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"We're not sure what comes next": Parent views on autistic girls' friendships and futures

My PhD focussed on the friendships and romantic relationships of autistic girls and women (Sedgewick, Hill, Pellicano, 2018), but it also involved talking to parents - while organising visits or while waiting for their daughter to be ready to talk to me. I realised very quickly that parents have a really key role in supporting their daughters' friendships, both practically (such as making sure that they meet people when they say they will) and emotionally (such as talking them through arguments with friends).

So, I decided to do a set of more formal interviews with the parents of the girls who took part in my research, to get a better understanding of their views of their daughters' friendships and to find out how they thought adult relationships might work out for these girls (Sedgewick, Hill, Pellicano, 2018).

Twenty parents of autistic adolescent girls, aged between 11 and 18 years old, took part in semi-structured interviews on the topics of friendships, conflict in friendships, and thoughts about adulthood and the future.

Current friendships

Overall, parents were positive about their daughters' current friendships. All the girls had at least one best friend, and parents thought that these were good friendships which helped their daughters to:

- enjoy school
- feel more included and accepted
- have friends to do things with in the evenings and on weekends.

They were generally confident that their daughters had a good understanding of friendship, and that their daughters were happy with the friends they had.

Bullying

That being said, most parents reported that their daughter had been the victim of bullying at some point in their school careers, some of which was extreme. This bullying particularly took the form of what is called 'relational aggression' behaviours such as gossiping about someone, deliberately excluding them, or trying to steal friends so that they end up isolated.

These are all things typically associated with teenage girls of course, but they were especially difficult for autistic girls to understand because they were very loyal in how they perceived friendships, so they were confused by people they thought of as friends being mean about them, and by the rapidly shifting dynamics of teenage female friendships.

Mental health

Parents talked about the impact being bullied had on their daughters' mental health, which was often incredibly negative. Several girls were self-harming or receiving support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services for anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

Parents explicitly linked increased difficulties with mental health to periods of greater social change, arguments with friends, or more intense bullying, and were worried that this association between friendship and mental health was something they struggled to support their daughters through.

Staying safe

There were also widespread concerns about the girls' development into adulthood, particularly around romantic relationships. While some parents felt that their daughters would be relatively safe negotiating these relationships, many were worried that their daughter would "go along" with what men asked them to do because:

- they didn't know how to say no
- they would believe a boy or man who said they loved her and therefore do whatever he said
- they would want to be accepted and feel like having sex was the best way to do this.

Some parents were also concerned about how their daughters would manage living independently, as even in late adolescence they were having to be reminded to do things like eat, wash, or keep track of time.

Supporting autistic girls

Parents described taking a range of approaches to dealing with their concerns and trying to prepare their daughters for adulthood and adult relationships. Most were already giving a lot of emotional support and social 'teaching', talking to their daughters about good and bad friendships, how to spot bullying, and what to do if you are bullied. Approximately half took the

Author: Dr Felicity Sedgewick
Organisation: Post-doctoral Researcher, King's College London
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same approach to adult relationships, talking to their daughters about dating, sexual relationships, and consent.

Others, however, felt that relationship and sex education was the job of school, or felt too awkward to bring it up with their daughters. Some also assumed that because their daughter was autistic, she would have no interest in romantic relationships as she matured. Lots of research, and accounts from autistic women however, show that autistic girls and women do want and have romantic and sexual relationships, and so it is important to teach autistic girls how to do this in a way which they are comfortable with.

Conclusion

The main conclusion of this study was that there is an urgent need for more open conversations with autistic girls to help them stay safe and secure as they mature, especially supporting them to understand and negotiate more intimate and complex adult relationships. While the picture generally for current relationships is that autistic girls have strong best-friendships, they may have difficulties with their wider peers which can impact significantly on their mental health.

Future research should examine how autistic girls' relationships change as they mature and transition to adulthood, combining the insights of parents, autistic girls and autistic women who have already gone through these processes.

References

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