

SPOTTING

AUTISM

IN GIRLS

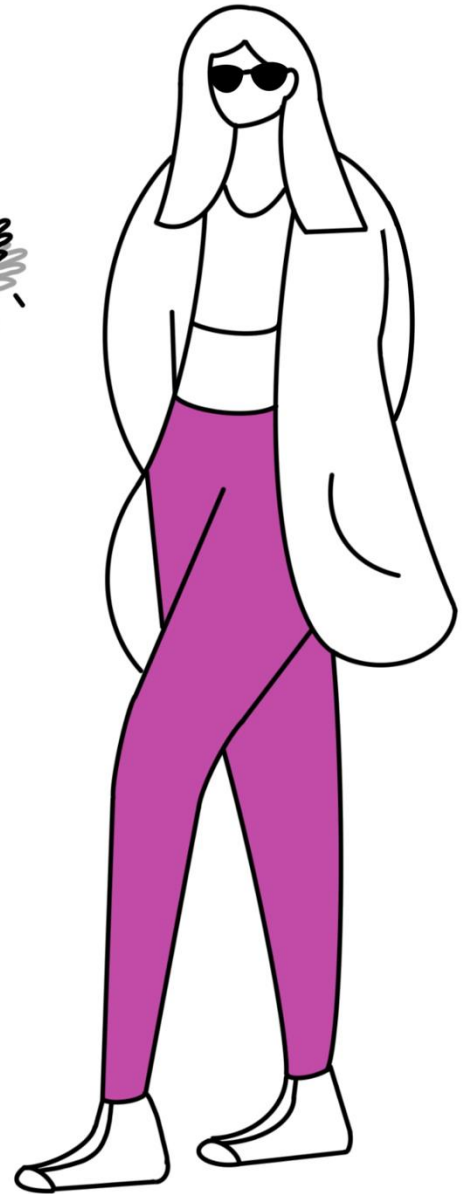
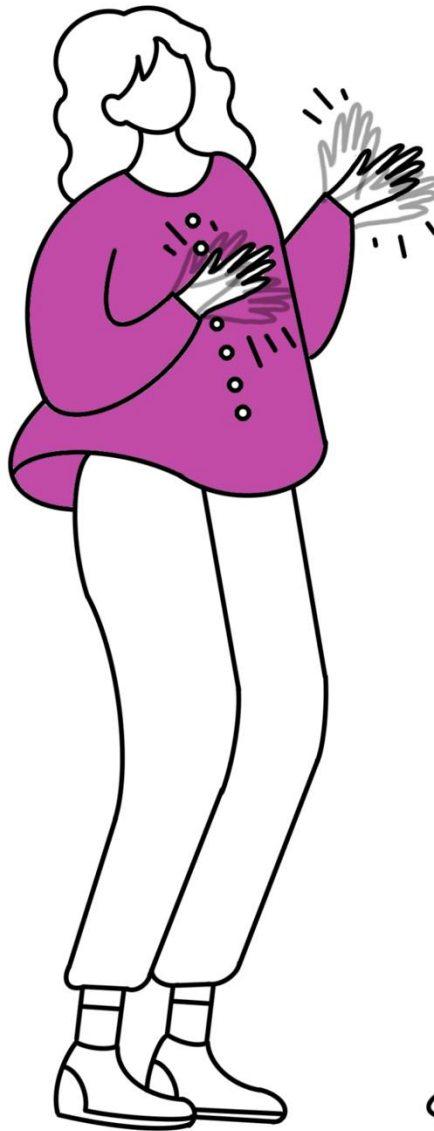


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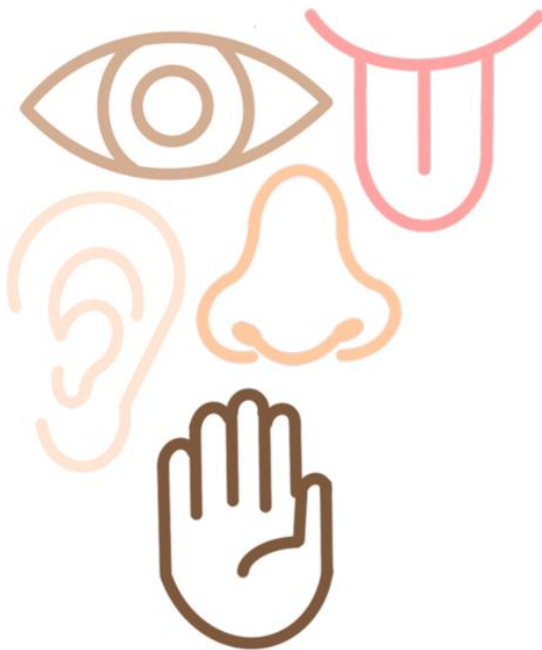
What Is Autism?

Autism is a **neurodevelopmental condition** that can affect anyone. It is something you are born with; it does not develop during or later in life like diabetes or depression. In the UK **1 in 100** people are autistic, that means in total there are over **700,000 adults and children** living with autism. This statistic doesn't show the divide between boys and girls -**5 times more boys than girls** are diagnosed with autism.



Autism affects everyone differently. We struggle with different things. In girls autism is often missed and instead we are thought to struggle with anxiety. This is because **girls present differently**. Each of us are unique and **no two autistics**

are the same. It affects our day to day lives in many ways. Living in a neurotypical world as an autistic is hard because it is not built for us. As more awareness is raised, we can all learn how to begin to adapt to create a society that accepts autistics for who they are and helps create a safe environment to live in.



Areas we commonly struggle with are **sensory, language, executive functioning, perception and motor skills**. How we see, hear and experience the world is different to others. It's like our superpower.

Masking

Sometimes our struggles are not obvious, this is called masking. Girls are amazing at masking; we **hide our true self and try to act 'normal'**. Boys can mask too however it is a lot more common with girls.

Autistics masking is like Mulan from the Disney movie 'Mulan', she wants to join the men fighting so she changes how she behaves and acts like them. She hides her true self as a male fighter called 'Ping' in order to fit in and not stick out. As time goes on she lets her true self shine and she thrives.

Autism isn't bad, it's something to be proud of not ashamed of. **It's society that holds us back and makes us mask, not our diagnosis.** Not all autistics have or do mask, people sometimes call them 'very autistic' however that is not right. Their

struggles and coping strategies seem more obvious but calling them severely autistic is labelling them like a baby who needs 24/7 care and doesn't understand much. This is incorrect and can be offensive to hear

Meltdowns are stereotyped as throwing things around, running away, screaming... that is what some meltdowns look like but in girls it is more common for **meltdowns to happen internally**. This makes it hard to spot autism. During a meltdown girls may **appear fine on the outside** but on the inside we are screaming and broken. We have spent our whole lives trying to fit in, we don't want to be different or be seen as weird. Masking uses up lots of energy. It is physically and mentally draining. Many girls may not have had external meltdowns before a diagnosis but after a diagnosis it's likely our



meltdowns will become 'more obvious'. This is because we are starting to accept our diagnosis and begin to unmask. Learning to unmask is hard and takes time. We have to learn what we hide, say and do to fit in and begin to do, say and act how our true selves would. **We sometimes don't know we are masking** as we have spent so long copying others it's becomes normal, and our true selves are hidden.

Some examples:

Struggling and dealing with sensory overload / using aids like headphones and earplugs

Going to parties because every one else is / choosing to stay for a short period with a definitive end time or not go

Making eye contact the whole time / not making eye contact as it is painful

Holding back stims to look normal / openly stimming wherever and whenever you want

Saying what other people want to hear and agreeing with others (people pleasing) / Letting yourself give your own opinion and say what you think

Not asking for help or additional support / letting people know what support and assistance you need such as extra time in exams or a safe quite place to go when overwhelmed etc

Being ashamed of a diagnosis and not telling people / being open about having autism and letting people know how they can support me

Going to appointments alone because that's what other people do / getting someone to come with you and support you

