](#): Katherine May (2018), Trapeze
- [*The State of Grace*](#) by Rachael Lucas – fiction about an autistic teenage girl

**University of Kent compilation of resources



- [List of books by/about Autistic Women](#)

University of Kent resources/projects

- [So, You're Autistic](#): a support programme for autistic University of Kent students (diagnosed and undiagnosed). This site also provides autistic people and those close to them resources on all things autistic.
- [Understanding Autism](#) – a free online autism course from the Tizard Centre, University of Kent. It is run several times each year.
- [Imagining Autism have created online resources](#), ensuring that children, teachers and parents now have access at home to the Imagining Autism experience.

Key & Recent Books and Articles on Autism and Gender

- [Girls and Autism: Educational, Family and Personal Perspectives](#): Carpenter, B & Happe, F& (2019). London: Routledge
- *Spectrum Women: walking to the Beat of Autism*: Cook, B & Garnett, M. (2018), Jessica Kingsley

**University of Kent compilation of resources



- Nerdy, Shy and Socially inappropriate: a user Guide to an Asperger Life,: Kim, C (201) Jessica Kingsley
- *A Guide to Mental Health Issues in Girls and Young Women on the Autism Spectrum: Diagnosis, Intervention and Family Support: Eaton, J (2017) , Jessica Kingsley*
- *Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Hendricks, S (2015) , Jessica Kingsley*
- Gender Identity, Sexuality and Autism: Voices from across the Spectrum: Mendes, E& Maroney, M. (2019) , London: Jessica Kingsley
- AsperGirls: Empowering Females with Asperger Syndrome: Simone, R (2010), Jessica Kingsley

**University of Kent compilation of resources

Finally...

- There is no one behaviour that reliably identifies autism.
- Autism is a “hidden or invisible condition.”
- Autism is varied for all individuals, male or female.
- Gender is just one of many factors that can influence how autism is expressed
- Never assume anything!



Before we tackle Questions...



Please copy and paste this link into your browser to complete the digital Mind survey:
<https://www.westsussexmind.org/online-training-evaluation-form>

Your feedback will help us shape future training and influence funding allocation from Mind

Question Time



Questions

I am going to be leading a Girls group for autistic girls, what would you recommend to help me make the group beneficial for them and comfortable for them?

Questions

I have a 11 old daughter diagnosed with High Functioning Autism diagnosed in the past 2 years. She really doesn't want to talk about her diagnosis, whilst she accepts it, she doesn't want any help or support but is finding it hard at school and to regulate her emotions (we have lots of intense anger and meltdowns at home). What advice could you give on finding ways to support her which she might accept?

Questions

How do I get my autistic daughters' school to help with my to make adjustments to her day so that she doesn't get overloaded and come home and have huge meltdowns? The school aren't currently helping because she is presenting as a model student at school and having all of her meltdowns at home.

Questions

How to open the conversation for the first time about autism with a young autistic person, especially if not yet officially diagnosed?



Aspie Trainers West Sussex

SHARING A FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE ON ASCS

Thank You!

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- ✓ Recommending Aspie Trainers to your child’s school or college
- ✓ Following us online
- ✓ Spreading the word about us
- ✓ Joining our mailing list