

# Girls on the Autism Spectrum

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# About Me

- Arlington Public Schools 16 Years
- Married for 26 Years
- Bat expert with Bat Conservation & Rescue
- Chair of the OAR Self-Advocate Advisory Council
- Virginia Autism Council
- Fairfax Disability Service Board
- Virginia Master Naturalist
- Cool Aspies
- Autistic





# SOME STATISTICS

Boys are being referred and identified in far greater numbers than girls (10x).

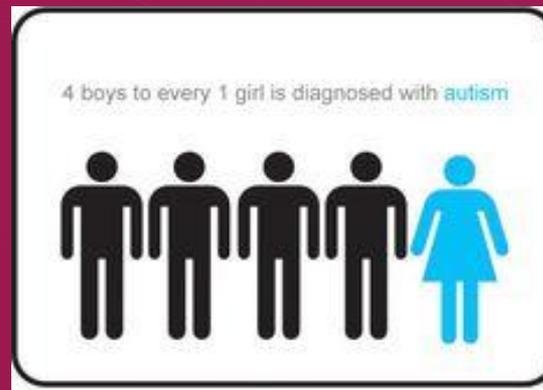
Girls are less likely to be diagnosed with autism than boys are, unless they also have intellectual disabilities or behaviors of concern.

Girls are also diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders at later ages relative to boys.

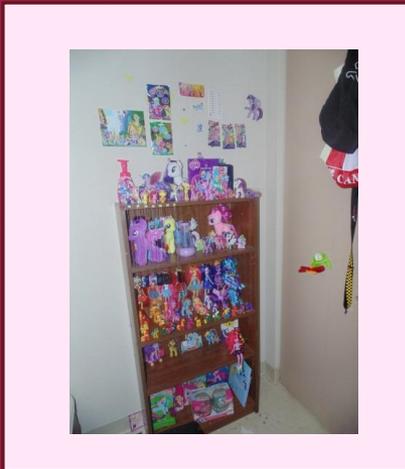
This gender “gap” raises serious questions because many female students with ASD are being overlooked and will not receive the appropriate educational supports and services.  
(Wilkinson, 2008)

# WHY ARE GIRLS DIAGNOSED LESS?

“...a growing body of research hints that the significant sex-based differences in autism diagnoses are a result not just of biological differences, but of a failure to recognize ASD in girls.”



# POSSIBLE GENDER BIAS IN DIAGNOSIS



## Special Interests

- Clinicians may have a male stereotype in mind when diagnosing.
- Interests more closely resemble typical dev.
- Less likely to be picked up
- Lining up vs Collecting

# POSSIBLE GENDER BIAS IN DIAGNOSIS

## Repetitive Behaviors



- Girls show fewer repetitive behaviors
- Repetitive behaviors tend to be less obvious
- More motivated to “fit in” with peers

# POSSIBLE GENDER BIAS IN DIAGNOSIS

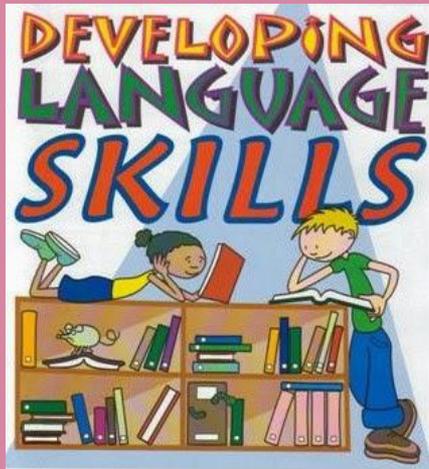


## Social Interactions

- Girls are usually more adept at imitating others' actions than boys.
- Girls will often cope by mimicking others. Boys tend to leave or avoid a social situation.

