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## Limpsfield Grange School: understanding autism in girls

[Limpsfield Grange School](#) in Surrey is a residential secondary special school for girls with social communication and interaction needs. The majority of our girls are autistic, and what's really different about our school is the fact that it's a community where autistic girls are in the majority.

In the last five years there's been an increased awareness in the medical profession that autistic girls present very differently to boys, with anxiety being an over-riding emotion. Being diagnosed as autistic and accessing support can be difficult, as there are still GPs who say to parents 'Your daughter can't be on the spectrum because she can make conversation and eye contact.'

But lots of girls on the spectrum can do exactly that. Many of them don't understand what's going on socially but they want to make conversation, while not understanding its subtext. The stereotype of an autistic person being locked into themselves and obsessive doesn't necessarily apply to girls, who are reaching out and trying to socially engage with other people.

At Limpsfield Grange we believe there needs to be much better awareness of what autism in girls and women looks like. We know that just because the girls aren't obsessed with *Thomas the Tank Engine* or lining things up in neat rows doesn't mean they are not on the spectrum. Just because they can make eye contact, have a reciprocal conversation with someone for five minutes doesn't mean they are not autistic. It means the girls have learned how to have a conversation. Society needs to redefine what it thinks autism is.

### Raising awareness

We believe that our community has part to play in raising awareness of female autism. The girls, along with author Vicky Martin, have written two novels about an autistic girl, [M in the Middle](#) and [M is for Autism](#). Both novels allow the reader to view the world through the anxiety-ridden eyes of an autistic girl called M. We also made a documentary with ITV called [Girls with Autism](#) to try and show people what it is really like to be an autistic teenage girl.

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The girls really want to tell people what it's like to be autistic and to help others. They've spent a long time feeling really alone and don't want other girls to feel as isolated. They're proud of their coolness and quirkiness and want other kids to feel part of a cool community.

## **Copying behaviours**

At Limpsfield Grange we call it social formatting: copying and pasting someone else's behaviour and trying to make it your own - without understanding where that comes from. This can lead to serious problems. It's mentally exhausting to continually suppress your natural social reactions. In places like school or college or work autistic women and girls are often surrounded by people who really don't get them. They have to mask their difficulties all day.

This is why understanding, regulating and managing their emotions is absolutely crucial to autistic girls' happiness in adult life. It is key to feeling well, happy and together and to accessing opportunities. It's the difference between being a contained, emotionally functioning adult, or being stranded in their bedroom by their anxiety.

## **Anxiety**

Managing and living well with anxiety is a fundamental strand of the work that we do here. When they first come to the school at age 11, the girls quite often lack self-awareness when it comes to their emotional range, and can't identify what makes them anxious. They don't really understand what they feel or how their feelings impact on their behaviour.

Working with the girls to recognise, label and manage their emotional responses is a long process. We work with them to link physical sensations with emotions and then work backwards to identify triggers for those emotions.

Once the girls understand why certain situations make them feel a certain way we can work with them to develop strategies to manage their emotional responses. This process can take months but once the girls understand why they feel the way they do, it can be incredibly empowering for them.

We hope that by enabling the girls to understand and manage their anxiety, and through raising awareness in society about female autism, we can equip them to lead the most successful lives they can.

## **5 Top tips for educating autistic girls in school:**

1. **Build a relationship.** Relationships are crucial to autistic girls – they need to feel accepted by you, and that you understand them.
2. Make learning **concrete, contextual and visual.**
3. Ask them how they would like to be **supported in social situations** –girls will want to engage with others socially but may find this overwhelming or confusing.

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4. Build in **quiet space and time** each day where the girls can process their thoughts and feelings without being socially “on show.” Remember that masking all day is exhausting.
5. Create some **bespoke sex and relationships** lessons. Autistic girls have multiple vulnerabilities:
  - they want to please people
  - they are sociable without understanding context
  - they are concrete literal thinkers
  - they can be very trusting
  - they may have low self-esteem.

Check understanding of situations and terminology and make these sessions student-led so you are addressing gaps in their knowledge.