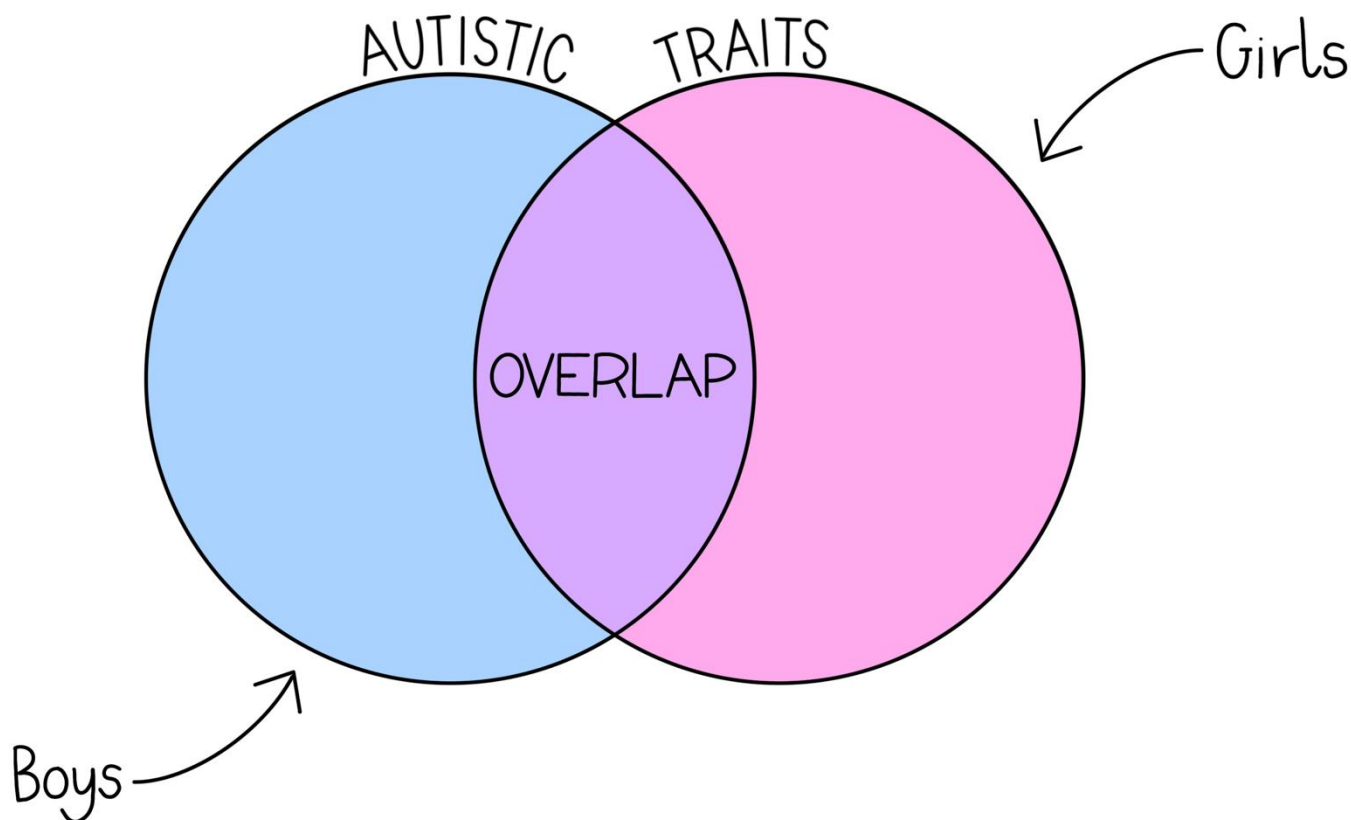
Making small talk and initiating conversation because you feel obliged to / accepting it makes you uncomfortable and let the others lead

Going along with changes to your day or routine / letting people know you don't like change and tell them to help stick to what you are comfortable with

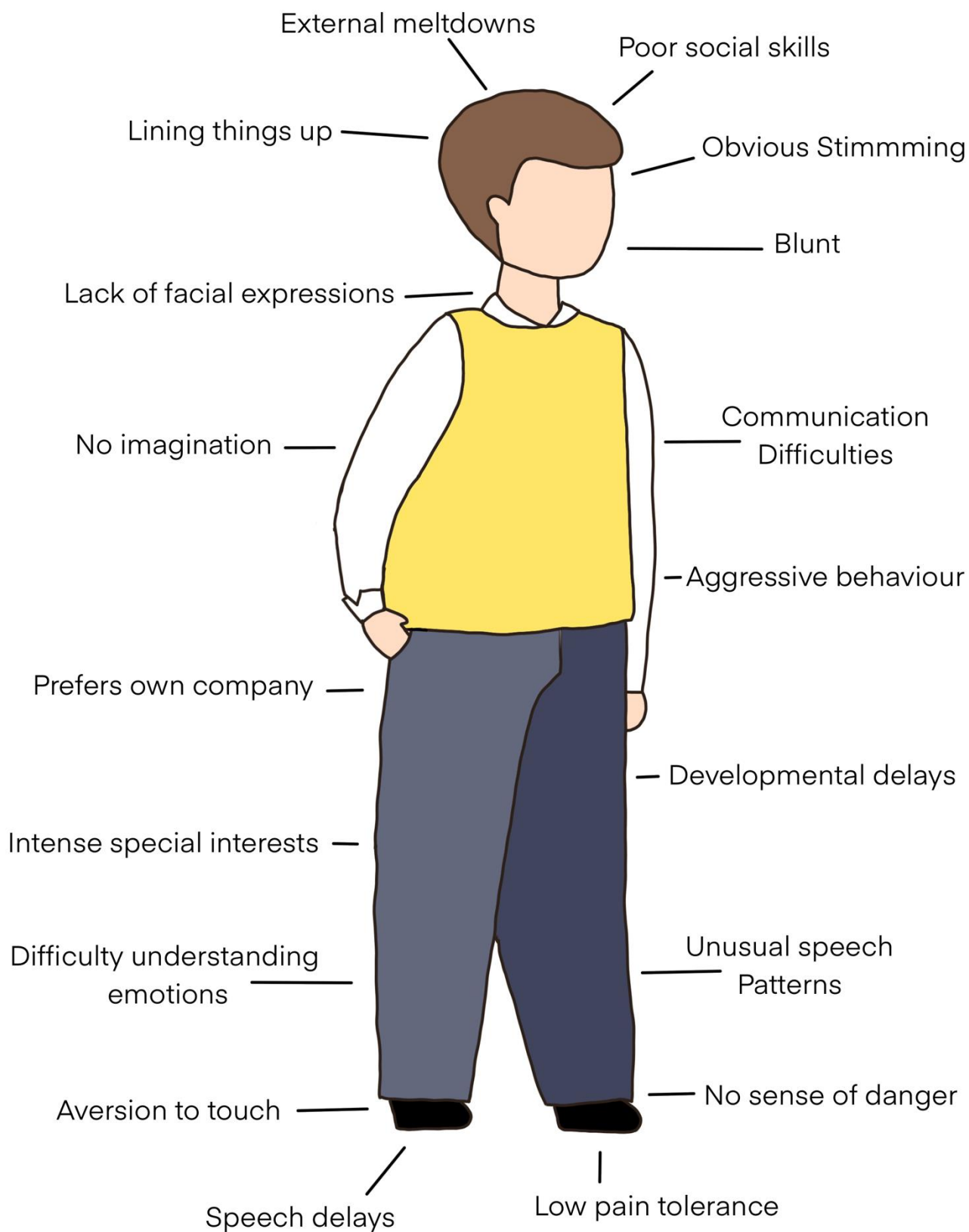
How Does It Differ Between Boys And Girls?

There are many autistic traits which boys and girls both present with, however it is becoming increasingly obvious that girls more often than not present differently. **The diagnosis assessments have traditionally been based on the traits typically present in boys.** This caused lots of girls to be missed and go undiagnosed. This has a detrimental affect on our mental health.

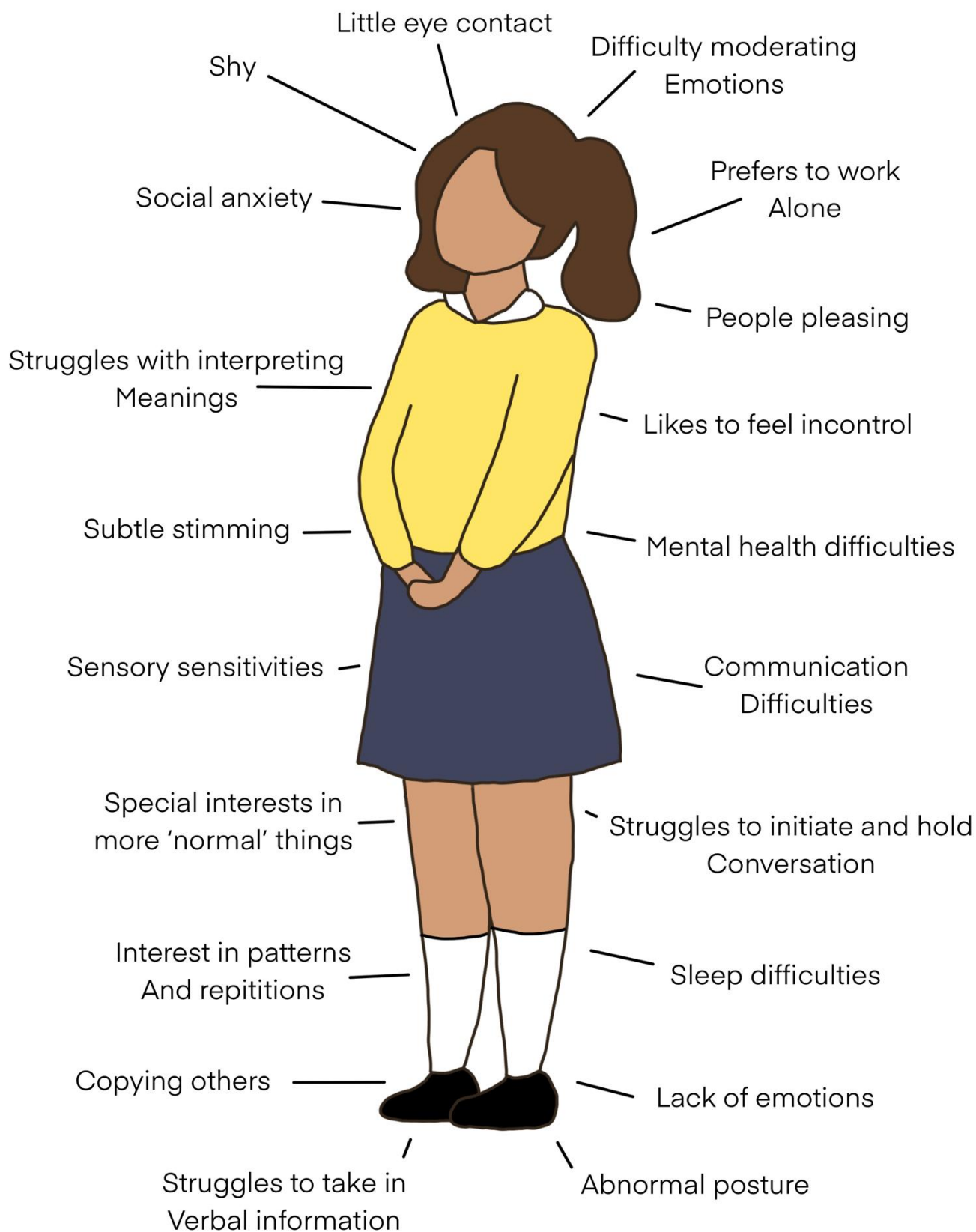
The longer we go without a diagnosis, the worse our mental health gets and the more we struggle. It is so important we diagnose girls as early as possible so they can receive the full support they need and avoid a mental health crisis. Too many girls are receiving a late diagnosis because their mental health has declined and they can't cope in this world built for neurotypicals.



