



Empowering Autistic Girls

In the UK today there is an estimated 1-in-4 autistic children who are girls - yet there is very little provided for them. **Sarah Wild** of Limpsfield Grange School in Surrey takes SEND readers through her journey as headteacher.

WHAT sort of a life can a young woman with autism expect to live? A happy one, with a job and maybe even a relationship? The traditional trappings of 'normality' may seem beyond the realms of possibility if coping with feelings can be a daily struggle; with the result that only 15% of autistic adults in the UK are in full-time paid employment.

At Limpsfield Grange School in Surrey, where autistic girls are taught the keys to self-management and self-belief, my aim is to help raise awareness and acceptance of female autism and to equip our girls to lead the most successful lives they can.

When they first come to Limpsfield Grange at age 11, quite often the girls lack self-awareness when it comes to their emotional range. They don't really understand what they feel, or how their feelings impact on their behaviour. We get them to work on this, and to gradually take the lead in labelling and

controlling their responses.

For too long the biggest misconception about autism has been that girls don't have it.

In the last five years there's been an increased awareness in the medical profession that autistic girls present very differently to boys, with anxiety being an over-riding emotion. Gaining a diagnosis and support can be hard, as there are still GPs who say: 'Your daughter can't be on the spectrum because she can make conversation and eye contact.'

But lots of girls on the spectrum can do exactly that. Many of them don't understand what's going on socially but want to make conversation, while not understanding its subtext. The stereotype of someone with autism being locked into themselves and obsessive doesn't necessarily apply with girls, who are reaching out and trying to socially engage with other people.

Some girls on the spectrum mask their behaviour, or copy other people.

At Limpsfield Grange we call it social formatting - copying and pasting someone else's behaviour and trying to make it your own - without understanding where that comes from. This can lead to serious problems. It's mentally exhausting to continually suppress your natural social reactions. In places like school or college or work often autistic girls and women are surrounded by people who really don't get them. They have to mask their difficulties all day.

This is why understanding, regulating and managing their emotions is absolutely crucial to autistic girls' happiness in adult life. It's key to feeling well, happy and together and to accessing a variety of jobs. It's the difference between being a contained, emotionally functioning adult, or being stranded in their bedroom by their anxiety.

Nearly all Limpsfield alumnae have gone on to college, and have taken

up retail work, equine management, veterinary nursing and health and social care as their subsequent careers. Lots of our ex-students want to work in schools or work with children. And that challenges perceptions about autism. We don't think of adults with autism working; and we should.

Being allowed to be different and understanding those differences is key to positive outcomes for autistic young people, and in mainstream school this isn't always possible. In fact, 34% of children on the autistic spectrum say the worst thing about being at school is being picked on by other pupils. We need to build greater awareness and

acceptance in mainstream schools so that autistic girls can succeed.

At Limpsfield Grange we believe that we have a part to play in raising awareness of female autism. The girls, along with author Vicky Martin, have written two novels about an autistic girl, "M in the Middle" and "M is for Autism" - both available on Amazon. Both novels allow the reader to view the world through the anxiety-ridden eyes of an autistic girl called M. We also made a documentary with ITV called "Girls with Autism" to try and show people what it is really like to be an autistic teenage girl.

The girls at Limpsfield Grange really

want to tell people what it's like to be autistic and to help others. They've spent a long time feeling really alone, and don't want other girls to feel as isolated. They're proud of their coolness and quirkiness, and want other kids to feel part of a cool community.

What's really different about Limpsfield Grange is the fact that it's a community where autistic girls are in the majority.

I would hope that outcomes for autistic girls in all environments get much better because schools are becoming more aware of the kind of support autistic girls need for them to thrive and flourish.

Girls and autism insights

The nasen miniguide

Nasen's Girls and Autism: Flying under the radar, a free download from www.nasen.org.uk/resources/resources.girls-and-autism-flying-under-the-radar.html, gives teachers a quick insight into today's essential issues for girls and autism. Researchers now suggest that the ratio of girls to boys is higher than suspected - 1:2 girls instead

of 1:4. Girls with equal severity of symptoms to boys are diagnosed later or not at all. There is also a 'hidden' group of higher functioning girls who mask their symptoms. The stress of continuously 'flying under the radar' can cost a child their mental health. It may end with school refusal, eating disorders, self-harm, anxiety

disorders, for example. Nasen's miniguide provides practical school-based support strategies, and shares family, professional and academic perspectives. It gives pointers for schools on considering their own pupil population, how to identify girls under the radar, and how to help them.

Girls on the Autism Spectrum

'The Big Shout' conference, London (27 January 2017)

Girls on the autism spectrum are often unrecognised and vulnerable. Many of our assumptions, diagnostic approaches and interventions in education, psychology or therapies relate to male populations. An emerging group of girls with autism present differently than the stereotyped male profile, but we do not have the tools to identify or support them.

'Because our diagnostic systems and stereotypes of ASD are based on males, we just don't know how many girls with very high autistic traits are out there, unrecognised.'

Professor Francesca Happé, Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience, King's College London (Nasen miniguide)

'In their teenage years, these girls are often referred to services with

mental ill-health conditions, and only then we discover their undiagnosed autism. They have lived for years of their childhood without the support that could have enabled them to live more fruitfully and at peace with themselves.'

Professor Barry Carpenter, CBE, Chair of the NAHT's ASC and Girls Forum

This conference is a synthesis of the work to date of the National Association of Head Teachers' National Forum on Girls with Autism. It aims to:

- Provide an update on the work of the Girls with Autism Forum
- Gain an insight from the perspective of girls on the autism spectrum
- Share effective practice emerging in the field
- Prepare a 'Call for Action' that

highlights future areas for development.

It will be relevant to senior and middle leaders from all phases of education, health professionals, parents, carers and adults with autism.

'What my girls carry is an overwhelming level of unseen anxiety. My teenager wears make-up, has her skirt rolled over and is obsessed with social media, just like her friends... except that often she does not understand the nuances of teenage girls' conversation... Look beyond the exterior and understand that they are often feeling like isolated misfits who will never be like the other girls around them.'

Carrie Grant, broadcaster and parent (Nasen miniguide)