Autistic Women's Friendships Through Life: how the research supports lived experience

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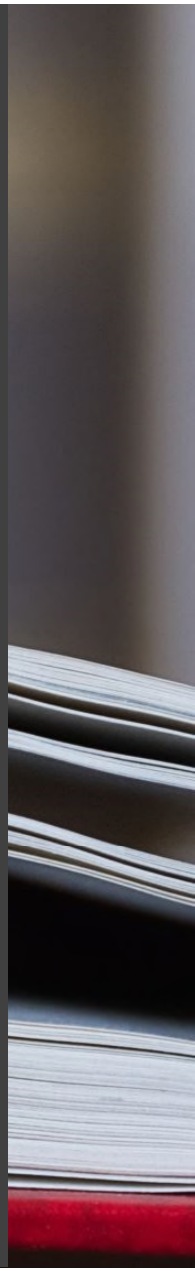


A BIT ABOUT US…

Background

Most autism work has been done with boys under 14, or adults with learning difficulties

There is growing interest in and work on the experiences of girls and women

Leading to an understanding that there are some differences, especially socially, by gender

May actually be an internalising/externalising difference, not female/male

Almost no work on non-binary and trans people's experiences still

Background

General gender differences found in autism:

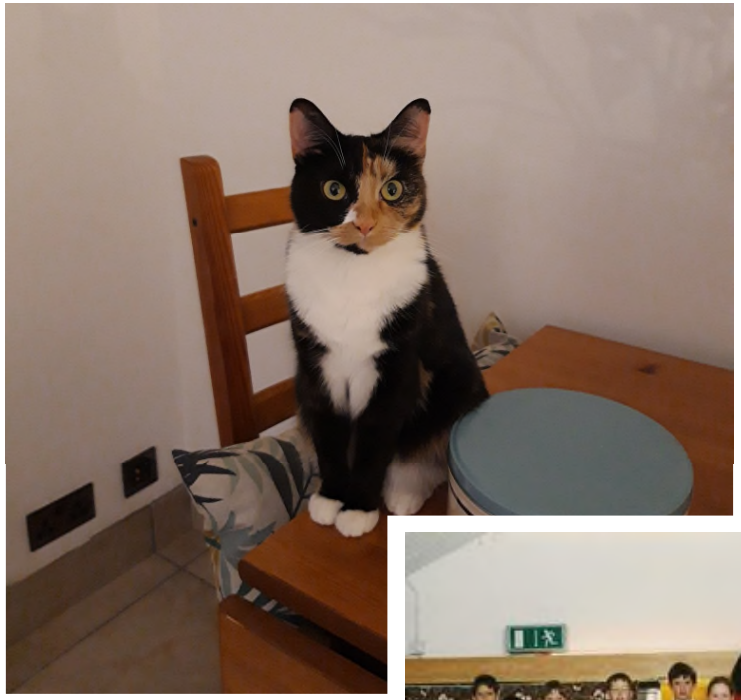
- Behavioural issues – girls have fewer, but need more to meet diagnostic criteria
- Cognitive styles – girls tend to be better at task switching, but have more difficulties with planning
- Special interests – girls have fewer, and they are more age/gender typical
- Social – we'll go into this in detail for the rest of the talk!

Life outcome gender differences:

- Women more likely to have 'normal' outcomes…
- To be in romantic relationships
- To be in employment, but for shorter periods
- To be living independently

Early family relationships

- Parents
- Siblings/Cousins
- Pets (Closer bond to animals than humans)



Early family relationships – the research

Parents

- Mothers – most work on stress! But warm relationships are very possible (Orsmond et al., 2006)
- Fathers – difficulty with expectations of what child/fatherhood 'should be', isolation, need to find appropriate shared activities (Keller, Ramisch & Carolan, 2014)

Siblings

- Less intimate than non-autistic siblings, but also less fighting/competition (Kaminsky & Dewey, 2001)
- High positive affect between sisters, lower opp-sex siblings (Orsmond et al., 2009)
- Siblings source of comfort and support (Laghi et al., 2019) – can be tiring for sibling though (Pavlopoulou & Dimitriou, 2019)

Pets/animals

- Emotionally important and strong bonds (Carlisle, 2014)
- Support prosocal behaviours (Grandgeorge et al., 2012)
- Carrying a guinea pig can improve children's social interactions (Krskova et al., 2010)

Early friendships

- Friends with strong accents or distinctive features
- Physically disabled friends
- Friends with keen interests
- Parents working in school helping social engineer friendships
- Birthday parties being fun but overwhelming
- Everything changes at 9/end of primary

Early friendships – the research

- Greater social motivation (Head, McGillivray & Stokes, 2014; Sedgewick et al., 2016)
- Different friendship patterns – age, parallel play (Barbu, Cabanes & LeManer-Idrissi, 2011), recreating stories (Knickmeyer et al., 2008)
- Autistic girls score better on friendship measures, both best-friends and wider peers (Head, McGillivray & Stokes, 2014)
- Autistic girls are more included/ignored (Dean et al., 2014)
- Autistic girls often mask/camouflage to try to fit in and make/keep friends (Cook, Ogden & Winstone, 2017)

