

Strategies:

Pupil profiling - Understand your pupils. Meet with parents and the child, if appropriate, and talk about successes and difficulties. Helping the child to understand that they have been heard and what will be in place for them will help to alleviate anxiety and foster self belief. Create a pupil passport so evidence of this discussion can be seen,

Class Room Environment - Calm environment, removal of hanging displays, use of neutral colours, clear spaces with calm areas. Clear the area around the whiteboard to aid concentration, lighting levels can be adjusted. Choose preferred seating areas that is identified as specific to her. Clear emotional regulation area outside of the classroom to be made available. Clear routine to be displayed and discussed.

Academic Teaching - Visual resources to be used, clear start and stop times specific use of language, with limited verbal instructions & with repetition if needed. Specific teaching on understanding of idioms. Provide her with a discreet way of securing support. Paired work instead of group alleviates overwhelming social processing requirements. Preparing for the following day, alleviates the uncertainty. Be aware of over reliance of rules and literal interpretation. Be aware of threats, e.g. 'staying in a play-time' this will be taken as direct even if said to the class as a whole. Make reasonable adjustments e.g. time out spaces, option of typing, sensory regulation tools. Incorporate their special interests into the learning.

Social Teaching - Pre teaching about social situations using social scripts / comic script conversations to support. Using videos & role play of real situations to discuss feelings and have 'what would you do?' conversations. Provide structured activities for social times and select positive role models.

Emotional Teaching - Specific learning about recognising emotions. Reassurance that feeling emotional is ok and normal, key adults to talk this through with. Use social stories to support understanding of fears, emotional responses and how to deal with

Provide Personalised Curriculum when teaching about puberty and Sex Education with specific teaching about

- Body changes
- Independence - ability to say 'No'
- Privacy Awareness
- E-safety
- Self image

Be aware that some girls will not associate this information as relevant for them and will need direct cuing in.

The Whole School:

- ◆ A culture of celebrating differences
- ◆ Listening to the voices of girls and their parents in order to plan in a meaningful way
- ◆ Clear concise communication
- ◆ Commitment from all on how to minimize and manage changes and loss of routine
- ◆ Understanding and open culture about anxiety
- ◆ Flexibility to teach in an innovative style, and identify personalised strategies for pupils
- ◆ Adults to understand that behaviour is communication.

Primary schools are in the privileged position to support early identification and implement strategies that will have a positive impact for Autistic girls in all areas. Making adjustments to the environment, interactions and providing social and emotional support helps to ensure lifelong engagement in learning and society and the ability and confidence to seek help when it is needed.

'She has a very unique brain that is wired up in a way that makes her exquisitely sensitive to life. This is both a blessing and a curse. The way she processes and interprets the world is both astounding and crushing, sometimes at the same time' parental quotation taken from *Education and Girls on the Autistic Spectrum*.

References

Hebron J. & Bond C (2019) *Education and Girls on the Autistic Spectrum - Developing an Integrated Approach*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Carpenter B. Happé C. Egerton J (2019) *Girls and Autism, Educational, Family and Personal Perspectives*. Oxon: Routledge.

Nasen (2016) *Autism and Girls - Flying Under the Radar*. www.nasen.org.uk



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Hiding in Plain Sight

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Presentation of Autistic Girls in the

Primary setting. Some areas to look out for:

- Quiet and reserved in comparison to peers
- Takes a long time to settle and interact with peers
- Consistently focuses on the same activity in class
- Follows what peers are doing rather than leads, not actively involved, on the edge of friendship groups
- Play/activities are less meaningful e.g. stories are not developed, are repeated and copied from another child or are 'scene setting'
- Unsettled and requiring adult support at transitions and changes of sensory stimulation.
- Unusual behaviors at times of anxiety, e.g. pacing, lack of engagement, repetition.
- Poor eye contact, looking just above the eyes or using peripheral vision.
- Extreme emotions at times that would not be age expected.
- Inability or difficulties with naming emotions
- Seeking out or demanding routine, e.g. same seat, toys
- Meltdowns at home, not identified in the school setting

How to identify in class:

Observation

Observe at different times throughout the day.

