

Girls are better at masking autism than boys

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Credit: Leiden University

Girls with autism have relatively good social skills, which means that their autism is often not recognised. Autism manifests itself in girls differently from in boys. Psychologist Carolien Rieffe and colleagues from the Autism Centre and INTER-PSY (Groningen) report their findings in scientific journal *Autism*.

Information about [autism](#) in [girls](#) is scarce. What we know about autism is mainly based on research among boys and men. That can be a problem, says Leiden Professor of Development Psychology Rieffe: 'If we take the clinical picture for boys with autism as the standard, there's a good chance that autism in girls won't be picked up.' To change this, Rieffe and her colleagues examined how autism manifests itself in girls.

Study among teenagers

The researchers analysed the behaviour of 68 teenagers, girls and boys, both with and without autism. As part of the test, the researcher pretended to have caught her finger in the ringbinder of a file, and exclaimed: 'Ow, that hurt,' while shaking her hand in pain. Two fellow researchers looked at the video afterwards to assess how empathically the participants had reacted.

Empathising with emotion or resolving the problem

Girls, whether or not they suffer from autism, reacted with more empathy than boys. Riefe explains: 'We didn't find any differences between the participants with or without autism. But we did see a qualitative difference between girls and boys. The girls more often responded to the emotion of the person conducting the test with questions such as: 'Are you OK?' The boys, on the other hand, looked for a solution to the problem: 'If you do it like this, you won't trap your finger.'

Empathising with or properly understanding love problems

Riefe adds that neither boys nor girls have difficulty empathising with the emotions of another person. However, the ability to understand why the person feels as they do is often lacking in both girls and boys with autism. This is why it is more difficult for young autism sufferers to react with empathy to such situations as love problems or conflict situations with parents or peers, all of which are topics that young people spend a lot of their time talking about.

Focusing on the request for help

What do the outcomes of the research mean in practice for the care provider? According to Rieffe and her co-authors, girls with autism have the big advantage that they have a good understanding of many of the social rules. Nonetheless, their care providers should not be misled by this, because it does not necessarily indicate a strong capacity for empathy or the skills to actually be able to form good social relations and friendships. So does this mean that these girls still find themselves more socially isolated? It is important when treating girls with autism to look at what their specific needs are. This may call for a different approach and strategy than for boys with autism.

Provided by Leiden University

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