

Understanding Neurodivergent Girls: A Guide for Parents & Educators

This guide provides clear, research-informed insights into how autism, ADHD, and AuDHD can present in girls. It covers traits, tendencies, and signs that may be overlooked, along with information on misdiagnosis and a gender-informed screening tool currently in development. The aim is to help parents and educators better recognize and understand the unique ways neurodivergence can appear in girls.

Why Girls May Present Differently

Girls often mask challenges by copying peers, staying quiet, or focusing on fitting in. This can hide difficulties from teachers and professionals, leading to delayed diagnosis and support.

Body Image & Eating-Related Concerns

Sensory sensitivities, perfectionism, and social pressures can contribute to disordered eating and body image concerns. Early signs may include selective eating or anxiety around eating in public.

Internalizing Tendencies

Anxiety, depression, and self-criticism are common in neurodivergent girls. They may seem fine at school but feel overwhelmed at home, a pattern that can lead to their needs being missed.

Skin Picking & Stimming

Skin picking can be a self-soothing or sensory-seeking behavior, sometimes mistaken for OCD compulsions. For some girls, it helps regulate emotions or cope with stress.

Pattern Recognition

Many neurodivergent girls excel at spotting visual, numerical, or rule-based patterns, but may struggle with interpreting social cues or unwritten rules.

Other Common Female Neurodivergent Traits

High empathy with emotional overload, literal interpretation of language, strong need for routine, executive functioning challenges, sensory sensitivities, and intense special interests are all common traits.

Signs That May Be Overlooked by Parents

Not every child showing these signs is autistic or has ADHD, but a pattern across different settings may warrant further consideration. Girls' challenges are often subtle, especially in school where they may be perceived as quiet, compliant, or social.

At Home

- Extreme tiredness or irritability after school ('masking fatigue')
- Meltdowns or shutdowns in safe spaces
- Intense focus on a hobby or topic but difficulty starting homework

At School / Socially

- Appears social but relies on mimicking peers or scripted interactions
- Struggles with group work yet thrives in structured, independent tasks
- Prefers one-on-one friendships rather than large groups

Emotional / Behavioral

- Hides worries or sadness until they become overwhelming
- Perfectionism leading to headaches, stomachaches, or trouble sleeping
- Repetitive behaviors like skin picking or nail biting for self-regulation

When to Consider an Evaluation

- The signs persist for six months or longer
- They occur across multiple settings (home, school, social activities)
- They affect wellbeing, confidence, or participation
- Coping strategies like masking are leading to exhaustion or distress

When Autism & AuDHD Are Mistaken for Anxiety or OCD

Social Behavior

Autism/AuDHD: Autism/AuDHD: Mimics peers, uses scripts, or avoids group work due to sensory/social fatigue.

GAD/OCD: GAD/OCD: Avoids social situations mainly due to fear of judgment or contamination.

Repetitive Behaviors

Autism/AuDHD: Autism/AuDHD: Often sensory-driven (rocking, skin picking, arranging objects).

GAD/OCD: GAD/OCD: Compulsions aimed at neutralizing intrusive thoughts or fears.

Focus of Worries

Autism/AuDHD: Autism/AuDHD: Concerns about changes in routine, sensory overload, or social exhaustion.

GAD/OCD: GAD/OCD: Fears of specific harm, contamination, or embarrassment.

Onset

Autism/AuDHD: Autism/AuDHD: Traits present from early childhood.

GAD/OCD: GAD/OCD: Often emerges later, following a triggering event.

Relief from Behavior

Autism/AuDHD: Autism/AuDHD: Provides comfort or sensory regulation.

GAD/OCD: GAD/OCD: Temporarily reduces anxiety linked to obsessive thoughts.

Gender-Informed Autism & AuDHD Screening Tool (In Development)

Developed by Gabriella Rizkallah, this tool is designed to identify subtle autism and ADHD traits in girls that standard assessments often miss. It includes a self-reflection version for teens/adults and a caregiver-reflection version for children, plus an AuDHD-specific section.

Masking/Camouflaging: Do you copy how others talk or act to fit in, even when it's tiring?

Sensory Sensitivities: Are certain clothing textures, sounds, or lights uncomfortable for you?

Internalizing: Do you hide worries or sadness so others won't notice?

Executive Function: Do you struggle to start tasks unless they are highly interesting or urgent?

Pattern Recognition: Do you notice patterns in words, numbers, or actions others miss?

To participate in the screening tool pilot, visit: [Landing Page Link Coming Soon at nsarttherapy.com]

Understanding the Bigger Picture

This guide is intended as an informational resource, not a diagnostic tool. Traits can overlap with other conditions, and a comprehensive evaluation considers history, context, and strengths. Girls are less likely to be flagged by teachers because they may appear engaged or well-behaved at school, even when struggling. Parents' insights are often key to building a complete picture, and collaboration with educators can still be valuable once concerns are identified.

Prepared by Nova Scotian Art Therapy

Nova Scotian Art Therapy, led by Gabriella Rizkallah (M.Ed, RCT, CAT), offers trauma-informed, creative-based counselling for individuals of all ages, with a special focus on neurodivergent children, teens, and families. We integrate art therapy with evidence-based counselling to address anxiety, emotional regulation, confidence-building, and social skills in a safe, inclusive space.

Website: www.nsarttherapy.com

Email: info@nsarttherapy.com

References (Selected)

- Hull, L., et al. (2019). Development and validation of the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q). *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.
- Brown, C. M., et al. (2020). Utility of the Girls Questionnaire for Autism Spectrum Condition as an autism assessment in adult women. *Autism in Adulthood*.
- Cook, J., et al. (2024). Improving diagnostic procedures in autism for girls and women. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.
- Collins, M., et al. (2024). Sensory processing in skin-picking disorder. *Journal of Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders*.
- Houghton, D. C., et al. (2018). Abnormal perceptual sensitivity in body-focused repetitive behaviors. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*.
- Kreiser, N. L., & White, S. W. (2014). ASD in females: Misdiagnosis with internalizing disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.
- Lever, A. G., & Geurts, H. M. (2016). Psychiatric co-occurring symptoms in autistic women. *Autism*.
- Mandy, W., et al. (2012). Gender differences in autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.
- Lai, M. C., & Szatmari, P. (2020). Sex/gender differences and autism: Implications for diagnosis. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*.