

Prevalence of ASD in girls

It has long been recognised that Autism Spectrum Disorder is more common in boys than girls. The most commonly cited estimate states that for every girl with ASD there are four boys with ASD¹. However, recent estimates suggest the ratio of boys:girls is closer to 3:1². There is increasing evidence that **girls with ASD are being missed**^{2,3,4}.

ASD – where are the girls?

It is increasingly clear that girls' diagnoses are missed as ASD 'looks' different in girls (see table). **A girl with ASD may superficially may 'look' the same as her typically developing peers** – because her repetitive interests are more age- and gender-typical⁵, because she mimics her peers' social interactions⁶

(without necessarily understanding them) and because she experiences social rejection via within-friendship aggression⁷ or being overlooked⁸ rather than by being ostracised.

Unfortunately, even the tools used to diagnose ASD are in some⁹, but not all¹⁰, cases biased against detecting girls with ASD.

Why do we need to identify girls?

Girls with ASD experience many challenges, despite their difficulties being less overt. In particular, **social camouflaging is typically exhausting and can lead to extreme anxiety and stress**^{11,12}. The social naïvety of girls with ASD can result in gender-specific risks: one study of 14 adult women with ASD found 64.3 % had experienced sexual abuse¹³.

Diagnostic criteria	Boys	Girls
Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower social motivation⁷. • Difficulties making and maintaining friendships; tend to be socially rejected. • Difficulties understanding social interactions. • Communication difficulties. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher social motivation⁷. • Fewer/less obvious difficulties making and maintaining friendships^{7,8,14}. • May camouflage difficulties understanding social interactions by mimicking typical peers⁶. • May exhibit 'linguistic camouflage' that hides communication difficulties¹⁵.
Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High levels of repetitive behaviour^{16,17}. • Restricted interests focus on objects/things, e.g. cars, trains⁵. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower levels of repetitive behaviour, particularly when older¹⁶⁻¹⁸. • Restricted interests focus on people/animals or are otherwise age- and gender-typical, e.g. horses, pop music⁵.
Expression of emotions (not a diagnostic criteria – these gender differences are seen in children and adults in general)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Externalise emotions, e.g. are hyperactive or exhibit non-compliant behaviour^{5,17}. • Expression of emotions more likely to be considered a 'problem' by others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internalise emotions, e.g. more likely to become anxious or depressed, develop an eating disorder or self-harm¹⁹⁻²¹. • Expression of emotions more likely to be invisible to others.

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