

What you need to know about Autistic Girls in Schools

Who are FIZZACC?

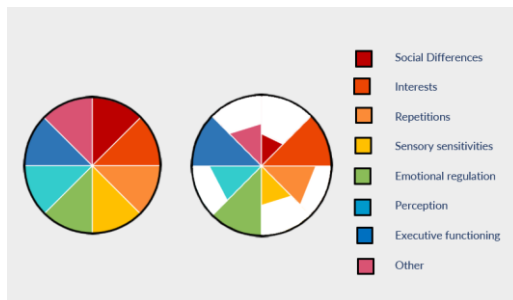
We are a research group consisting of one PhD student from the University of Southampton who has 20 years experience of teaching in secondary schools, and six autistic girls who have a lifetime of experience of autism. We believe that learning from the lived experience of autistic people themselves is the key to developing good practice. We have been working together on ideas to help teachers and other pupils better understand the experiences of autistic girls in schools as part of a project on improving educational transitions. If you would like to find out more about us and what we have been doing please go to <https://acorns-soton.org.uk/2022/03/fizzacc-information/>

What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity recognises that human brains are all different. The term neurodivergent refers to traits and characteristics related to a number of conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia. People who are not neurodivergent are often referred to as neurotypical. People with neurodivergent brains add diversity which is important. Although there are challenges associated with neurodivergence these are often caused by environments that are designed for neurotypical people. There are also many strengths associated with neurodivergence.

Why do we refer to autism as a spectrum?

No two people are the same. This is true for autistic people as well as neurotypical. Because of this we refer to autism as a spectrum. Each person will have a different pattern of strengths and challenges. It is also important to remember that a person's profile will change. What is easy one day might not be the next. For this reason the terms 'high' and 'low' functioning are not helpful. 'High' functioning people often lack the support they need whereas 'low' functioning people can often miss out on opportunities due to a false perception of their abilities.



This profile shows how someone might have strengths in perception and emotional regulation but struggle with sensory sensitivities. This is not a fixed profile. It will change in different situations and on different days. It shows how the idea of autism being linear, from 'mild' to 'severe' for example, does not reflect the true picture of strengths and challenges.

Why are we focusing on autistic girls?

The perception that many people have about autism is that it is a condition associated with boys and men. This is partly based on an outdated assumption that male and female brains are different. As a result, research and diagnostic methods have focused on boys, resulting in girls and women being identified as autistic much later if at all. So why is autism not identified in girls? There are some differences in the way autistic traits look between boys and girls.

- Girls are better at hiding their autistic traits. This is often called masking or camouflaging.
- They are more likely to want to make friends and fit in. This can often lead to them copying the behaviour of their friends.
- Girls will internalise their feelings whereas boys will often 'act out'.
- Girls have interests that are considered more typical of their age for example TV shows, pop bands or animals.

Autistic strengths

- Attention to detail
- Ability to focus
- Creativity
- Acceptance of difference
- Integrity and honesty
- Ability to identify patterns in information
- In depth knowledge of specific interests

What challenges are there for autistic girls in school?

Sensory challenges. Bright fluorescent lights, the smell of school dinners, the scratchy feeling of a polyester school jumper. These are not only irritating. They can cause physical pain and make it difficult to concentrate on learning.

Meltdowns. These occur when an autistic person is in a situation that their brain can't deal with. This looks different for everyone. Some people cry, some scream and shout, some run away. This is not a choice or 'bad behaviour'. A meltdown must be allowed to run its course in a safe space and the young person should then be supported until they feel well enough to continue with their learning.

Shutdowns. These happen when there is too much information to process. The person will stop paying attention to the things that are overwhelming. This might look like rudeness with a refusal to answer questions or follow instructions. Again support should be offered in a safe space until the feeling of overwhelm comes to an end.

It is very likely that there are autistic girls at your school who have not been identified as autistic. This can make the environment even more challenging as they may not understand why things are more difficult for them.



How can we help?

There are lots of things that schools can do to support autistic girls. These will support them with learning, help prevent meltdowns and shutdowns, and protect their wellbeing. These tips are also applicable to boys.

- Teach staff and pupils how to support the autistic children in their schools.
- Don't assume that what is possible for an autistic person one day will be possible another.
- It can be difficult for autistic children to explain why they are finding things challenging. Give them time to explain and check back with them regularly.
- Most autistic children want to learn. Don't assume conduct that doesn't meet your expectations is due to wilful poor behaviour. First check all other possibilities.
- Provide a safe space that is accessible at all times without having to ask for permission. Ensure this space is a calm sensory environment.
- Have flexibility in your uniform policy.
- Keep lighting low and fix faulty lighting that is flickering or buzzing.
- Remember that sensory issues can be felt as pain. If a child is in pain, they won't be able to learn so take them seriously.
- Autism in people from ethnic minority groups is often misdiagnosed. Consider this if a child from an ethnic minority group is struggling at school.
- A lot of autistic young people are proud of their autism and consider it a superpower. Help them to celebrate their abilities and harness their strengths.

Some words of wisdom from FIZZACC

'You can't tell if someone has Autism just by looking at them! Absolutely anyone around you could have a hidden disability so make sure to be mindful and kind to everyone. We're different not less!'



'Some children who haven't been diagnosed act "naughty" but they aren't always, they might be overwhelmed; so just TBYA – Think, Before, You, Assume.'



'Every autistic person is different - there is no one way to 'look' or be autistic, we all have different traits. Autistic people can be of any race, gender, sexuality etc. but we're all still autistic :)'



How do I find out more?

Here are some links to information that might be helpful.

A comic strip which explains the autism spectrum. <https://the-art-of-autism.com/understanding-the-spectrum-a-comic-strip-explanation/>

A really clear explanation of what is meant by neurodiversity.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsfml3yVh1g>

An article about The Double Empathy Problem written specifically for young people.

<https://kids.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frym.2021.554875>

An article about why the language we use when we are talking about autism is important.

<https://www1.racgp.org.au/ajgp/2021/march/autistic-or-with-autism>

The National Autistic Society – a good source of information and support.

<https://www.autism.org.uk/>

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