How boys typically present



How girls typically present



Spotting Autism In Primary School

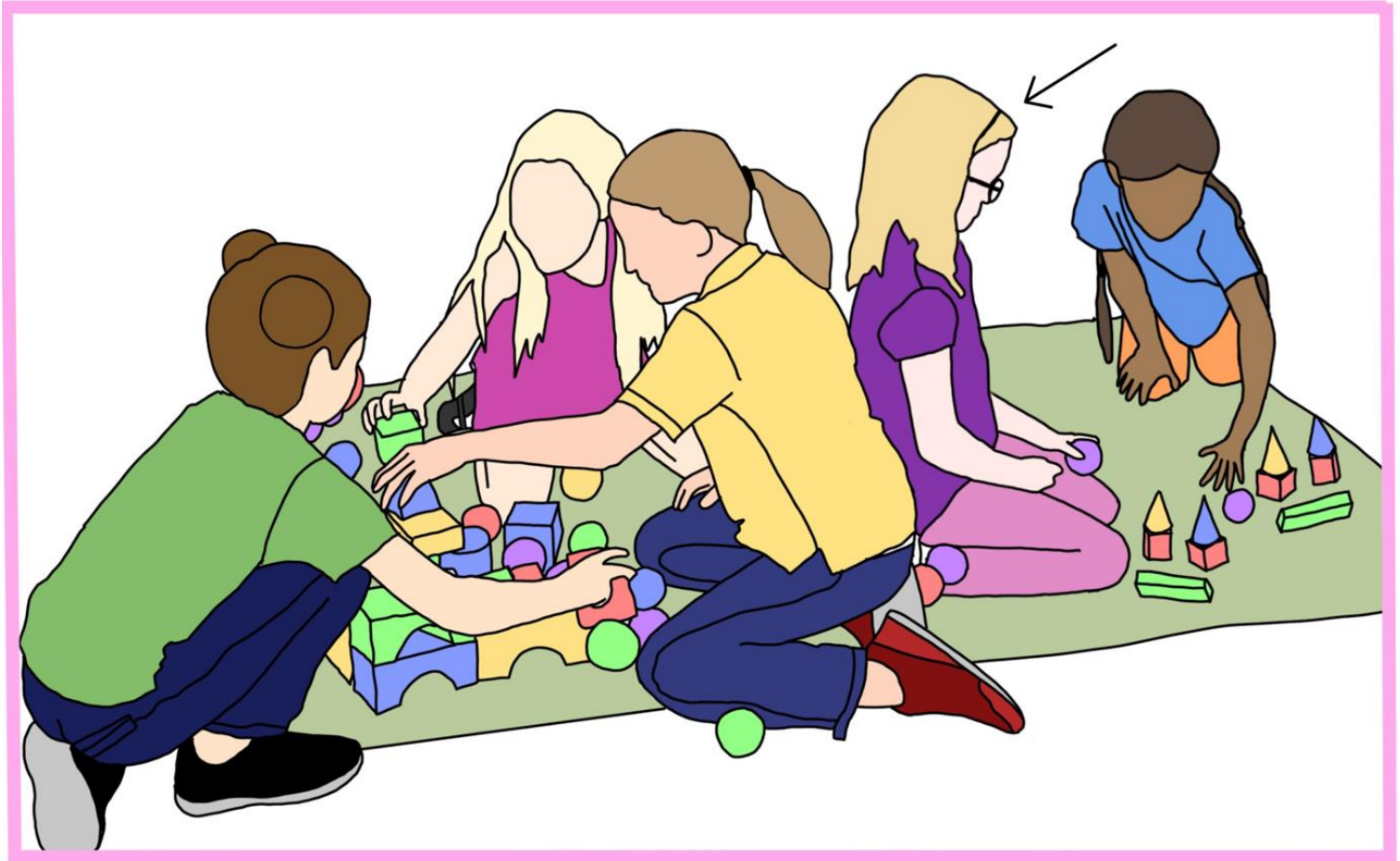
There are many traits of autism that can be present in younger children. It tends to be **easier to spot Autism in boys at this age than girls**. It is possible to spot the early signs of masking at this age if you know what to look for. We are all aware of the typical signs of autism, what we don't all know is those signs are based on boys not girls. **There are many similarities but there are also many differences.**

For boys it seems more 'obvious'- they tend to have external meltdowns, poor communication, speech and language delays, lack of social skills etc. For girls it tends to appear more like **copying others, sensory sensitivities, anxiety, shyness, good behaviour etc**. It is so important to be aware of the differences in order to spot autism in both genders.

It's important to understand that **not all girls will mask**. It is more likely for girls to, but this does not mean everyone does. You must look for all the signs of autism not just the traits associated with girls and masking.



Some examples of autism in primary school:



INDOOR PLAY

The girl is watching and copying the other girl. This is what learning to mask looks like. We observe how other people behave and copy.

Other things to look out for:

- Lining things up or creating patterns
- Little or highly developed imagination and enjoyment in fantasy play
- Playing alone and avoiding social interaction
- One sided play or overly controlled
- Shy

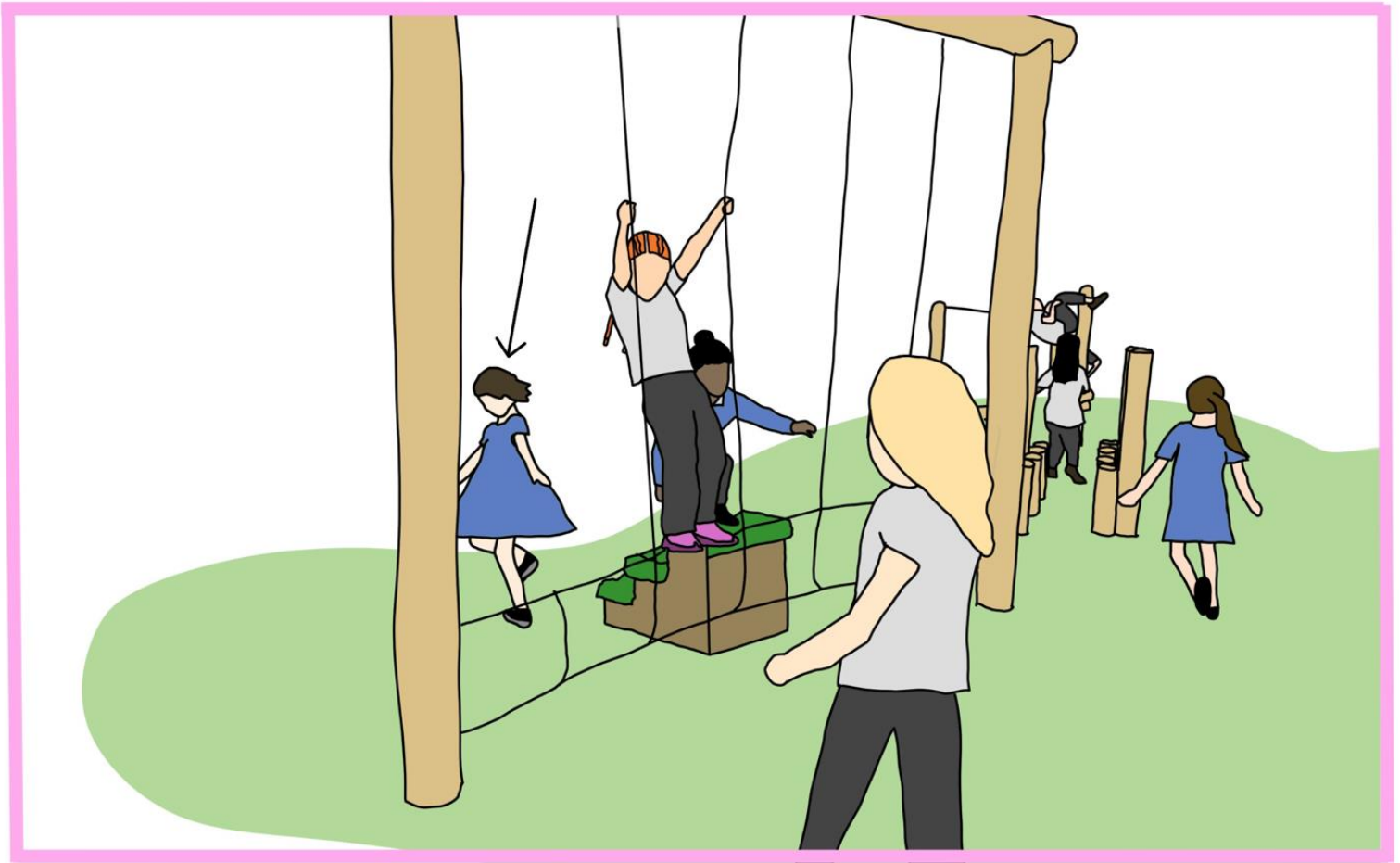


GROUP WORK

In this one the girl is doing all the work. She wants to be in control but doesn't have the confidence to take charge. She compromises by creating the resources. Sometimes girls do take full charge. The thing to look out for is the need to control something. Sometimes we don't trust other people to do things how we want them to.