- What are her interactions like, peer groupings, repetitive actions? Are there any behaviors that might highlight anxiety?
- Is she using speech and language skills appropriately? Is it slightly stilted, slow responses? Does she misunderstand idioms? Don't assume that because the child uses age appropriate language that the understanding is there. Are the interactions high quality?
- Is she using embedded social skills or are they copied, controlling or anxiety driven?
- Are there certain areas or times that are avoided, or she appears more distressed in?
- Is she insistent that work is completed in her own way?
- What happens when the time has ended but she has not finished the set task?
- Is there literality of thought?
- Any intense, rigid or repetitive behaviors seem?
- Is she hyper/hypo sensitive to sensory input, sensory seeking and/or sensory avoiding? What are the exhibited behaviors evidenced at these times? Complete a Sensory Audit.



Parental Observations

Main Areas of Concern

Hidden and unrecognised areas of difficulty can lead to a lifetime of isolation, both physically and emotionally.

Anxiety and Mental Health - Often identified in the home as girls are often adept at masking their anxiety in the school environment, coming across as shy and introverted. Avoidance tactics are often used by girls to manage their emotional responses.

Peer Interaction - Autistic girls often desire friendships and want to be included, however spend a lot of their time and emotional resources copying and trying to fit in. This can lead to excessive worrying about getting it wrong and later ingrained social anxiety.

Imitation - 'Masking'. Some girls are so adept at masking their symptoms that they end up being referred for other conditions, and the possibility of Autism is over looked. Imitation might include, good eye contact, age appropriate speech and language skills, use of physical gestures, hidden repetitive behaviours, age appropriate interests.

Social Vulnerabilities - Difficulties reading some social cues. Misinterpreting social situations, commenting inappropriately in conversations, possibly leading to social isolation, misunderstanding and loneliness. Increased risk of bullying.

Learning - Intense interests in certain subjects resulting in a spiky profile of learning. Difficulties inferring meaning and translating learning across the curriculum and possible under achievement, Use of peers to follow lessons and activities. Inability to understand inferred meaning and complex language. Exhaustion especially towards the end of the day due to hypervigilance required to access learning and cope with the school/classroom environment.

Home Life - Often reported significant changes in presentation to that at school. Meltdowns are common in response to the over-whelming level of interaction required throughout the day in all areas. Aggressive, self isolating, highly emotional behaviours seemingly without immediate cause can be evidenced. Possible school refusal.

Sensory Over load - Hypersensitive: inability to cope with close contact, loud noises, strong smells, flashing light and quick movements etc.

Hyposensitive: may invade the space of others, touching people and objects, seeking resistance from objects e.g. banging, pushing, use materials to self-sooth.

Girls can often be viewed as 'hyper emotional' in response to them exhibiting their anxiety around sensory input.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Environment - Primary classrooms can be busy, interactive, noisy, smelly and over whelming. This can lead to distraction, disengagement, anxiety leading to behavioral issues. Entering the classroom in the morning or after play can cause heightened anxiety. Communal areas and lunch halls are often a huge area of concern.

Work - Might be associated learning difficulties, slow processing can often be identified. Structure and routine to learning will help maintain a feeling of security. Leaving work that is perceived as half finished can lead to heightened anxiety. She might perform better in test situations than generalized learning. Hypervigilance to what peers are doing and comparison to her own work. Inference might not be understood leading to misconceptions and misunderstanding.

Homework - School is school & home is home. Transference of work is difficult as the school schedule is compartmentalized to that particular environment. Homework is often late or incomplete, parents report significant issues to engage.

Friendships - Isolation and mis-interpretation leads to decrease in self-worth and confidence. Sometimes overthinking and inability to 'let go' of issues can become a significant problem. Incidents at unstructured times continue into the classroom if not deemed to be resolved. Fixation on peers can occur.

Adults - Having a key adult to facilitate support and resolution to problems can be a support. Certain adults may be actively disliked and resistance to following their directions may become apparent.

Emotional Resilience - Unable to label her own feeling and express her anxiety both in class and unstructured times can lead to masking of feelings. She might be hyper vigilant to the emotions of those around her and become over sensitive to the teachers every emotional expression, wanting to keep everyone happy. May become a perfectionist and respond to mistakes in an extreme manner.

Growing up and Puberty - The change and transition of puberty is a highly anxious time. She might become easier to identify as immature compared to peers., and refuse to engage in discussion around the physical changes.

Transitions - High level of anxiety and self-soothing behaviours. Inability to comply with age appropriate expectations, sometimes resulting in meltdown. Secondary School transfer is high risk time for Autistic girls.