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## **Autistic female friendships: what we know, and what we can do**

Most of us have friends. Generally, we like to form close relationships with other people, to build trust, to have fun together, to rely on each other when life is difficult, and to share our joy when life is great.

In early autism research however, there was an assumption that the above statement was not true for autistic people. 'Autism' came from 'auto', meaning self, and the implication was that autistic people were more interested in their own world, did not particularly want friends, and may even be incapable of doing so.

Thankfully we have moved far past these assumptions, and there is a wealth of work examining the friendships and social lives of autistic young people (Bauminger et al, 2008; Locke et al, 2010; Petrina et al, 2014). We know that autistic adolescents do want friends, usually have them, and are generally satisfied with the friendships they have – even if they don't look exactly like the friendships of their neurotypical peers.

This research has generally been carried out with male participants though, due to a long-standing under-recognition of autism in girls and women. We know that in neurotypical people there are notable gender differences in friendship: women talk more; are more emotionally supportive; have fewer, closer friends than men; and engage in socially subtle aggression. Are these gender differences also true for autistic people?

### **What do we know?**

Autistic girls are usually more socially motivated than their male counterparts – they tend to be more interested in making and maintaining friendships (Calder, Hill, & Pellicano, 2012; Sedgewick et al, 2016). They are likely to have more friends than autistic boys, and be more included in the classroom (Dean et al, 2014). They tend to talk with their friends, rather than focussing on shared activities, something which both autistic and neurotypical boys do (Kuo et al., 2011).

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For my PhD, I carried out three studies which examined friendship and relationship experiences of autistic girls and women. In my adolescent study with secondary school students, autistic and neurotypical boys and girls completed questionnaires about their friendships and about bullying, and they took part in an interview about these things too.

I then carried out a similar study with autistic and neurotypical women, including questions about their friendships when they were teenagers and how things had changed. Finally, I interviewed the parents of autistic girls to learn what they thought about their daughters' friendships, and what their concerns were for the future, if any.

My research (awaiting publication) showed that teenage autistic girls have best-friendships which they rate as just as close as those of neurotypical girls. Autistic girls tended to have one or two best friends rather than a larger group, which is different to neurotypical girls, but their friendships were distinctive from the friendships of autistic boys.

For all these positives though, one difficulty was clear – autistic girls were more often the target of relational conflict (being gossiped about, or left out) than neurotypical girls. They found it difficult both to understand this, and to know how to respond to it effectively.

### **What about autistic women?**

Many of the similarities between autistic and neurotypical girls continue to be present in adulthood, according to women in my research. Autistic women are similarly likely to be:

- in romantic relationships
- to be mothers
- to be employed
- to have friends.

The patterns of these relationships are like those of autistic girls – autistic women tend to have one or two close, intense friendships. Their romantic partner is often their main relationship, sometimes acting as a 'social gatekeeper', meaning that they socialise mainly with their partner's friends. Autistic women were happier and more secure in their friendships and relationships than they had been as teenagers. They attributed this increased self-assurance to receiving an autism diagnosis in adulthood, providing an explanation for their differences.

Unfortunately, some of the difficult aspects of relationships in adolescence continue into adulthood too. Autistic women described struggling with office or school-gate politics, finding the tactics other women use to 'get ahead' both baffling and pointless (as they may well be!). More worryingly, most autistic women I spoke to had experienced sexual assault or domestic abuse in the past, although all were in good relationships now. They themselves often attributed this to difficulties understanding other people's motivations towards them, and an assumption that people would 'play by the rules'.

## So, what next?

Reassuringly, assault and abuse weren't problems among the adolescent autistic girls I worked with, and many parents (who I also interviewed) were actively trying to talk about safe relationships with their daughters. Hopefully, as the current generation grow into adult women, they will face fewer challenges because they know they are autistic and are learning what they need from their relationships.

Despite some of the worrying findings of my research, my take-away message would be this: some autistic girls and women have friendships and relationships which are in many (but not all) ways like those of neurotypical girls and women, and which are different to those of autistic boys.

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