Other things to look out for:

- Not joining in with group discussions
- Agreeing with everyone else (staying neutral and not taking sides)
- Lack of interest
- Working alone

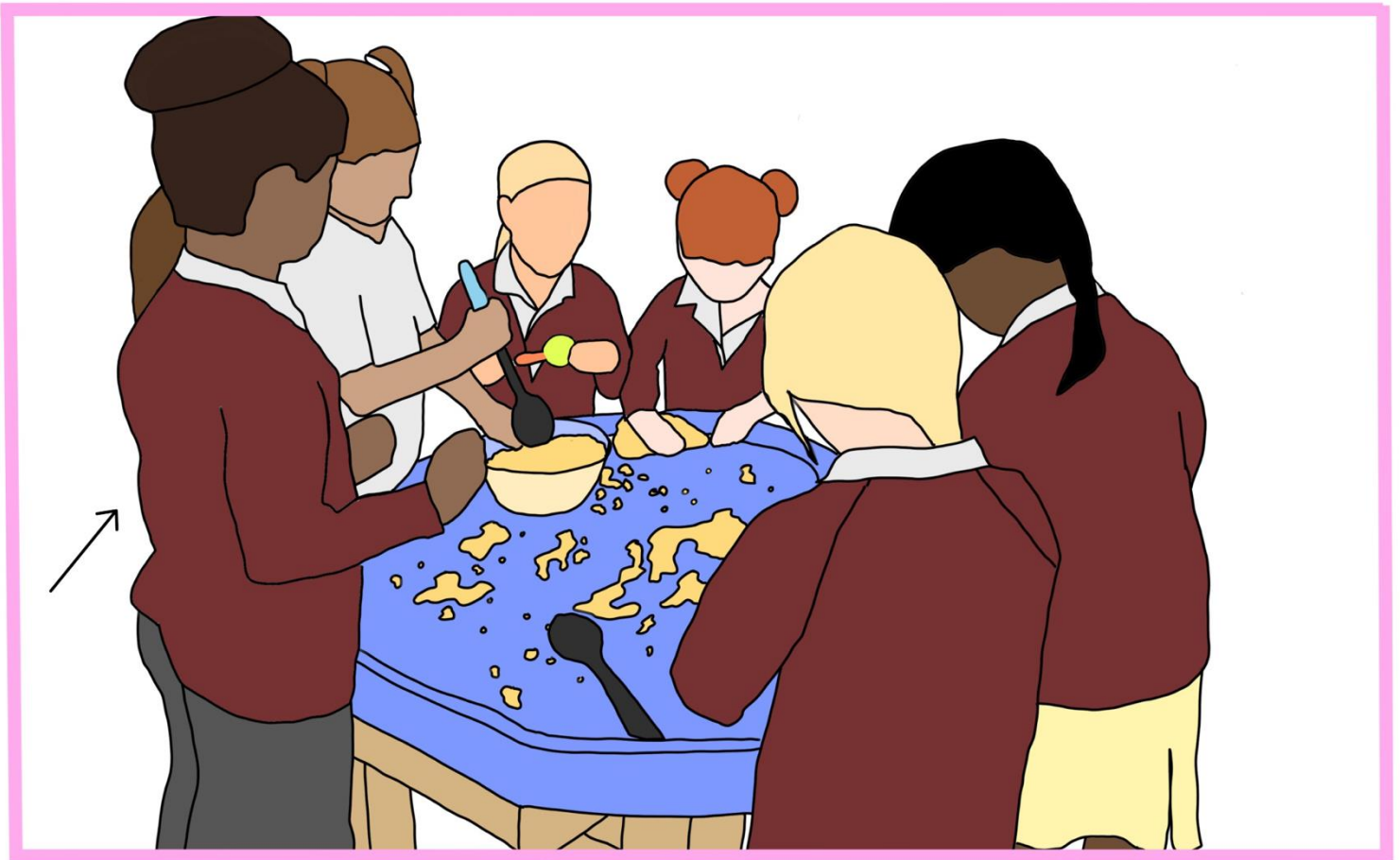


OUTDOOR PLAY

In this image the girl has chosen to play alone and avoid social interactions. She has created her own play, spinning in circles. This makes her feel happy and she enjoys being in her own world.

Other things to look out for:

- Repetitive or structured play
- Struggles with imaginative play or is really involved in imaginary play
- Copying others
- Following people around and watching what they do
- Talking to them self or appears to be in their own world
- Appears to be 'mothered' by others
- May act out-with the expected level for there age



MESSY PLAY

In messy play sensory differences can be observed. Some people are sensory seekers and others are sensory avoiders, it's important to look out for both. In this situation the girl is a sensory avoider.

Sensory seekers love sensory input. They often love to get their hands dirty and really enjoy playing with different textures such as slime. Sensory avoiders are the exact opposite. They don't like some textures and are reluctant to join in.

Other things to look out for:

- Reluctant to finger paint or get involved with tasks that require touch
- Hands on ears or running away from loud noises
- Overly involved in messy play
- Seeking sensory input, such as playing with lights or food etc



GROUP DISCUSSION

In this scenario the girl has little interest in the group discussion and her mind is elsewhere. She is distracted and thinking about other things that do interest her. Her mind is wandering and zoned out. It's hard to focus and engage with the discussion when we have little interest in the topic.

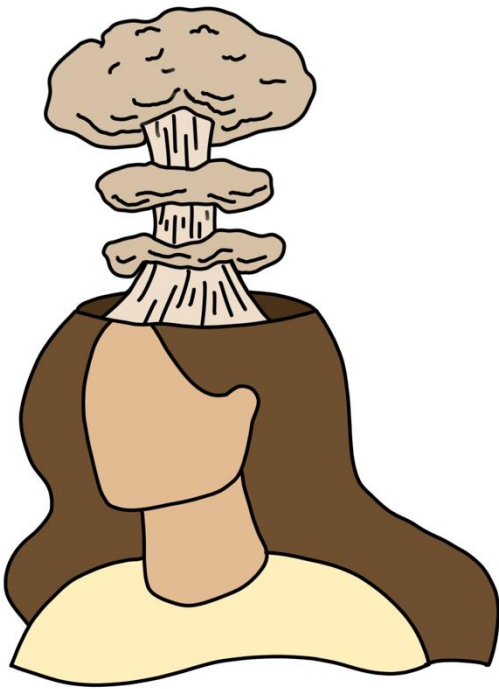
Other things to look out for:

- Stuttering, sweating, and other physical symptoms of anxiety
- Overly involved in group discussions when it is of our interest
- Lack of eye contact when adding to the conversation
- Fidgeting, doodling, humming or verbal stims
- Listening and engaged but not verbally taking part

Other observations:

- Not responding to their name
- Not smiling when you smile at them
- Not talking as much as other children
- Difficulty understanding phrases
- Taking things literally
- Finds it hard to read non-verbal social cues
- Trouble understating unwritten rules
- Prefer to hang out with children younger than them
- Be rigid in following rules
- Difficulty understanding the concept of personal space
- Doesn't like touch
- Walks away from hugs
- Clingy to teachers
- Limited range of facial expressions
- Loves routine
- High levels of anxiety around others and new experiences
- Separation anxiety
- Sleep difficulties
- Refusing to attend school or classes
- Non- verbal or selective mutism
- May seem to be behind in class or play
- Find work too easy and need to be challenged
- Interest in specific parts of toys like wheels
- Clumsiness
- Poor spatial awareness
- Poor hand eye coordination
- Low muscle tone
- Easily frustrated
- Sensitive to bright lights and sunlight
- Wears sunglasses or sunhat outside even when it's not sunny
- Require extra time to complete tasks
- Easily distracted
- May appear to be 'mothered' by other children
- Insensitive to emotion
- Doesn't like other children or adults expressing lots of emotions
- May appear to be bullied and picked on
- Intense interests that may change
- Struggles to initiate and carry-on conversations
- One sided conversation
- Hard to stop them once they start talking about there intense interests
- Need encouragement to join in with others

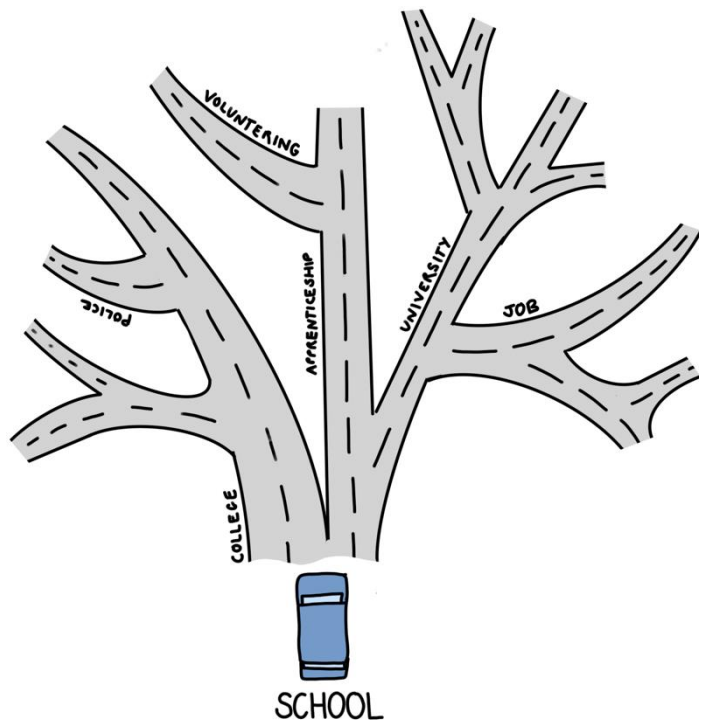
Spotting Autism In Secondary School



Often with girls in **secondary school we break apart**. We go from coping to struggling with everything. This is because all the years of masking and pretending catches up on us and pulls us down. We could be straight A students who are ‘a pleasure to teach’ and then suddenly become a student with poor grades, poor attendance, poor attention, poor engagement etc. This breaking point is tragic. **It often happens around the time students start their exams journey**. By reaching breaking point we often drop off which has a terrible affect on our grades. **We are always told higher (or A-levels) are the most important exams** we will take. They

are the exams that determine whether we get into **university or unemployment**. This added stress, on top of an Autism explosion, creates a downwards spiral. Our grades, attendance, engagement, enthusiasm and mental health go in the bin. It’s like we are stripped raw and have to start again and relearn everything.

