

The Girl Squad

A Unique Social Group for Girls on the Spectrum

Myah Gittelson, Psy.D.



Autism often presents in girls as deficits in social skills and communication. Girls with autism may also have repetitive, or stimming, behaviors, although they sometimes "mask" these manifestations. Dr. Gittelson, a clinical psychologist who specializes in evaluating, diagnosing and treating Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), discusses how participation in a girl-specific group can provide a safe and accepting environment with individuals who share similarities.

A New Approach

Autistic individuals with diagnosed social skills deficits have usually been recommended for social skills training. These individuals have sometimes felt that the unspoken goal of this traditional training is to teach neurodiverse people to appear more neurotypical in their social behavior. Unfortunately, this places undue pressure on autistic individuals. What's really needed is a place where they can be themselves and explore their unique feelings among other individuals that are like them. Furthermore, social skills training groups are usually dominated by boys, with only one or two girls in attendance. While this may lead one to assume that there are more boys than girls on the spectrum, this article aims to refute that perception. It also seeks to shed light on an innovative, holistic approach to girl-focused groups.

Why Girls Present Differently

My professional journey has led me to believe that there are not fewer autistic girls. Rather, there is a female phenotype that we have only recently started to recognize. However, it continues to be difficult to diagnose and treat autistic girls since they often learn to mask autistic-like characteristics in various settings. They do this by imitating others, but it comes at a cost. Girls can find masking to be exhausting. Some girls have described it to me as feeling like they are on stage acting all day. As I focused on such cases over the past few years, I came to see the importance of forming a specialized social-emotional processing group. I called this group the *Girl Squad*.

What is the Girl Squad?

My concept of a Girl Squad is therapeutic in nature and intent. It is designed to help autistic girls develop and strengthen social skills, process everyday feelings, and interact with peers. Once a young female patient has been evaluated and diagnosed with autism, I offer her parents the option to enroll her in one of the ongoing Girl Squads available through my office. Small groups are formed according to age, and include girls aged four to 15 years old. The groups meet on a weekly basis to work on socializing and addressing deficits in a safe, familiar environment. Under my facilitation and planning, they have the opportunity to practice engaging and communicating with others through fun activities, including crafts, books, paired sharing and outdoor games. Friendships naturally develop over time as the girls become more comfortable with each other. A female resident therapy dog also attends the groups for added enjoyment and soothing purposes. In fact, Lola the dog has become a main attraction, and the girls miss her on the days she is not in attendance.

Relieving Stress

The ongoing stress of having to “fit in” all the time can eventually cause burnout, especially as social situations become more complex with age. Autistic burnout is a state of physical and mental fatigue and diminished capacity to manage life skills and social interactions. My goal is to relieve the stress of females on the spectrum so they can relax and not feel they have to mask their symptoms. Only then can treatment begin and relief be achieved. The parents of my Girl Squad members have shared with me the positive results that are being seen in academics, in the community, and among family and friends as a result of group participation.

Growing Popularity and Success

The Girl Squad offering has become a staple treatment in my practice as it has proven to be popular and successful among patients. Parents receive periodic reports that summarize their daughters’ progress, and they share insights with me as part of a two-way relationship aimed at optimal treatment planning and positive outcomes. I am also happy to report that the increasing demand for Girl Squad groups has led me to expand the program. A Boy Squad is also in the works for neurodiverse young boys and adolescents as it is time to offer them an alternative to social skills training as well.

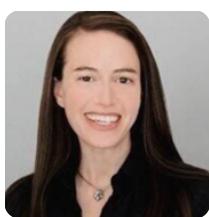


Conclusion

Unlike most social skills training programs, Girl Squad is a social-emotional group that celebrates each girl’s uniqueness and well-being by helping her discover her inner thoughts and feelings. It does not dwell on external, surface behaviors or try to make her be like everyone else. Only when individuals are comfortable in their own skin can they form successful relationships and lead happy lives.

I recognize that the Girl Squad described in this article is unique to my private practice in Studio City, California, at this time. However, it is important for parents to be aware of their daughters’ unique needs. Parents and caregivers can advocate for their daughters by seeking a neurodivergence-affirmative therapist, who can assist with the right placement in groups tailored to the needs of autistic girls. Such groups should provide a supportive environment in which masking or camouflaging is not needed to cope. We are living at a time when there is greater awareness of neurodiversity in the psychology community. Fortunately, more and more alternatives to old treatment methods are becoming available across the world. This important change is cause for optimism and hope.

Please contact Dr. Gittelson for more information about the Girl Squad or other psychological services.



Myah Gittelson, Psy.D., earned her Psy.D. in Clinical Psychology from California School of Professional Psychology, Los Angeles campus. Dr. Gittelson has over a decade of experience in the field of Autism. She has been a consultant for multiple Regional Centers in southern California conducting evaluations within the intake eligibility process. Dr. Gittelson also has a private practice located in Studio City, CA, providing diagnostic evaluations and treatment, as well as social-emotional peer groups and parent workshops. Read more at www.drmayahgittelson.com.