# POSSIBLE GENDER BIAS IN DIAGNOSIS

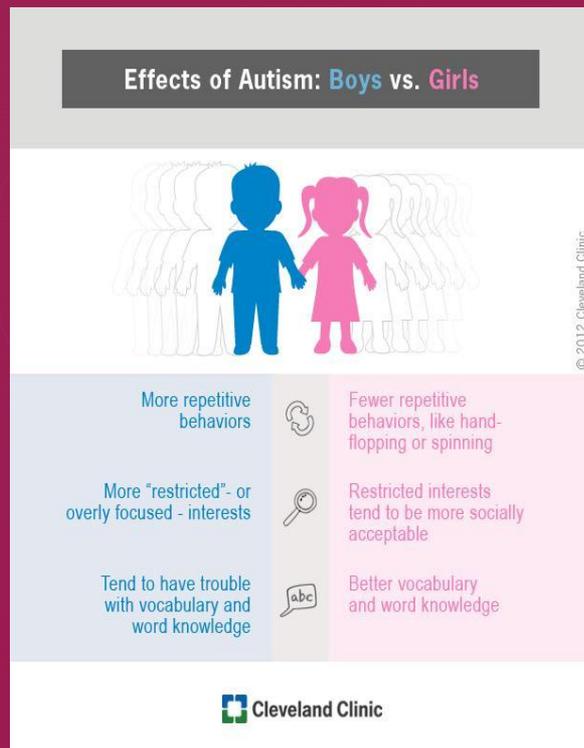
## Language



- Girls that are diagnosed later than boys tend to have more advanced vocabulary than boys.
- Boys' speech tends to be monotone and robotic
- Girls' speech tends to be high-pitched and child-like. It may take on the characteristic of a television character.

# POSSIBLE GENDER BIAS IN DIAGNOSIS

Effects of Autism: **Boys vs. Girls**



More repetitive behaviors	Fewer repetitive behaviors, like hand-flapping or spinning
More "restricted"- or overly focused - interests	Restricted interests tend to be more socially acceptable
Tend to have trouble with vocabulary and word knowledge	Better vocabulary and word knowledge

Cleveland Clinic

## Other

- Teachers are more likely to report concerns about boys than girls.
- Girls symptoms tend to manifest differently at home than at school.

# ▶ FINDINGS...

On the whole, children identified with having autistic traits were more likely to misinterpret sad and scared faces. These same children tended to incorrectly label a variety of emotions as “happiness”.

When separated by gender...girls were less prone to make mistakes when identifying emotions.

# Research Shows...

Girls may be better at “masking their traits” in everyday situations.



Girls may be better than boys at recognizing emotional cues in their environment (“typical activity”).



Girls still had difficulty recognizing emotions in “unconventional activities” or those that are more subtle. Clinicians, parents and educators may “assume” that they are neurotypical.



# ANOTHER STUDY...

Gender differences in emotionality and sociability in children with autism spectrum disorders.

- 101 10-16 year olds
- Interviewed using the Friendship Questionnaire
- High scores indicate that one has close, empathetic and secure relationships
- One parent also completed the questionnaire (to assess differences in perception between parents and children)
- Females in general had higher scores than males
- Those with ASD had lower scores (regardless of gender)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUuoq8CWeeU>

# SPECIAL CONCERNS FOR GIRLS AT SCHOOL

## Bullying

- Girls on the spectrum are more at risk of being teased AND less likely to report it
- Sexual harassment
- Cyber-bullying

## Appearance

- Hygiene
- Grooming
- Eating disorders

## Social Interaction

- Age-appropriate interests
- Desire for friends
- Pragmatic language

# HELPING GIRLS WITH SOCIAL SKILLS

- **Related and Supportive Services**
  - Speech therapy
  - Counseling
  - Social-skill groups and classes
  - Specific goals and support generalizing
- **Peer Models**
  - Train typical peers
  - Choose “kind” classmate for projects, coaching
  - No-bullying programs (Upstanders)
- **Universal Friendship Supports**
  - Buddy Benches
  - Pro-social training for all (conversations, conflict resolution, reading body language, perspective taking)
- **Special interest clubs**



# SUPPORTS IN THE CLASSROOM

## • Visual supports

- Subtle cue for hygiene issue
- Way for student to ask for help
- Rule reminders