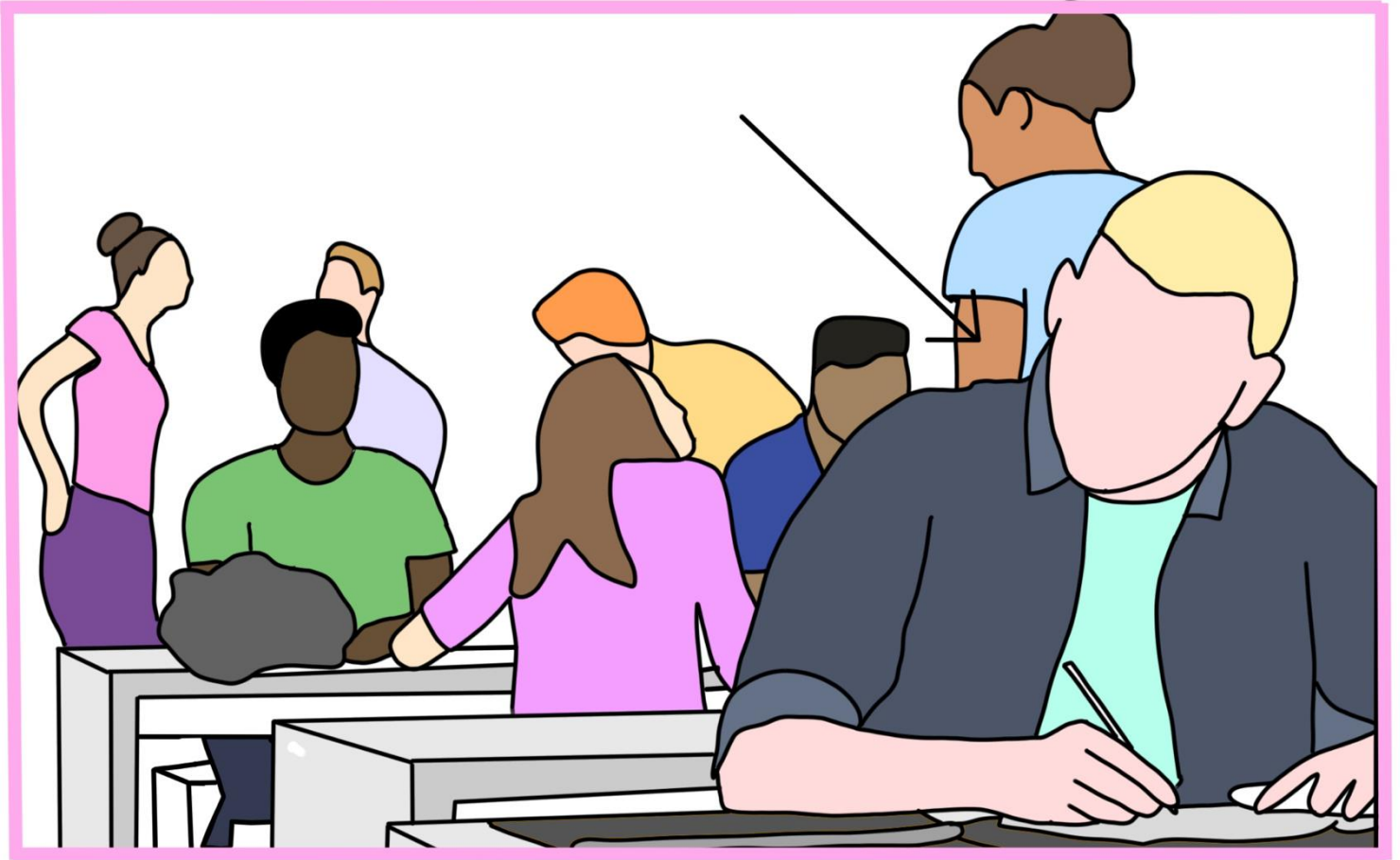
In school it is so important to **initiate discussions** with pupils who may fit the autism criteria and get them **support as early as possible**. This will allow for their needs to be discussed and support arranged for classes, break times, in corridors and prior to exams. This **support is vital to avoid an autism explosion** and ensure we can comfortably be in school. It’s important we have the best opportunity to do as well as we can in classes and exams and to have equal opportunities to our peers.



The black and white view of university or unemployment has an extremely negative effect. These days we are told of other **pathways after school, but the focus is ALWAYS on university** and getting the grades to apply. Classes are spent filling out university applications further implying that this is the normal way to continue after school. It's so **important to discuss all routes equally as by predominantly talking about universities it creates a false black and white image** in our heads. All our life we want to be normal so to take an **alternative route after school makes us feel like a disappointment** and less than everyone else.



Some examples of autism in secondary school:



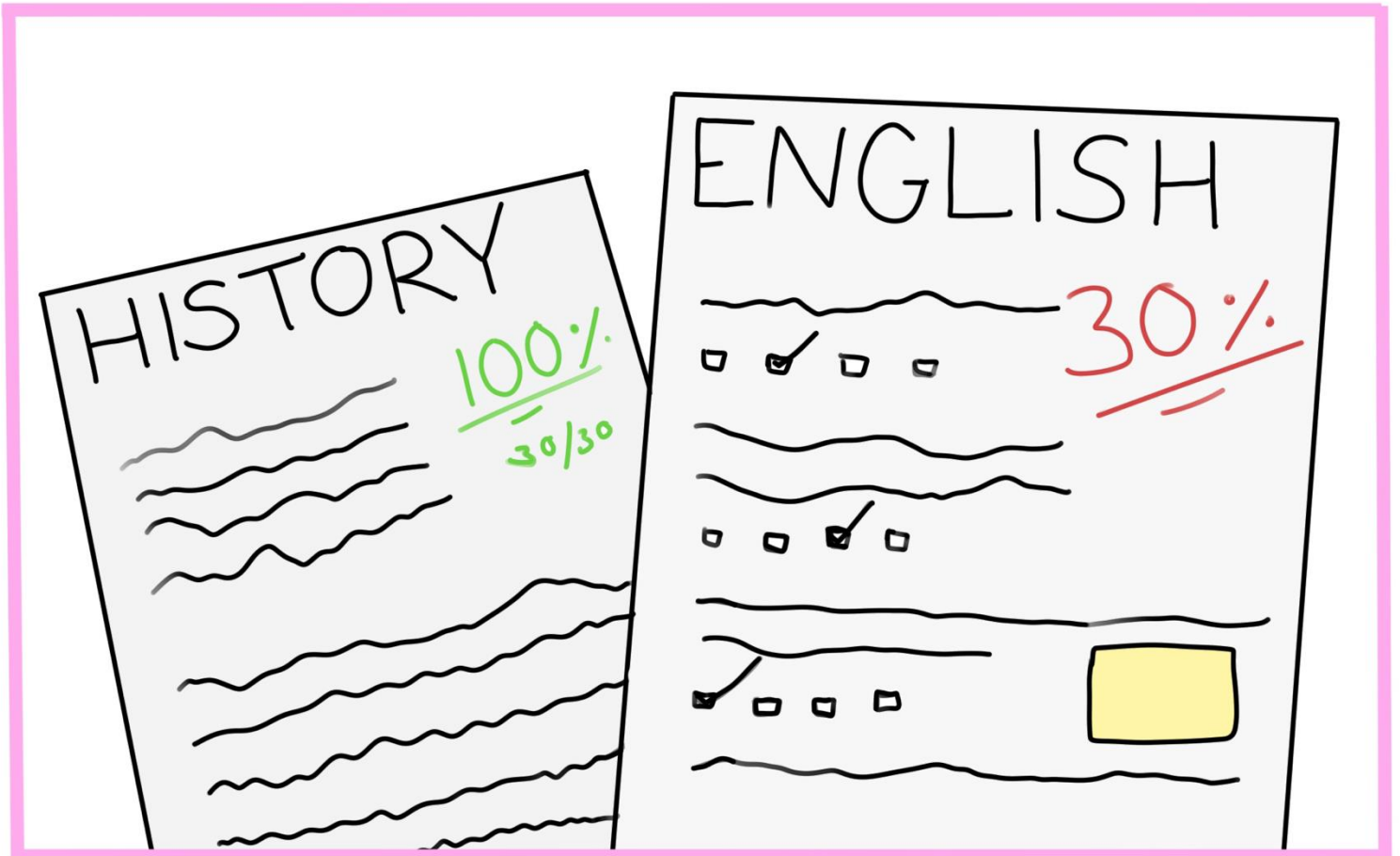
GENERAL INTERACTIONS

Everyone with autism will struggle with anxiety. It can be caused by anything and everything from busy crowded corridors to the feel of writing with a pencil. Social anxiety affects us all, this means we tend to prefer to work alone. That way we are in full control and there is no need for social interactions, lessening the anxiety

