(Mis)diagnosis: The Challenges of Diagnosing Autism in Girls
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For autistic girls, the process of diagnosis is often one of the most significant challenges encountered on their journey. Research suggests that up to 39 percent more girls should be diagnosed with autism[i], a staggering figure that highlights the need for a better understanding of how this condition manifests in autistic girls. This begs the question, why aren't more girls being diagnosed?

Diagnostic Bias

In general, autism in girls presents differently than it does in boys, which has created a pervasive diagnostic bias for clinicians and this bias is also present in the testing measures they use to evaluate symptoms. Traditional diagnostic criteria for autism were historically developed based on observations of more male individuals.[ii] These biases can result in missing or underestimating the presentation of autism in girls, as they may exhibit different social and communication patterns.

Clinicians themselves may carry biases about the gender distribution of autism, leading to an underestimation of its prevalence in girls. This bias can result in overlooking or misinterpreting autism-related traits in girls.

When exploring a potential autism diagnosis with your clinician, it's important to be aware of the common mistakes that can be made while assessing for autism, including:

- Relying too much on a single measure
- Forgetting to get the subjective experience from the child and/or caregiver
- Not conducting an in-depth interview
- Not requesting historical information (i.e. Report cards, prior assessments)
- Making assumptions based on social capabilities[iii]

Don't hesitate to follow up with your clinician if you have concerns about any of the diagnostic issues mentioned above.

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Why are autistic girls so often missed?

It's important to note that autism is a spectrum, and no two individuals present with the exact same symptomology, that said, there are certain autism traits that are more common in autistic females and can make a diagnosis more difficult to attain.

1. **Camouflaging**

Autistic girls may be more skilled at camouflaging their social difficulties by imitating neurotypical behaviours, leading to better social adaptation.[iv] This camouflaging can make it challenging for clinicians to identify autism, especially when focusing on observable behaviours.

2. **Social Mimicry**

Girls with autism may engage in social mimicry, imitating their peers' social behaviours to better fit in. While this adaptation helps them navigate social situations, it can mask their inherent challenges in social communication and make their difficulties less noticeable.[v]

3. **Special Interests and Play Patterns**

The nature of girls' special interests and play patterns may differ from stereotypical expectations of autistic interests. Girls may develop intense interests that align more closely with typical interests for their gender (e.g. unicorns, animals, reading), leading to their interests being overlooked as signs of autism during assessment.[vi]

4. **Language and Communication Differences**

Autistic girls may exhibit more advanced language skills compared to boys with autism, making it less apparent that they struggle with social communication.[vii] Their stronger ability to express themselves verbally can mask underlying social and pragmatic communication challenges.

5. **Co-occurring Conditions**

Autistic girls often have co-occurring conditions, such as anxiety or depression, which may overshadow the core features of autism.[viii] Clinicians may focus on addressing the secondary conditions rather than considering autism as an underlying factor.

6. **Internalizing Symptoms**

Girls with autism may be more prone to internalizing symptoms, such as withdrawal or anxiety, rather than exhibiting externalizing behaviors typically associated with boys with autism. This internalization can lead to a less visible presentation.[ix]

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How does autism look different in girls?

Social Interaction:
- May appear more social but struggle with understanding social hierarchy.
- May be on the peripheries of friendship groups or have intense but volatile friendships.

Anxiety and Coping:
- May experience high levels of anxiety at school, often masked, resulting in distressed behaviours at home.
- May employ various techniques to compensate and hide difficulties from teachers and staff.

Transitions:
- May struggle more with transitions and unstructured times, such as break or lunch periods.

Communication:
- May rehearse social situations
- May copy or mimic others during social interactions
- May use scripting, like 'cutting and pasting' lines from TV, movies, or other people in conversation

Empathy and Emotional Expression:
- May experience intense empathy, including towards animals.
- May seem emotionally and socially younger than peers.
- Express strong opinions when not masking and may be difficult to convince they are wrong.

Imagination and Behaviours:
- May display a vivid imagination, developing elaborate fantasy worlds or escaping into fiction.
- May enjoy collecting things rather than playing with them.
- May exhibit perfectionist tendencies.
- Stimming behaviours may be less noticeable, they may be small movements or internalized.

Adolescent Challenges:
- May find coping with adolescent years, including sexuality, relationships, and puberty, more difficult than autistic boys and non-autistic teenagers.

Enhancing awareness and understanding of the unique presentation of autism in girls is vital for timely and accurate diagnoses. Knowledge sharing plays a pivotal role in dispelling misconceptions, reducing diagnostic bias, and ensuring that autistic girls receive the support and interventions they need. By fostering a more inclusive and informed approach, we can collectively contribute to better outcomes for all.

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