High school friendships

- Secondary/high school incomparable to primary school
  - New rules
  - Huge amounts of people
- School being about socialising not learning
  - Being a social butterfly and being able to fit in with all cliques (but only for 5 minutes !)
- As girls get more complicated boys become better friends
  - …until boys get more complicated then it's an AWFUL idea
  - Why every Autistic girl needs a gay (male) best friend

High school friendships – the research

Autistic boys and girls do different things with their friends (Kuo et al., 2011)

Autistic girls have best-friendships like those of neurotypical girls, different to autistic boys (Kuo et al., 2011; Sedgewick et al., 2016; 2018)

Autistic girls manage friendships and conflict differently to neurotypical girls (Sedgewick et al., 2018; Vine Foggo & Webster, 2017)

Difficult friends (and bullies)

Bullying rife but not noticed at time

- Faux apologies being taken at face value
- Being set up for falls

Inability to understand jealousy

Faux Boyfriends

- Being victim to both physical and sexual abuses
- Vulnerability to CSE

Copying others /trying to “keep up “

- One page ahead or one page behind

Difficult friends – the research

Autistic children are more bullied than those with other SEN

Not easy to recognise/accept something is bullying

- Category/behaviour mismatch – friends vs mean
- Autistic girls are most bullied of all groups – relational conflict (Miles, Boyle & Richards, 2019; Sedgewick et al., 2018)

Conflict in girls is predicted by group, social awareness skill, and anxiety

- Boys it is just anxiety

Starting to date

Dating to have friends

- Understanding the difference between a friend and a partner

Comparing own dating to friends dating and trying to keep up

- Being vulnerable to older men

Girls assuming your male friend is a boyfriend

Being the third wheel

Dating – the research

Very little! Focus on sexual knowledge/education

Most knowledge from non-social sources, less knowledge overall (Brown-Lavoie, Viecili, & Weiss, 2014)

More confused and more negative experiences of sex ed (Hannah & Stagg, 2016)

Parents often assume not needed (Holmes, Himle, & Strassberg, 2015; Sedgewick, Hill & Pellicano, 2018)

Often unaware of actual extent of child's knowledge and experience (Dewinter et al., 2015)

Romantic relationships

- Boyfriend becoming your world
- Choosing partner over friends
- Losing own identity
- Vulnerable to controlling relationships
- Stress of trying to maintain the responsibility of a close friend and a boyfriend

Romantic relationships – the research

More likely to be in long-term romantic relationships (Baldwin & Costley, 2015)

- Women more likely to be non-heterosexual and asexual (Dewinter, De Graaf, & Begeer, 2017)

Talk about romantic relationships becoming key focus

- Relationship 'gatekeeping'
- 'Ready meal of friendship'

80% women experience sexual and/or domestic abuse (Sedgewick et al., 2019)

- Higher percentage of autistic women have sexual experiences than men, but this needs to be accounted for!

High levels of satisfaction reported by those in relationships, similar to non-autistic people

- Those who are not in relationships similar split un/satisfied too

Adult friendships

Friendships tend to be interest or work based

- Occupations as friends

May go months –years without seeing friend in person

- Phone calls can prove difficult
- Group chats with multiple friends impossible to navigate

Struggling to keep up with Hen dos or baby showers

May have much older or much younger friends

Pets again as friends

Adult friendships – the research

- Early adult outcomes work suggested few autistic adults had friends or romantic partners (Howlin 2000, 2014)
- Having friends improves self-esteem, depression, anxiety and loneliness (Mazurek, 2013)
- Choose friends for similar reasons to non-autistic adults – closeness, shared interests/values, similar levels/types of desired contact (Finke, McCarthy & Sarver, 2019)
- Adult friendships most successful when differences are normalised (Sosnowy, Silverman, Shattuck & Garfield, 2018)
- Social media often a helpful mode of communication, finding people with shared interests (Brownlow, Bertilsdottir, & O'Dell, 2013; Ward, Dill-Shackleford & Mazurek, 2018)
- Risks of manipulation and vulnerability – 'mate crime' (Pearson & Forster, 2019)

Motherhood

Isolation as mother and baby groups often don't satisfy your need for adult/intelligent conversation

Baby may indeed become your number one friend

Changes to other relationships

- Other friends may fall away if you have an Autistic child
- Better at safeguarding against faux friendships if baby becomes hyper focus!
- Able to navigate avoiding social situations as you know have huge responsibilities (which are also a great excuse to leave!!)

Motherhood – the research

Autistic mothers	More likely to have pre/post-partum depression
	More challenges with caring responsibility
	Felt misunderstood and poorly supported by professionals
	Could feel isolated and judged
	But consistently act in child's best interests and put child first (Crockford et al., 2019)
	Difficulties with healthcare and being judged common across work on autistic motherhood (Donovan, 2017; Litchman et al., 2019)

Summary

Autistic girls have friendships that are different to autistic boys

These differences continue into adulthood

Come from expectations of the society around them as much as themselves

Autistic girls and women can be vulnerable and be target for manipulation/ exploitation

But most have positive experiences overall – don't give up hope!

THANK YOU
FOR LISTENING