

Strategies:

Pupil profiling - Working with girls to agree on supportive strategies that will be in place and knowing that staff are aware of the agreed strategies can often alleviate a high proportion of anxiety.

Class Room Environment - Having agreed seating often near a clear exit. Provision out of class for learning should it be required **A SAFE SPACE IS A KEY PROVISION IN REDUCING ANXIETY.** Altering any environmental factors that might cause a problem for example a loud clock, flickering light. Pre warning of changes to routine.

Academic Teaching - Providing visual supports and chunking of information. Be aware of the use of complex language and check for misunderstanding. Discreet methods to gain support, perhaps an agreed visual cue. Acknowledge the fear of failing. Awareness that whole class consequences will be taken personally.

Homework - Homework clubs will support completion. Homework to be recorded in different ways, handed in differently from peers to alleviate pressure. Emailed support from teachers, rather than given face to face. Support and understanding for families

Emotional Teaching - Specific teaching about recognising emotions and what to do about them. Building awareness of different levels of concern some worries being more important than others.

A Special Interests Group - Creating a supportive environment that builds on forming a social circle of peers who have similar interests. Social skills can be practiced and embedded, in a safe and secure place.

A Girls Group - Creating a supportive environment where girls can be heard, and build on a social circle of peers who understand their difficulties and they can be open about fears and anxieties. A safe environment to explore their diagnosis.

Provide Personalised Curriculum when teaching about puberty and Sex Education with specific and personalised 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 cueing 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
- ◆ Educating peer groups
- ◆ Flexibility to teach in an innovative style, and identify personalised strategies for pupils
- ◆ Adults to understand that all behaviour is communication and requires careful monitoring in order to identify the messages

Secondary schools are key in supporting girls make a successful transition from childhood to adulthood, teaching them key strategies in order to engage in society once they leave education. Teaching them to be aware of their own strengths and difficulties and how to access support is key in ensuring they become successful independent young women ..

'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



The Beacon
Park Farm Road
Folkestone
CT19 5DN

Autism & Girls Secondary



Hiding Behind the Mask & Blending into the Background

Masking: hiding or holding in anxiety in order to appear calm

Blending: An attempt to blend in with neuro typical people

Specialist Teaching
and Learning Service
Folkestone & Hythe

Presentation of Autistic Girls in the Secondary setting. Some areas to look out for:

- Quiet and reserved in comparison to peers
- Takes a long time to settle and interact with peers
- Follows what peers are doing rather than leads, not actively involved, on the edge of friendship groups, vulnerable to bullying
- Similar interests to peers but over focused or obsessive
- 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
- School refusal
- Poor mental health, self harm, suicidal thoughts, verbalizations.
- Meltdowns at home, not identified in the school setting
- Sleep and eating difficulties
- Lack of homework

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 there literalism 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 and have a high level of social anxiety. Possible Eating Disorders & OCD type behaviours,

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 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 overlooked. 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 and inappropriate coercion.

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 and at risk of self harm and eating disorders.

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. pushing.

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

Stimming: reduces anxiety and encourages feelings of well-being and happiness

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Environment - Communal areas and lunch halls are often a huge area of anxiety.

Work - There 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. Internalised anxiety and frustration can lead to serious concerns, with social and emotional health.

Secondary Transition requires intensive support.