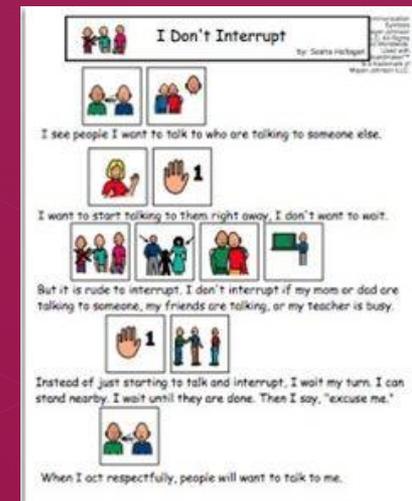


## • Social Narratives

- Script way to answer questions, interact socially, or handle difficult situations

## • Coping Strategies

- Cue before calling on student
- Sensory tools
- Seating



# SOCIAL SKILLS INSTRUCTION

## Instruction should NOT be gender-neutral

- Girls socialize differently than boys
- Social skills instruction should be tailored and prioritized, based on gender specific characteristics
- Use girl-oriented peer group/social groups to teach age-appropriate skills
- Consider the “Hidden Curriculum” (how are other girls of the same age interacting?)
- These skills change and become more complex over time. Focus on those that can be used immediately in the natural environment.



# HELPFUL HINTS

- Language

- Be clear
- Be concrete
- Use visuals to break down steps



- Timing

- Start early
- Teach skills before our students “make social blunders”
- Preview and prepare girls for unfamiliar or uncomfortable situations
- Practice, Practice, Practice

# PROMOTING POSITIVE THINKING

- Girls with autism are at risk for depression and anxiety disorders, so we must:
  - See the potential in every student
  - Not ignore the girls who are “quiet” and “getting by”
  - Offer individualized positive reinforcers for desired behaviors
  - Give compliments and positive praise
  - Help students understand their gifts and talents



# FAMOUS AND SUCCESSFUL WOMEN ON THE SPECTRUM



Temple Grandin



Yayoi Kusami



Susan Boyle



Sia



Daryl Hannah



Breanna Clark

## RESOURCES: BOOKS

- ◉ ***Girls Under the Umbrella of Autism Spectrum Disorders: Practical Solutions for Addressing Everyday Challenges*** by Lori Ernsperger
- ◉ ***Asperger's and Girls*** by Tony Attwood and Temple Grandin
- ◉ ***Parenting Girls on the Autism Spectrum: Overcoming the Challenges and Celebrating the Gifts*** by Eileen Riley-Hall
- ◉ ***Aspergirls*** by Rudy Simone
- ◉ ***Are You a Girl with Autism? Me Too*** by Meghan Rodo
- ◉ ***I Am an Aspie Girl: A Book for Young Girls with Autism Spectrum Conditions*** by Danuta Bulhak-Paterson
- ◉ ***How to Be Human: Diary of an Autistic Girl*** by Florida Frenz

# RESOURCES: WEBSITES & ORGANIZATIONS

- Amazing Women with Autism

<http://www.makers.com/blog/14-amazing-women-autism/1>

- Girls with Autism

<http://girlswithautism.com/>

- Asperger Women

<http://www.aspergerwomen.org/>

- Autism Women's Network

<http://autismwomensnetwork.org/>

# RESOURCES: ARTICLES

- <http://time.com/3837896/autism-girls-diagnosis/>
- <http://autismdigest.com/aspergers-syndrome-in-women/>
- <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/05/magazine/05autism-t.html?pagewanted=all>
- [http://iancommunity.org/cs/simons\\_simplex\\_community/autism\\_in\\_girls](http://iancommunity.org/cs/simons_simplex_community/autism_in_girls)
- <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/isi/?next=/smad-news/autism-is-likely-under-diagnosed-in-women-due-to-gender-bias-28003167/>
- <http://www.autismsupportnetwork.com/news/thoughts-and-ideas-woman-asd2358>