Other things to look out for:

- Struggle to engage with classmates and teachers
- Difficulty initiating conversations
- Lack of eye contact
- No desire to be involved in conversations
- Standing back and observing
- Monotone voice
- Abnormal posture

- Sensitivity to sensory input
- Need for control and sameness
- May come across as 'different' or 'odd'
- More understanding and enjoys the company of teachers, may become attached to a specific teacher(s)



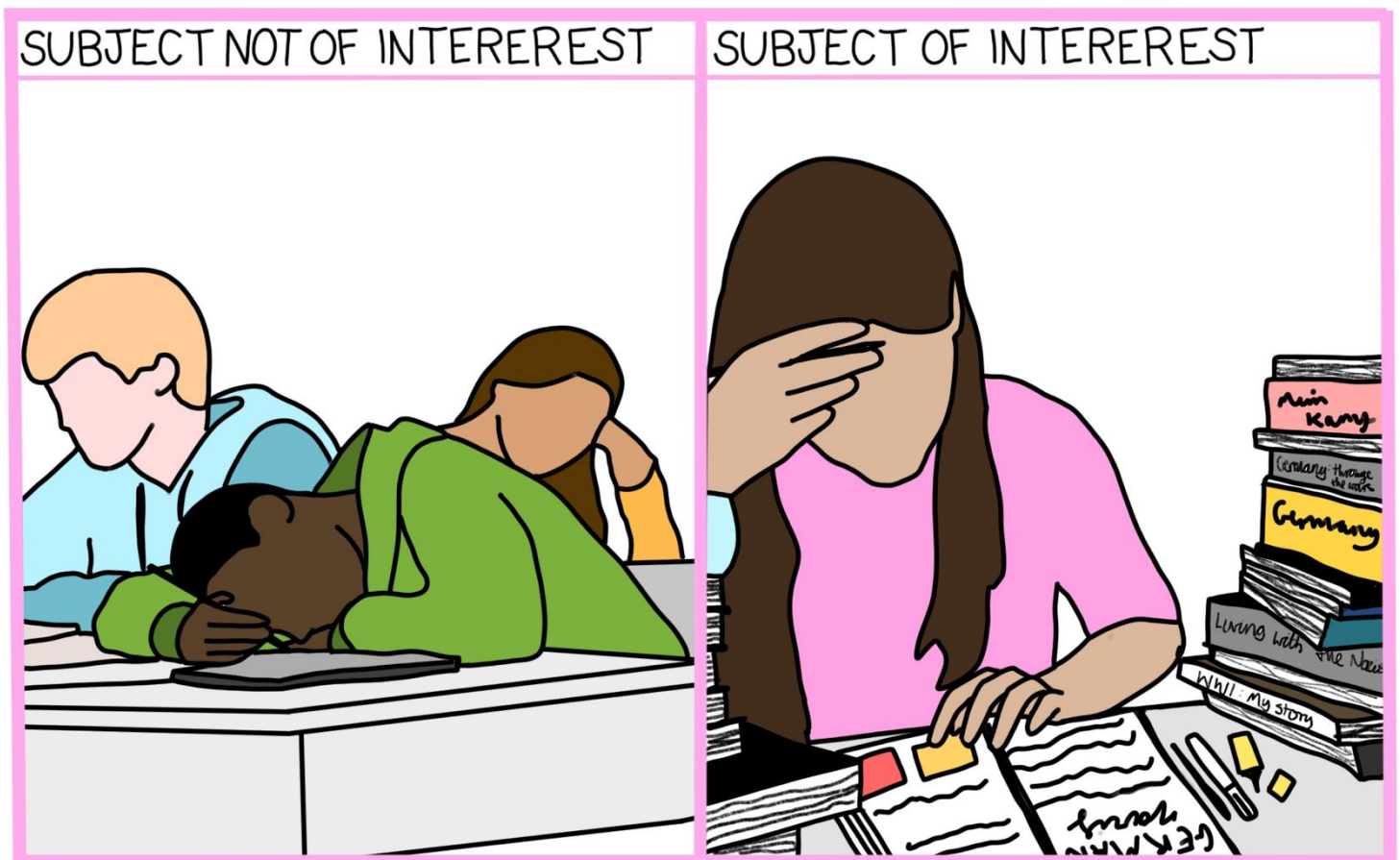
HOMWORK

When it comes to homework everyone handles it differently however most of the time it's obvious when as an autistic, we have little interest in the subject. Often subjects we don't like we ditch and do the bare minimum, sometimes not even that. Subjects we do like however we will spend ages on and go almost a bit over the top. If it's something we enjoy we will hyper focus, meaning we will spend hours on it without noticing the time passing.

Other things to look out for:

- Difficulties with deadlines
- Overwhelmed by too much homework

- Finding it hard to do work at home due to black and white thinking. School is where you do work, home is where you relax (our safe space)
- Afraid to ask questions, would rather lose marks than ask for help
- Have a high expectation for them self
- Uncompleted homework
- Misunderstanding of the work set
- Difficulty prioritising tasks and concentrating for enough time to complete the homework
- Perfectionist, homework is always of a high standard
- Puts in most of the effort and time in group homework, may seem to be controlling



ENGAGEMENT IN SUBJECTS

Simply put, if we like a subject, we will engage but if we don't like a subject we won't. When there is work which we are enthusiastic about we will put a lot of effort into it and really make a good job of it. If there is work that we have no interest in we won't be motivated to complete it.

The lack of engagement can be observed mainly during the first years of secondary school before the pupils choose their subjects and are stuck with a mix of compulsory subjects.

Other things to look out for:

- Behaviour difficulties
- Poor attendance
- Over working
- Difficulty in starting or stopping tasks
- Prioritising tasks of interest and abandoning those of no interest



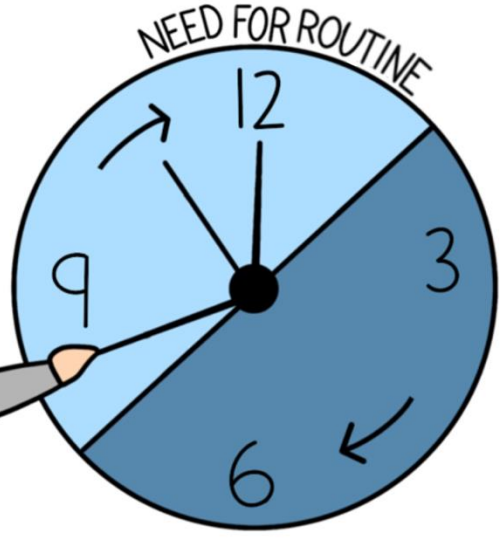
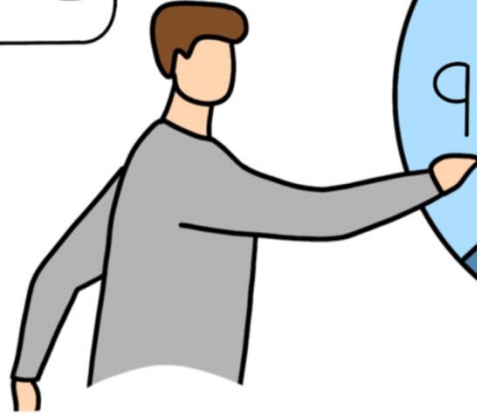
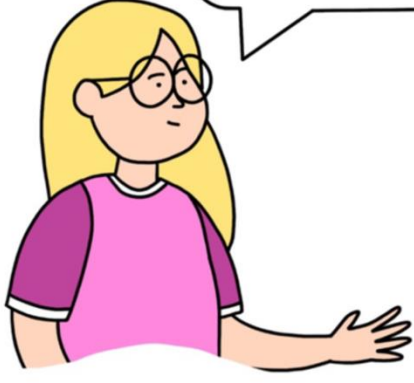
Other observations:

- Finding smart boards too bright
- Struggles with fire alarms and bells
- Prefers to leave class early or late to avoid crowded corridors
- Dislike the feeling of writing with a pencil
- Prefers to write on paper with a book underneath
- Finds reading black font on white paper to contrasting
- Tends to be involved in maths and sciences groups etc over lunch as opposed to hanging out in the canteen
- Limited interaction
- Follows the school day by the minute, keeping track precisely of when periods start and finish
- Struggles with unexpected change
- Difficulty coping with stress and pressure
- Struggles with comorbid diagnoses such as dyslexia or ADHD
- Can't stop halfway through a task
- Problems understanding verbal or written instructions
- Overwhelmed by too much text
- Hard time staying focused
- Lack of motivation
- May not study for tests but still get good scores
- Panic attacks
- Doesn't like to be asked or to ask questions
- Hands on learner
- Struggles with or has an exceptional imagination
- Difficulty visualising things
- Very quick learners
- May appear to control group work
- Does all the work in groups but stays quiet
- Sitting at the back of the class
- Seems uptight and uncomfortable when friends aren't there
- Difficulty staying still
- Fidgeting
- Struggles with English, specifically close reading and creative writing
- Doesn't like to be wrong, comes across as stubborn
- Gets upset if told off
- Needs to be given precise instructions
- Struggles with tasks where there is more than one way to complete it
- Finds deadlines overwhelming
- Sits at back of class and lies low
- Dislikes presentations and talking in front of others
- Works well alone and with friends but struggles to work with unfamiliar classmates
- Struggles with drama and expressive arts
- Finds walking into a class ,or a space with people in ,daunting
- Gets embarrassed easily
- Always a bit on edge and easily scared

