

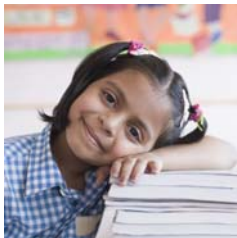



Children's National: CASD CHAT

Girls with ASD: Understudied, misunderstood and under-identified?

The Centers for Disease Control reports that [1 in 68 8-year-old children have an autism spectrum disorder \(ASD\)](#). As we all know, more boys than girls have ASD. Generally, ASD is diagnosed four times more frequently in boys than girls, but when you narrow it down to children with ASD who don't have intellectual disability, that imbalance skyrockets, and the male:female ratio increases to about 10:1. There are probably biological reasons for the fact that more boys than girls have ASD, but we don't yet understand them, partly because there are still very few studies focusing on girls. Several recent studies that do compare girls and boys with ASD point to one disturbing contributor to the sex differences in ASD diagnosis: under-identification of girls with ASD.

Rachel Hiller and her colleagues have just published a paper on some **reasons why girls with ASD slip under the radar**:

- ***Girls with ASD are less likely to have an obvious obsessive interest than boys.***
- ***Girls have better social skills in key areas that mean that they "pass" more easily*** than boys.  Girls can combine talking with nonverbal cues like eye contact better and are better at having a reciprocal conversation than boys. This finding fits with the report of young women with ASD, who talk about "passing" for years before being diagnosed, and how exhausting it was. Because they do have problems with other social skills, girls are better at initiating, but not maintaining friendships, than boys.
- Related to those findings, research from Connie Kasari's group shows that ***boys with ASD are more overtly socially excluded compared to girls with ASD, who seemed to be overlooked, rather than rejected.***
- ***Teachers appear to be less aware of the problems girls with ASD have at school*** and so report fewer problems than they do in boys. It seems that girls can get by better in large social settings, and so they can "hide" some of their problems more easily at school than boys can. 

The fact that they are not all getting diagnosed with ASD, doesn't mean that these girls aren't struggling. In fact, one other recent study found that unlike boys with ASD, girls with ASD have increasing conduct problems as they get older.

Two take-home messages:

1. **If you think your daughter may have ASD be sure to push hard for a careful assessment from an expert in ASD.** Because girls with ASD may present with a surface-level 'look' different from the 'classic' presentation of ASD, they get diagnosed later, according to at least one study, even when there is no difference in (a) the number of professionals the parents visited and (b) the child's age when the parents first expressed concern.
2. **If your daughter has ASD, she can make a major contribution by participating in research on girls.** For example, through our collaboration at NIH, we are studying the



behavior and brains of girls with ASD without intellectual disability who are 10 years or older. We are interested in seeing how behavior and brain structure and function differ between girls and boys with ASD and between girls with ASD and typically developing girls. We will use behavior rating scales, paper and pencil tests, and brain imaging (MRI) to accomplish this goal. As part of this study we

administer gold standard autism diagnostic measures and can write a brief report on the findings. **For more information on this study, call Emily White at the [Laboratory of Brain and Cognition](#) at NIH 301-435-4928.**

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