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Girls and Autism: What's the difference?

Sarah Hendrickx

'I feel like I have a different operating system and a very good emulator running on top of it. The few people I tell are shocked to find I'm autistic. I can fit in, I can behave like others up to a point, but it isn't me and doesn't fulfil anything within me. It's empty and meaningless.' - Autistic woman (2015)

Let me introduce myself...

- Diagnosed autistic aged 43
- By the time I was diagnosed:
 - Masters degree in autism
 - 6 autism books published
 - 1000+ autism training delivered
 - Managed autism mentoring project
 - Partner diagnosed autistic
 - Many family members diagnosed or suspected



Why did it take so long??

...because I am female... and because I applied my logical, systemising nature to the life long study of people rather than objects

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info@asperger-training.com

tel.:07803 325542

The Beginning... One Weird Kid

- 'Gifted' child – IQ 153
- Speaking sentences at 9 months old
- 'Shy', 'neurotic' 'in a world of her own', 'Sarah Snail'
- Tomboy – aircraft models, wood work, fishing, cars
- Sorter – Lego, sweets, buttons
- One bossy friend at a time
- 'Clever but lazy', 'careless'
 - No understanding of purpose of education



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The Middle... Why is this so difficult?

- Teen – naive, vulnerable, poor judgement
- Wanted to fit - copying
- Self-harm, anxiety, suicidal thoughts
- Mediocre educational achievement
- Alcohol – self-medicating to socialise
- Mum by 19
- Two failed marriages, many relationships
- 33+ jobs...
- And then autism explains everything



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And now... an autistic life

- A framework to create a life which supports:
 - My natural strengths
 - My limitations
 - My health & well-being
- The best autistic partner
 - Accepted without judgement
- A very low arousal life
- Job which suits my skills & needs
- 'Scaffolding' which holds up my public persona
 - Routines, schedules, support, time out



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Research Context

- 2.5:1 male:female autism ratio (Gould)
- Girls 'look less autistic' – focus on social learning
- Diagnosed later than boys (+3yrs) – MH diagnosed before autism
 - Anorexia, social anxiety, OCD diagnoses first
- Early & precocious speech – may mask social & comms diffs
- M & F with autism more 'androgynous'
- Gender incoherence to be expected (Bejerot)
- PCOS, menstruation diffs, migraines, hormones (Baron-Cohen)
- Less rigid and restrictive interests; more social difficulties
- Better social skills than ASD boys in childhood; poorer than ASD boys in teens
 - Female teen social world = nuanced
 - M – 'aloneness'; F – 'clinging'
- Large number of 'invisible' adult women seeking diagnosis – negative experience
- Highest % suicide ideation is in autistic females (Baron-Cohen)



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Applying the criteria to girls

- Social interaction
 - Mimicry and copying - masking
 - 'Almost constant use of language'
 - 'Shy', 'on the edge'
 - Mask difficulties very well
 - Watch everything/everyone
 - Systematic brain applied to social world
- Peer relationships
 - Not intuitive – seek inclusion on own terms
 - Other girls 'mother' and lead
 - Organised by parents
 - Can be bossy
 - Can be passive
 - Can be obsessed with friend
 - Seeks exclusivity with friend
 - Clown/intense – 'smile it might never happen'



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Applying the criteria to girls

- Restricted interests
 - People based
 - 'Little Psychologist' – not 'Little Professor'
 - Animal based
 - TV, celebrity based
 - Appear 'normal' in topic – but are more intense
- Routines
 - 'Sensitive', 'Perfectionist', 'Particular'
 - Collecting – rubbers, pics, badges, stones
 - Seen as positive trait in girls?
 - Less aggressive than boys when faced with change?
 - Shutdown rather than meltdown (less visible)



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Applying the criteria to girls

- Sensory behaviours
 - Stroking, touching – 'normal'
 - Soft toys – 'normal'
- Imagination
 - Fantasy worlds – as an escape from real life
 - Take on persona of animals/characters
 - Difficult to separate fantasy/reality
 - Imagination not typically associated with autism
- Activity Choice
 - Reading
 - Construction
 - Collecting, sorting, tidying
 - Colouring, drawing
 - Animals and bugs



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Teenage Years

- Maybe when autism first presents
- 'Worst years of my life'
- 'Peering in from the outside'
- Fashion /Trends
 - Tried and failed
 - Imitating peers
 - Don't understand the rules
 - Don't understand the point
 - Unique style
 - Dress for comfort – jeans and trainers
- Puberty
 - Physical and emotional changes
 - Hygiene and self care
 - No one to talk to
 - Needs to be taught the rules



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Friendship & Relationship Stuff

- No game-playing
 - Blunt, straight-forward
 - Expect same from others
 - Vulnerable to predators
- Personas
 - Exhausting
 - Lose real self
 - Can't keep up indefinitely
 - School / College / Work colleagues – all day every day
- Sensory issues
 - Touch, smell and noise
 - Positive & negative
- Sexual Offending
 - Stalking, inappropriate behaviour, revenge
- Cannot read interest (or lack of)



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Adult Autistic Women

- Still the '*Little Psychologist*'
 - lifetime work, never entirely fluent
- Often do not identify with NT women
 - Less interested in 'fripperies' and handbags
 - Do not identify with any gender: 'I'm just me'
 - Seen as 'aloof', 'scary', 'stand-offish'
- Cannot meet societal expectations of 'woman'
 - Nurturing, people focused, social
 - Interim (pointless) social contact between activities expected
 - Emotional support expected
 - Interest in trivial topics expected
- Hidden mental health issues
 - as a result of presenting as capable



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Supporting Females on the Autistic Spectrum

- Look beyond her surface presentation
 - She may need more support than she looks
- Consider autism as a possibility in diagnosis
- Lifetime of not being believed or heard – may not ask for help
- *Teach her never to compare herself to NT females* – finding her own 'tribe' is key
- Reading women focused ASD information:
 - Tony Attwood, Lianne Holliday-Willey, Rudy Simone, Robyn Steward, Shana Nichols, Alis Rowe (Curly Hair Project), *Sarah Hendrickx!*

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