General traits of autism



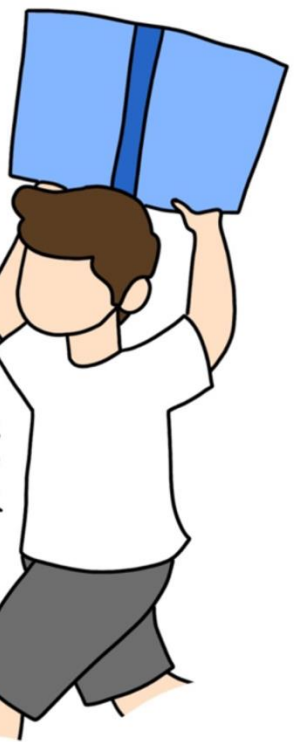
SPEECH AND LANGUAGE DELAYS



DIFFICULTY WITH IMAGINATION



HYPERTACTILE, IMPULSIVE AND INATTENTIVE



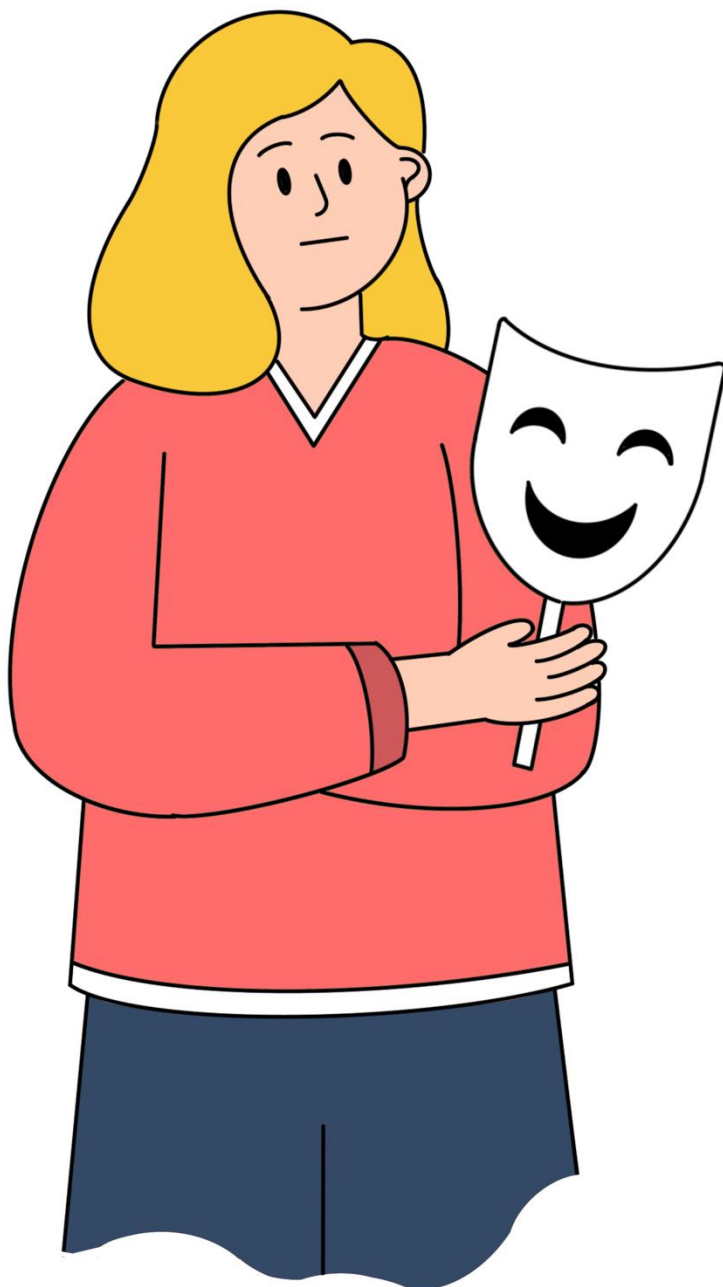
LINING UP OBJECTS AND CREATING PATTERNS



ANXIETY

How To See Through The Mask

Girls are excellent at masking their autism. We spend years watching and copying others which can make it very hard to spot our traits.



The most effective way to ‘spot’ autism is to talk to the person. As girls we hide so much that our struggles and difficulties aren’t easy to see. By talking to us you can begin to understand how we see the world. You can find out what we struggle with and what support we need.

It’s important to slowly introduce the idea of autism to people you think may be autistic. It might be quite daunting and overwhelming at first but by slowly bringing it into conversation it will allow them to take in what you’re saying and do their own research.

Autism isn’t something to be ashamed of but at first some people might be offended by the idea. We all just want to be ‘normal’ and the thought of an autism diagnosis to some means they aren’t normal. For

others it can be like a lightbulb moment. Finally, we can begin to understand ourselves and we can get the help we need. A diagnosis can be life changing. For once everything starts to make sense, there is a reason for the way we are, the struggles we have and the help we need. A diagnosis can be literally life saving.

How To Support Autistics In School

In the classroom:

- Allow use of aids such as fidget toys and earplugs
- Reduce smart board brightness
- Close blinds when it's sunny to avoid blinding sunlight
- Ensure the volume is kept at a low level
- Put on subtitles
- Use lightly coloured backgrounds on documents to relive contrast
- Have print offs with the important information
- Allow plenty of time to take in new information, avoid rushing through work
- Take time to go through answers
- We struggle with summarising so allow us time to write everything down or give us pre-summarised points
- Use simple sentences written in plain language
- Avoid the use of figures of speech and idioms etc
- Use simple colour schemes



Tests and exams:

- Extra time
- Separate accommodation
- Allow use of aids such as tinted glasses, overlays or fidget toys
- Discuss additional support prior to tests

Between classes:

- Allow pupil to leave class early or late to avoid busy corridors
- Allow use of earplugs, headphones or other aids to help with noise

Break times:

- Have quiet spaces like libraries open
- Offer clubs and/or open-classrooms to study in
 - Make pre-ordered food easily accessible, away from crowds
 - Allow pupils to arrive at class early

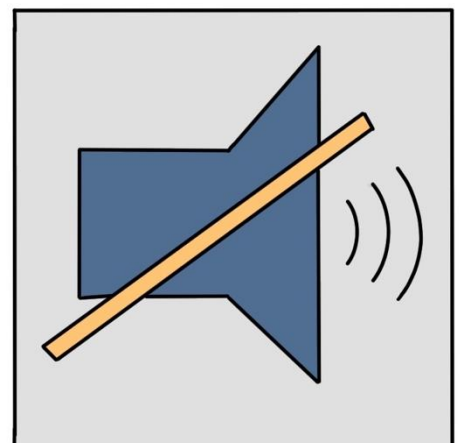


Avoiding and dealing with meltdowns:

- Have a known safe space to go to when overwhelmed
- Allow pupil to leave the class when things get too much, use a time out card or something similar
- Offer an alternative space to work such as an empty classroom or library
- Have accessible fidget toys
- Agree to the use of headphones when needed
- Allow short, discreet time outs to calm down. Have a code word or sentence such as 'I need a drink', or a physical time-out card to communicate
- Have a known person or place for pupils to go to, such as their guidance teacher or PSE classroom

Assemblies and school events:

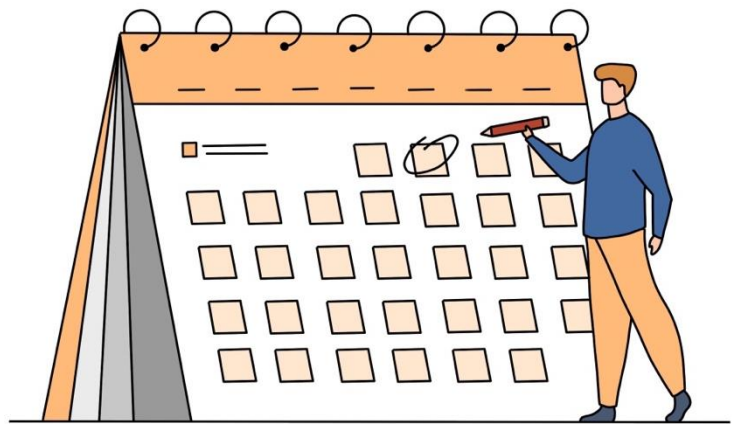
- Have seating available at the back for pupils to use
- Limit bright lights and loud noises
- If an assembly isn't important make it optional
- Allow easy access out of the room or area
- Have clear timings, a set start and end time
- Make pupils aware of events or assemblies in advance
- Use simple colours and bullet points of key information. Avoid walls of text



Homework and home learning:

- Allow time in class to complete homework once main work is completed
- Have drop-in sessions to help with any homework queries
- Have empty classroom to be used to complete homework

- Be firm with due dates but not harsh, don't point out when someone fails to hand in and allow a few days leeway
- Working in their home environment is hard, ideally limit compulsory homework
- Use simple sentences written in plain language
- Avoid the use of figures of speech and idioms etc
- Clearly state if homework is compulsory or optional
- Ideally have different levels of difficulty and multiple options to choose from
- Have optional extra homework tasks
- Go through the homework answers and explain them clearly
- Limit the number of tasks to avoid overwhelming
- Limit and break up large text areas. Big paragraphs of text can be too much and can be the difference between completed and uncompleted homework
- Cameras and involvement in online classes should not be compulsory, questions should be directed to the whole class not individuals
- Make use of the chat or group work apps in online lessons and try to avoid microphone use



