



Dale Yaul-Smith

# Girls on the spectrum

Misconceptions and stereotypes mean that many girls and women with autism are going undiagnosed, argues **Dale Yaul-Smith**, herself diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum as an adult.

“Neurological science has not yet acknowledged the significant numbers of females who are on the autism spectrum. I believe that females could be affected in equal proportion to the numbers of males who have autism. In schools for children with autism, only girls with severe autism are admitted.

Professionals don't expect to find autism in girls because recent research indicates that it is a rarity

The challenge to researchers and scientists now is to investigate why females are misdiagnosed as having mental health issues or are simply overlooked because significant numbers of females really *are* on the autism spectrum. I suggest that professionals, such as teachers and doctors, don't expect to find autism in girls because recent research indicates that it is a rarity. It is only girls with extreme autism, displaying obvious behavioural difficulties, who cannot be ignored.

I believe that girls with undiagnosed autism are instead being stereotyped as 'feminine' and

their behaviours are widely considered to be traditionally feminine traits – hysteria, highly-strung, shy, indifferent, quiet, passive, outspoken, catty, fussy, compulsive liars, over-sensitive, temperamental, moody, bossy, rude, daydreamers, or just plain awkward – i.e. women! These same traits are described differently, raising concerns, when they are displayed in boys, with the apparent single-mindedness commonly associated with autism being focussed on instead. Furthermore, many girls are heavily chastised compared to boys when they appear to be displaying what is seen as 'masculine' behaviour or traits, such as violence.

Parents and professionals don't seem to worry so much about girls who prefer solitary activities, such as lining-up, sorting, organising and paying a keen attention to detail. Indeed, this behaviour is tolerated and encouraged in girls. Parents may even boast about how studious their daughters seem to be at a very early age, whereas they worry about such behaviour in boys who are supposedly meant to be gregarious. Girls are also encouraged to credit inanimate objects, such as dolls and cuddly toys, with feelings, so girls

can appear to be more empathetic than boys. Fashion and beauty may become their focus of interest by default, so they present an image of confident, savvy women. When girls on the autism spectrum become adults, they become increasingly susceptible to the sexual advances of others, making it easier to be taken advantage of.

The desire by many children on the autism spectrum to fit in makes them hypersensitive to the environment, vulnerable and easily manipulated, so they are conditioned to conform to the social norm but, as a result, risk losing a sense of identity – not least because social etiquette and mores change and develop over time and because a large part of conformity for girls in particular is to please others. It has also been suggested that parents encourage the female peer group to include other girls who appear to be left out so girls with undiagnosed autism are effectively camouflaged and can appear to be coping.

Many females are being diagnosed later on in adult life. I knew I was different early on in life. I was painfully shy, quiet, withdrawn, lacking social and communication skills. I often wondered why I found

areas of my life, such as planning, decision-making, motivation and styles of thinking, so difficult while others appeared to deal with these areas of life with ease. I observed people and tried to copy some physical behaviours e.g. body language which I have found exhausting because, with hindsight, I know that my concentration has been fundamentally focused on trying to understand and interpret other peoples' behaviours and intentions. As a result, I managed to get by on a superficial level but never really grasped functioning socially on a deeper level.

The fact that girls with undiagnosed autism are painstakingly copying some behaviour is not being picked up on and therefore any social and communication problems they may be having are also overlooked. This effort of mimicking and repressing their autistic behaviour is exhausting, perhaps resulting in the high statistics of women with mental health problems.

Without the right education and a lack of power in controlling what happens to them, young people on the autism spectrum can slip into sub-culture groups in an attempt to fit in and be accepted. This has worrying consequences for many

people with autism because they don't realise that many sub-culture groups are merely fashion trends which eventually collapse, resulting in affectations in styles of speech, inappropriate behaviour and mind-sets leaving them lacking a sense of self-identity. Of course, many girls and boys on the autism spectrum do get the most out of their education and consistently achieve at a very high level.

### *Gaining a diagnosis... almost like having a license to be me*

At a special school in my area for 64 children, the majority of which have autism, the ratio of girls to boys is 1:10 and they are among the most severely autistic in the whole school. This is not untypical across the UK, and indeed the world, although, the ratio of diagnosed adult women to diagnosed adult males is now about 1:4 in the UK. The fact is that more boys than girls do have diagnoses' but the reality is that girls with undiagnosed autism are being done a great disservice.

It seems then that sensory perceptual issues are ignored in girls as they are deemed to be 'typically' female characteristics. Could it be

then that girls are more likely to be allowed their 'eccentricities' in the name of 'extreme femininity'? Could this be the real reason that autism is considered to be less obvious in girls? I am convinced that the use of stereotypical masculine and feminine language and its interpretation has a large part to play in this issue. The use of such language is inappropriate and indeed harmful with reference to people with autism.

In 2005, at the age of 41, I gained my diagnosis. Now I know that I am not quite the bad person I had been dubbed and I have a better understanding of myself, it's almost like having a license to be me. But even now, I sense people questioning and passing judgement on whether I have a disability or not remarking: 'we're all like that sometimes'. This may be so but the impact on one's life experience is quantifiable. Only when researchers and scientists can step back from their primary view and carry out further research can girls with autism be treated fairly and not as an oddity. ”

*Are girls going undiagnosed because of stereotyping?*

