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Women and Girls on the Autism Spectrum

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Applying the criteria to girls

- Social interaction
 - Girls talk more than boys
 - Mimicry and copying
 - Feel the need to interact
 - ‘Shy’, ‘on the edge’
 - Mask difficulties very well
 - Three is a crowd!
- Imagination
 - Fantasy worlds
 - Take on persona of animals/characters
 - Difficult to separate fantasy/reality
- Peer relationships
 - Other girls ‘mother’ and lead
 - Organised by parents
 - Can be bossy
 - Can be passive
 - Can be obsessed with friend



Applying the criteria to girls

- Sensory behaviours
 - Stroking, touching - normal
 - Toys – normal
- Restricted interests
 - People based
 - ‘Little Psychologist’ – not ‘Little Professor’
 - Animal based
 - TV based
 - Appear ‘normal’ in topic – but are more intense
- Routines
 - ‘Sensitive’
 - ‘Perfectionist’
 - ‘Particular’
 - Collecting
 - Seen as positive trait in girls?
 - Less aggressive than boys when faced with change?



Research

- New criteria for women required (Wing & Gould)
 - Girls missed and misdiagnosed
 - Impact may not be apparent until after puberty
- Androgen theory of autism (Ingudomnukul, Baron-Cohen)
 - Elevated fetal testosterone levels correlate to autistic traits and inversely correlate to social development and empathy, eye contact
- Extreme Male Brain Theory of Autism (Baron-Cohen)
 - Hyper-masculine cognitive profile – perform better than NT males. AS females more ‘male’ than men.



Research

- Anorexia implicated as linked to Autistic Spectrum Condition (Treasure)
 - Share weak coherence
 - Rigidity – rule following
 - Perfectionism
 - Low self esteem
 - Low empathy
- Self-harm (NAS, 2011)
 - Means of expressing emotions in physical, ‘concrete’ way
- Women AS – ‘more life events’ (Wjingaarden-Cremers)
 - Over-anxious and worry about getting it wrong
 - High IQ women missed behind
 - Anxiety
 - Mood swings
 - Learning difficulties



Research

Women ASC and mothers of children with ASC (broader autistic phenotype) show increased likelihood of:

- Hirsutism
- Bisexuality
- Asexuality
- Irregular menstrual cycle
- PCOS
- Dysmenorrhea (menstrual cramps)
- PMT (low estrogen)
- Obesity (connected to PCOS)
- Acne
- Epilepsy
- Tomboyism
- Low interest in marriage, children and physical appearance
- Family history of genital cancers



Adult AS Gender Differences

Men

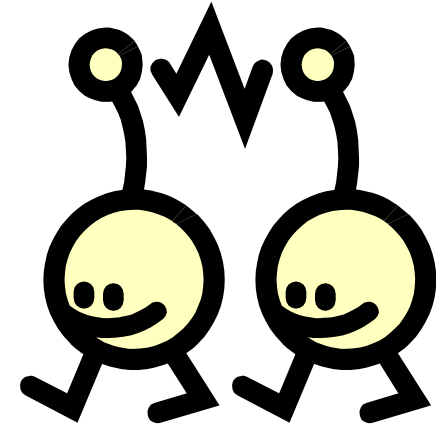
- 'Why?'
- No abstract imagination = say No to anything
- Decision-making – no ideas
- 'Gentle', 'effeminate', 'camp'
- Presumed gay
- No male peers – dislikes male behaviour
- Prefers female company
- No male 'bigging up'
- No sense of being a 'man'
- Expected to initiate
- Low self esteem
- Low concept of emotional needs
- 'Cruel', 'cold', 'insensitive'
- Sex meets physical need

Women

- 'Why not?'
- No abstract imagination = cannot see why should say No to anything
- Decision-making – cannot determine practicality of idea (fantasy/reality blurred)
- Tomboys
- 'Male' – not feminine in social and behavioural sense
- Make-up, fashion
- Do not get on with non-AS women
- Prefer male company
- No small talk/gossip/chat
- Blunt, direct
- Does not meet societal expectations of women (nurturing)
- May see sex in more 'male' terms

Life as a Woman on the Autistic Spectrum

- Partner usually also has Autism
- Do not identify with NT women – need own peer group
 - Only friends are men and AS women
 - Less emotional requirements?
- Seen as ‘aloof’, ‘scary’, ‘stand-offish’
- Cannot meet societal expectations of ‘woman’
 - Nurturing, people focused, social
- Not believed to have AS – presents as too capable
- Hidden mental health issues as a result of presenting as capable (meltdowns)
- Lifetime work of studying people and the NT world
- Poor boundaries – hard to say No, poor self-preservation
- Burning bridges – if wronged, will leave/cut off
- Parenting
 - Emotional support, decision-making (safety, boundaries)
- Employment
 - People, authority/hierarchy, logical nature, too many questions, clever/stupid



Supporting Women on the Autistic Spectrum

- *Teach women with ASD never to compare themselves to NT women*
- Women only ASD support/peer groups
- Online forums – sharing experiences
- Specialist ASD sexual health and awareness
- Mentoring from NT women – navigating the NT world
- Self-respect and self-acceptance
- Awareness of difficulties with boundaries – support in recognising own limits
- NAS Women and Autism Conference (next one - Leeds, October 2013)
- Reading women focused ASD information:
 - Aspergirls (Rudy Simone)
 - Aspergers and Girls (Attwood)
 - Pretending To Be Normal (Holliday-Willey)