Making decisions regarding their education:

- Clearly show all options and pathways
- Limit speeches or documents of text and instead use photos and videos to show all the options at stake
- Give plenty of time to make decisions
- It's likely they might change their mind; they're not trying to be awkward they just really struggle with decision making so help sort things out nicely
- Don't be biased to particular pathways or encourage popular subjects. It's important to not mark anything as 'the norm' such as university or choosing Higher English
- Bullet point key information
- Create a positives and negatives list for each option
- Allow plenty of time to work through all the options and make a decision

Fire alarms:

- Make said pupils aware ahead of fire drills
- Take time after to calm down before resuming work
- Try to avoid crowding, encourage space between classes or an alternative place for said students to go and be registered

Poor behaviour/ attendance:

- Talk to the pupil to understand the cause of poor behaviour, it can often be a meltdown, a lack of understanding they are ashamed of or a lack of interest etc
- Poor attendance can be a result of anxiety, you need to understand what the cause of the anxiety is and how you can help relieve it
- Understand that some subjects are much harder for autistic students such as English, the work needs to be adaptable to their needs
- Talk about optional choices to classes they have no interest in or that cause extreme anxiety, such as replacing some with study periods
- Shouting is not the answer, time-outs are. It's important to deal with outbursts of anger or walk-outs calmly and appropriately. It's likely to occur mid meltdown and they need space to calm down. The last thing they need is to be shouted at or pointed out in front of peers.
- Clearly explain what we have done wrong and why it isn't acceptable



How To Support Autistics Outside Of School

Groups and clubs:

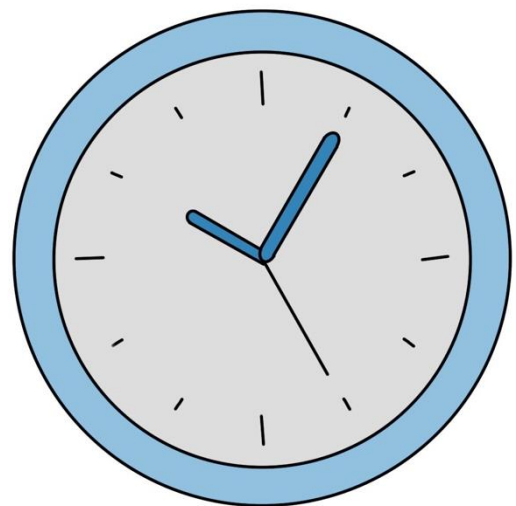
- Have quiet areas away from the main busy areas
- Group interactions should not be compulsory or pushed
- Avoid excessive noise or lights
- Give warning before loud noises or flashing lights etc. Even when simply turning on and off lights or starting to play videos or music
- Have a programme of planned activities
- Have a set start and end time and stick to it
- Have a rigid plan of events
- Give clear instructions

Parties:

- Allow people to come and go as they wish
- Have a set start and end time
- Have things to do so the focus isn't all on socialising
- Try to reduce sensory input such as avoiding flashing lights or loud music
- Have a quiet area to go to when overwhelmed or to have a break from the main party
- Give a rough idea of how many people will be attending and what will be happening prior to the event

Competitions:

- Encourage fun and involvement rather than competitiveness
- Yes, it's cheesy but it's important to everyone knows 'it's the taking part that counts'
- Praise hard work and taking part
- When giving feedback start and end with positive comments
- Create a plan for the prior to the competition and try to stick to it
- Clear communication between coaches, parents and us
- Have quiet areas to escape to or relax before and after competing etc



Shopping:

- Have quiet times where there is no music or loud noise and dimmed lighting
- Give help when it is asked for, try to avoid offering help when people walk into a shop (specifically people with sunflower lanyards on etc)
- Have self-service checkouts
- Appear happy or neutral, confusing facial expressions can cause unnecessary alarm or worry
- Self-service changing rooms
- Clear signage
- Easy access and marked toilets and lifts
- Quiet area that can be used when overwhelmed or alone-time is needed
- Exits marked clearly
- A general understanding of autism from all staff and adaptations that can be used when necessary, such as non-verbal communication like pointing or the use of an AAC device or app

Cafes and restaurants:

- Offer a child's menu or a simplified one to customers, or have it easily accessible
- Be precise in food descriptions on menus, include all sauces and vegetables etc as this can make a huge difference
- Clearly signed toilets
- Cater to reasonable changes requested on menu items, such as removing mayonnaise or tomatoes
- Understanding and adapting to alternative communication options



Volunteering and working:

- Be very exact about tasks and clear communication
- Allow for short breaks when needed. Could use a code word etc for when they are overwhelmed
- Give plenty of guidance
- Take things at their pace
- Don't do too much too soon, take it slow and give plenty of encouragement
- Make people aware early when there are

changes to rotas or volunteering times etc

- Understand what tasks we like doing and what tasks they don't like doing. It can make a huge difference
- In jobs such as waitressing it is likely we will have preferences such as choosing washing up instead of serving tables etc. This is important and should be accepted
- Learn how we take in information best; this could be written, verbal or hands-on
- Establish a routine and try to stick to it where possible

Public spaces:

- Have a quiet room available for autistics and others who may require it
- Keep noise at an appropriate level, ideally to a minimum
- Try to avoid bright or flashy lights
- Avoid the use of bold bright colours
- Have very clear signage
- Have benches or other things to sit on to take a rest
- Available water and toilets

Public transport:

- Have readily available maps of railway stations or bus depots
- Have easy to read, simplified timetables available
- Help points and people who can assist
- Make assistance easy to get on the spot or to prebook
- Have a good, decent length of time before changing information screen
- Clear signage
- Indicate clearly which seats available
- Give clear announcements
- Plenty of spaces to wait, including ones in quiet areas and ones near the announcements and platforms etc
- Be patient and understanding
- Keep rigidly to timetables, when delays or disruptions occur be sure to give very clear information regarding the effects and what to do.



The Importance of Diagnosing Autism Early

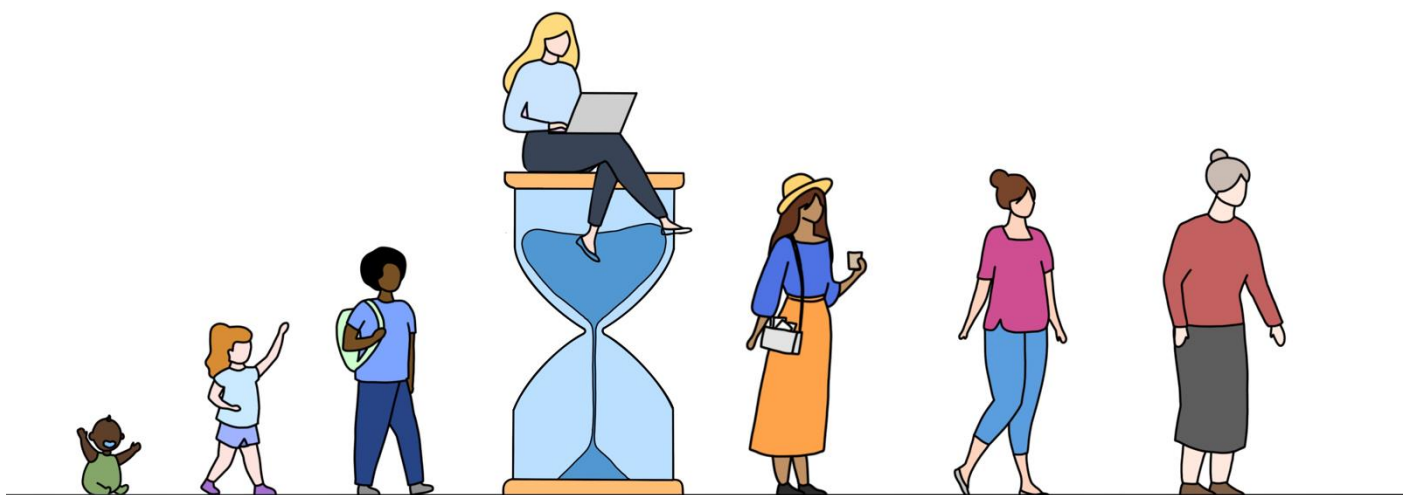
It is **SO important to diagnose autism early**. The more resources and information out there on autism and girls will allow it to become diagnosed much earlier. This is **critical to our mental health and ensures equal opportunities**. If left too long without a diagnosis it can lead to poor mental health (sometimes life threatening), delays and MAJOR setbacks. Picking up traits early on and following them through with a professional, can allow a much earlier, and much needed diagnosis.

Unfortunately, the diagnosis process for autism is long and extensive. Many girls wait ages for a diagnosis. It's **important to begin the screening early**, allowing time before the breaking point for intervention.

Ideally everyone would be diagnosed in nursery, but the reality is the waiting lists are extensive and in the case of girls spotting the signs are difficult. It's not impossible and we have to hope more resources will be put into place to help lower the average diagnostic age and the length of time a diagnosis takes.

We can all play a part in helping. By educating yourself on the signs and traits of autism in the girls we can all become more aware of the neurodiverse population amongst us. It's **key to intervene and offer support as early as possible** to ensure we reach our full potential and thrive in our life.

It's important to note that no one grows out of autism. It's not something you



develop and outgrow. It is something you are born with and affects you every

day of your life. It affects all age groups, genders and races and it's important to understand that and support every neurodiverse person equally.

Sources:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/signs/children/>

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<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/education/homework/parents>

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