

## Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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## Girls and ASD

- Lack of information on girls with ASD
  - “Research orphans” (Ami Klin)
  - Under-diagnosed
  - Diagnosed as adults
  - Poor outcomes
- Differences in boys and girls with ASD
- Provide professional information and personal experiences.
- Give girls a voice
  - Support their uniqueness

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## Girls and ASD

- 4:1 Autism
- 10:1 Asperger Syndrome
- Focus on a male centered profile

“Girls are better learners. They are more gifted for the concrete and practical. In the autistic individual the male pattern is exaggerated. It may be there are no autistic girls. We just don't know.”

Hans Asperger, 1944

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## First Signs

- Good social imitation skills
  - Pretending to be Normal (Wiley)
- Odd play skills
  - Not overly stereotypical
  - Pretend play
- Passive or lack of initiative
- Non-aggressive behaviors
- Attentional problems
  - Without hyperactivity
- Lack of focus
  - daydreaming
- Lack of empathy
  - awareness
- Increased anxiety
  - Excessive worrying

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## Karen (mother of Rosemarie)

“From the beginning I knew my little girl was different from her two brothers. Rosemarie was happiest when she was on the floor, wearing as few clothes as she could get away with, hovering over a huge sheet of drawing paper. Drawing became her way to communicate and escape from a world that was too complex for us to understand.”

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## Gender Differences

- Girls don't fit the male prototype
  - Girls are rarely fascinated with numbers or have stores of arcane knowledge (Skuse)
- Males have a higher level of activity and behavioral problems
- “Males demonstrate aggressive, acting out behaviors and are more likely to be identified. Whereas, girls who are compliant and quiet are over-looked and underdiagnosed.” (Jean Kearns Miller)

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## Gender Differences (cont.)

- Underdiagnosing girls is due to our reliance on the male prototype. If girls exhibit the male features of autism or the male externalized behaviors, they are identified earlier. (Kopp & Gillberg)
- “Whenever girls act in a sensitive manner toward people around her or her community, she is praised and her behavior is reinforced. I discovered early on that I could win people over if I did nice things.” (Zosia Zaks)

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## Theory of Mind

- Theory of Mind is the ability to read the beliefs, desires, perception, and intentions of others in order to understand and predict behavior.
- Girls failed the “Sally-Anne” test
  - Ability to understand and read other people’s thoughts and feelings
  - Girls had a greater impairment in TOM (Nyden & Gillberg)
- Girls with ASD have a limited ability to “Mind Read”
- Girls with ASD appear insensitive to other people’s feelings

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## Theory of Mind

- Inability to negotiate friendships and responding to intentions
- Girls with ASD have difficulty with emotional understanding, sarcasm, irony, “white lies” and non-literal speech.
- Inability to read the listener’s level of interest
- Inability to anticipate what others might think of one’s own actions
- Mindblindness (Baron-Cohen)

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## Diagnosis

- Mattie
- 5 Yrs old
- Neuropsychologist
- Initially Traumatic
- Relief and Validation
- Jana video

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“Under-diagnosing of women with ASD contributes to the marginalization of females. If we do not appropriately identify girls at an early age, women will continue to stay in the background and live in seclusion. They will continue to live in isolation.” (Jean Kearns Miller)

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## IEP Team

- What can we do as a team to bring out the student’s abilities
- Focus on their strengths and motivators
  - Student Profile
- Allow some flexibility in the curriculum to incorporate the child’s motivators so they succeed
- Role of the parent
- Placement decisions
  - Special education placement is dominated by boys, therefore a lack of opportunity to make female friends

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## Student Profile

- Create an individual student profile consisting of:
  - Strengths and weaknesses
  - Medications
  - Reinforcement
  - Stress hierarchy and triggers
  - Topic of special interest

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## IEP Experience from a Parent's Point of View

- Danielle's IEP Story
- Make sure to point out strengths
- Parents and school personnel need to be equal partners in development of the IEP
- Modified homework

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## Behavior Intervention Plans

