

# ABOUT AUTISM AND GIRLS



Until recently, autism was considered far more common in boys and it was believed that girls with autism were more likely to experience other difficulties such as intellectual disability (Happe, 2019). Recent studies suggest the ratio of males to females with autism could be closer to 2:1 (Dworzynski et al, 2012).

Each learner with autism is a unique individual and adjustments to their educational program and learning environment should be tailored to their needs. When you understand the impact of autism on the individual learner, you'll be better able to adjust to their needs.

## Autism and girls

Research shows when girls with autism remain undiagnosed, there can be devastating consequences on their social and mental wellbeing, due to being misunderstood or overlooked for support (Carpenter et al, 2019). When autism in girls remains undiagnosed, there is a high risk of developing mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, self-harm and eating disorders (Rae and Hershey, 2019).

Characteristics of girls with autism appear to conflict with the stereotype of autism, as they can be considered too sociable and not display repetitive behaviours (Carpenter and Egerton, 2017). This conflict contributes to autism remaining undiagnosed.

## Impacts on learning for girls with autism

In a learning environment, girls with autism can:

- experience difficulties with abstract concepts, auditory processing and impaired executive function
- dislike change but like routine and structure for all transitions
- mask difficulty and won't ask for help or will appear avoidant
- internalise and hide anxiety
- experience bullying and exclusion
- experience perfectionism driven by the fear of making mistakes, disapproval and not meeting impossible standards and unattainable goals.

## Strengths of girls with autism

The strengths of girls with autism can be:

- special interests with an exceptional detailed knowledge
- attention to detail and observational skills
- concentration that's free from distraction
- an extraordinary memory
- expertise in particular areas of interest
- unique thought processes that support innovative solutions
- integrity, tenacity and acceptance of difference.



**Government  
of South Australia**

Department for Education

# AUTISM AND GIRLS ADJUSTMENTS



## EXAMPLES OF ADJUSTMENTS



### Understand autism and girls

- Understand the presentation of girls with autism, their strengths and special interests.
- Understand the impact of impairments, for example, exhaustion during the day caused by social imitation.
- Identify rising anxiety or mental health issues and discuss these with parents or carers.



### Setting tasks and activities

- Encourage flexibility in making mistakes and re-drafting work. You can model this yourself by making mistakes and using self-talk to deal with it.
- Provide templates for structure and scaffolding tasks.
- Present tasks that can be done in different formats, for example electronic, pictures or words.



### Staying safe

- Understand the vulnerability and risk of exploitation for girls with autism due to their lack of understanding of inference.
- Explicitly teach how to be safe in and out of school.
- Listen to them without judgement and provide a safe reflective space.
- Set clear, firm and consistent boundaries.
- Through questioning, establish what the learner already knows and identify the gaps and misconceptions.
- Build effective respectful relationships and explicitly teach about self-esteem, self-advocacy and the right to say 'no'.



### Social development and emotional wellbeing

- Help learners to develop socially acceptable ways to respond to situations.
- Use a social language program to navigate social rules, with peer mentoring schemes for friendship and bullying issues.
- Work with families to provide opportunities for girls' social understanding, skills and knowledge to be transferred across different environments.