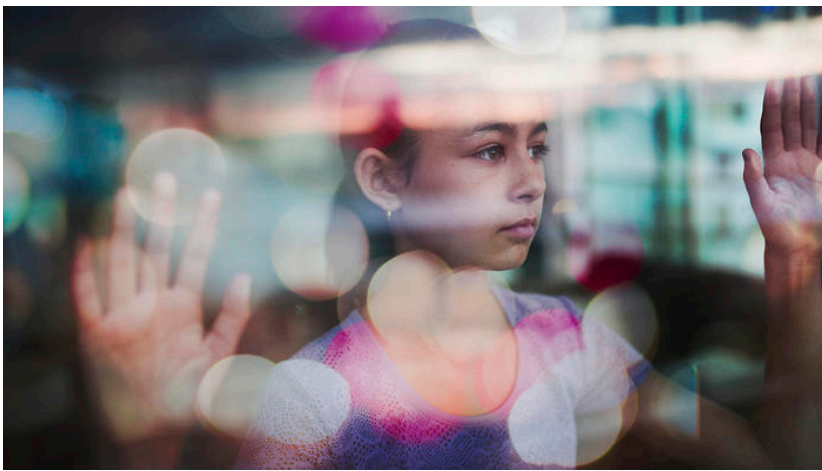


Identifying Autism in Girls

by Amanda Tipkemper
Autism Services Director



The Autism Services program for students with autism at The Children's Home of Cincinnati currently serves 80 students from 13-21 years of age, 10 of whom are female. When touring our program, visitors often comment on the disparity in enrollment of males versus females.

Those familiar with autism statistics know that autism has historically been diagnosed in boys over four times more than in girls.

New studies are starting to question if the difference in prevalence can be accounted for due to the difficulty in identifying girls on the spectrum.

The major schools of thought focus on gender differences in the brain and how girls on the spectrum manifest characteristics differently than boys. "Girls may have fewer restricted interests and repetitive behaviors than boys do, and may have more socially acceptable types of interests," said Dr. Nicholette Zeliadt in a 2018 *Spectrum* article. "They are also more likely than boys to mask their autism features by copying their neuro-typical peers."

Dr. David Skuse, professor of behavioral and brain sciences at University College London, offers some examples. For instance, a young girl with autism might constantly spout facts about her favorite musician while a young boy of the same age might memorize and recite train schedules. Clinicians may be more alert to certain stereotypical gender-related restricted interests, such as trains, than they are to female topics.

I have met many girls on the spectrum that did not start to struggle in a public school environment until middle school. These girls have been able to maintain in a social environment that was more play-based and structured [and more supported by adults] with the breakdown occurring when the social stakes are raised and become more based on nonverbal communication and the interpretation of social cues and interactions in natural settings.

"A teenage girl may collect makeup and study its application as done by a favorite makeup artist while a younger girl may learn the history of Barbie dolls or study her American Girl books," said Connie Datu of *Autism Parenting Magazine*. This may make the condition harder to recognize and may only become noticeable around puberty when social interactions become more complex, and the pressure to conform is overwhelming."

So what should parents look for? There is no one single symptom that indicates autism; but, parents who note the following behaviors in their young daughters should consider seeing a specialist to determine whether their child may have ASD. Some signs of autism in girls include:



- She relies on other children, usually other young girls, to guide her and speak for her in school.
- She has specific and restricted interests. While it's not uncommon for young girls to flock toward a particular TV show, for example, a girl with ASD may collect information and obsessively glean knowledge about things like the characters, locations, props, or actors, while knowing very little about the show's plot or the show's genre as a whole.
- She was developing, as far as anyone knew, typically as a young girl but finds social communication to be increasingly difficult as she becomes a teenager.
- She experiences difficulty in making friends or may not pick up on non-verbal communication appropriate from her peer group such as people turning away or facial expressions. She might find it challenging to imitate her peer groups' conduct or mannerisms, fashion trends common to her age and friends or even hairstyles even though she may want to emulate her peers.

If a parent does want to pursue an evaluation for their daughter, a clinician or team that has experience with girls on the spectrum is recommended, as the criteria identified in tools for diagnosis has often been criticized as being born from male characteristics.

It is also important to consider the input of professionals that have the opportunity to see the young lady in the natural environment and in a variety of social scenarios, as individuals with autism who are conversational can often thrive in a 1:1 interaction with a clinician, which can impact the evaluation.

There are resources out there that are specific to girls on the spectrum. Individualized education plans can address social skills and a private therapist can provide support related to the anxiety a person with autism may experience due to social stresses. Depending on the needs and challenges, a family may decide to consider different educational options, including private settings that may offer more support and smaller classroom sizes.

Contact Autism Services at The Children's Home of Cincinnati for information about the programs we offer and/or about local resources.

Amanda Tipkemper, M.Ed. is the Autism Services Director for The Children's Home of Cincinnati, which provides a specialized setting with low student ratios and high student engagement, and encourages the support and involvement of parents.

Amanda has worked with individuals on the autism spectrum from early intervention to adulthood. Her extensive experience includes developing and overseeing educational programs for students on the spectrum using evidence based practices, consulting with schools and other organizations, and connecting community resources to support best practice and optimal outcomes.



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