- ASD is a behaviorally based disorder
- Girls with ASD have a variety of behaviors that interfere with their learning or that of other
- BIPs are developed to meet the behavioral needs which include a lack of social skills
- Case study: Ashley

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## BIP

- Target behavior
  - No friends in school
- Date collection
- Function of behavior
  - Escape or avoid
  - Attention
- Replacement and/or alternative skills
  - Conversational social skills
- Reactive plan
- Long-term outcomes
  - employment

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## Social and Communication Skills

- “To recognize and use a range of different behaviors to interact and negotiate through verbal and non-verbal means”
- Families and school personnel must explicitly teach to each of these deficit areas

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“My memories of school were far from what can be considered normal. Many nights I lay crying in bed, afraid that one of my school pencils might not be sharp enough. I was frustrated because I absolutely had to walk with my desk partner when switching classes and was not permitted to walk alone. The slight cracks between the adjoining desks bugged me. Lunch time in itself was hell. I was afraid that I would miss recess or class afterwards. Therefore, I would pick two classmates every day and ask them to sit beside me at lunch and play with me at recess. This was my typical day.” Rosemarie

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## Social/Communication Curriculum

- Identify a girl with ASD
- Consider her age and cognitive level
- Review social skills and write down the 3 most relevant and necessary social skills for that student to be successful
- Share with the group

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## Instructional Techniques for Social/Communication Skills

- Pictures
- Video Self-Modeling
- Role-Play
- Direct Instruction
- Scrapbook of emotions
- Games "Cool-Uncool"
- Incidental Teaching
- Social Stories

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## Hidden Curriculum

- Passing Notes- Mattie
- Unwritten rules in classrooms
  - Brenda Smith Myles
- The hidden curriculum makes the unwritten rules more explicit to students
- List a few unwritten rules in schools

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## Bullying and Social Skills

- Girls with ASD are prone to bullying due to their uniqueness and being alone
- Staff can create a "Circle of Friends" or a peer buddy system to help insulate from Bullies
- School-wide Zero Tolerance
  - Increase supervision in target areas
  - Carol Gray's Guide to Bullying

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## Bullying and Girls with ASD

- Verbal insults
- Social exclusion
- Refusing to be friends
- Gossiping
- Teacher's may inadvertently bully students
  - Stop daydreaming
  - You are lazy
  - Look at me

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"School was hell wrapped in a hot winter fur. This one girl at school never wanted anything to do with me. All of my attempts to play with her resulted in rejection. As the school year progressed, my peers started to use my idiosyncrasies against me for their own fun." Rosemarie

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## Peer Buddy System

- Select and train peers
- Create supervised activities
- Peer Selection
  - Calm personality
  - Sense of humor
  - Ability to deflect teasing
  - Moves easily amongst peer groups
  - Has many stable friends
  - Consistent personality

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## Steps for Addressing Bullying

- Teach how to react to bullying and practice new skills
- Develop the girl's talents and strengths
- Join a group with similar interests
- Teach age-appropriate social skills and other ways to fit in
  - American Girls Series

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- Why Parents Need to be Advocates for their Children
- Teaching self-advocacy skills to our young women

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- Everything I learned about being a Parent Advocate, I learned in Kindergarten
- This story about Mattie will demonstrate the importance of early advocacy
- We need to be their voice for a short time

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## Advocacy and Self-determination

Girls with ASD who are empowered with self-determination and advocacy skills have higher employment rates and earn a higher wage after graduation. (Test, Karvonen, Wood, & Algozzine, 2000)

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“It took me several years to admit that I had issues. After all the research my mom had shown me, I could definitely see that I had tendencies. But the part that I didn't see eye-to-eye with the experts is that I believe Asperger Syndrome is not a disorder. It is a Gift.” Ashley

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## Self-Advocacy Skills

- Provide with the facts and resources about autism and AS
- Define terms and behavioral symptoms associated with ASD
- Identify related services and community services
- Focus on strengths
- Discuss the disability openly but discreetly
- Role-play advocacy skills

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## Findings and Conclusions

- Maintain high expectations
- Seek Knowledge
- Plan for the Future
- Embrace Uniqueness
- Create a Network of Support

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