

The Research Files Episode 48: Autism and navigating friendships

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Hello and thank you for downloading this podcast from Teacher magazine, I'm Rebecca Vukovic.

A new study that examines the gender differences in the friendships and conflicts of both girls and boys with autism, relative to their neurotypical peers, has found that girls with autism have significantly more social challenges and they find it harder to manage conflict successfully. [The study](#) was led by Dr Felicity Sedgewick who we'll hear from later in this episode. She conducted this research for her PhD studies and the full report is published in the journal titled Autism. My first guest today though is Felicity's PhD supervisor and Senior Researcher on the project, Dr Liz Pellicano. Dr Pellicano is a Professor of Educational Studies at Macquarie University, and here, I ask her to share what the motivation was for conducting this research in the first place.

Liz Pellicano: There were two reasons really, why Felicity, an educational psychologist Vivian Hill and I were keen to conduct this research. So when we started out, which was probably about three or four years ago now, it was just being noticed that many girls and women (being noticed at least by researchers) might be being misdiagnosed or missing out on a diagnosis of autism altogether because diagnostic criteria are fundamentally biased towards boys and men. So autism is often viewed as a male condition and the criteria used to diagnose children, young people and adults are drawn predominantly from research and clinical practice with boys. So there was and there still is much interest in trying to understand the different ways that autism might manifest in women and girls. That was the first reason.

The second reason was each of us researchers had heard the firsthand experiences of autistic girls and women. And when these girls and women talked to us about their friendships and their social relationships, they seemed to be really different to the kinds of friendships described by autistic boys and men. And so we were really keen to do some research to identify whether this might indeed be the case.

RV: What were some of the questions you were seeking answers to?

LP: So in essence we were interested to understand young autistic peoples' experiences of their friendships and their social relationships. And to begin, we wanted to get a sense of how young autistic people perceived their friendships. That is, how they felt about their friends, what being a friend meant to them, and also how those perceptions and experiences might be different from non-autistic young people.

And next, we wanted to know whether the young person's gender made a difference to their responses. That is, whether the girls tend to report a different perception and experiences of their social relationships from the boys. And this latter point is quite important because we know from work in typical development, that girls generally have different friendship experiences than boys. So girls often develop close friendships based around emotional sharing, talking together, while boys tend to have friendships that revolve around doing things – playing games, playing football for example – rather than talking about their feelings. And these patterns might well be caused by different patterns of socialisation during childhood. We expect girls to be more in touch with their emotions and to be more talkative and so we, as parents and teachers, tend to emphasise girls' verbal skills more than we do for boys. And so we were interested to find out whether we would see similar differences between the autistic girls and boys that we generally see non-autistic girls and boys.

And finally, one more thing, we were interested also in the extent and nature of the conflicts within young people's friendships. This was interesting because all of the autism literature thus far had concentrated on bullying – which unfortunately many young autistic people suffer from – but almost no studies had looked at the kind of inevitable conflicts that can occur between friends. So the kind of minor disagreements you might have during your friendships. And we were interested in how young autistic people might manage that

conflict, so that was our final question for this research project.

RV: Now Liz, could you give me a sense of who the participants were in this study?

LP: After amazing efforts on Felicity's part, we managed to see over 100 adolescents – 102 – and there were 27 autistic girls, 26 autistic boys, 26 non-autistic girls and 23 non-autistic boys. All of them were aged between 11 and 18 years, and they were all considered to be cognitively or intellectually able, in that they had their IQ scores in at least the average range.

RV: Where was the study conducted?

LP: This study was conducted in the UK, most of the young people came from areas around London. Although, given that so few autistic girls are diagnosed (at least relative to boys) Felicity had to travel far and wide to see autistic girls and young women in particular. ... We managed to see quite a few autistic girls in the end but it took a long time to recruit them.

RV: And I understand this was a mixed-methods study. What were the various methods you used to conduct this research?

LP: We used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods to try and get a fuller picture of young people's friendships and relationships, and the types of conflict that they might experience within those relationships. In terms of quantitative methods, we used questionnaires that the young people themselves completed, to try and tap their perceptions of 'close' friendships or 'best' friendships, as well as their experiences of overt or explicit conflicts, like, for example, when someone might threaten to hurt you or beat you up. And their experiences of relational or more implicit conflicts, like when someone, for example, deliberately leaves you out of conversations or activities. So we used questionnaires to tap those kinds of constructs.

And then we also used semi-structured interviews – essentially conversations with young people – in order to illicit in depth young people's views on their experiences and their potential social difficulties, as well as how these difficulties and experiences might impact on their everyday life.

RV: Finally then Liz, in what ways does this research contribute to the body of research already conducted in this area?

LP: So the research literature on autistic girls and women is really only just beginning. This study was contributing to our currently very little knowledge of this area. In particular, very few studies have directly compared autistic boys and girls to non-autistic boys and girls, all in the same study. So there are a few studies now, particularly qualitative studies, looking particularly just at autistic girls or comparing autistic girls and non-autistic girls. But we wanted to have all four groups – autistic girls, non-autistic girls, autistic boys, non-autistic boys – all in the same study, particularly to look at those potential patterns of gender differences that I described earlier. And no study had actually previously looked at young people's reports of conflicts in their relationships. This was something that was certainly unique to our study.

That was Dr Liz Pellicano, Professor of Educational Studies at Macquarie University. My next guest is Dr Felicity Sedgewick who was lead researcher on this project. She joins me today to talk more about the results of this study, and the implications they may have for both teachers and school leaders. Dr Sedgewick conducted this research as part of her PhD studies at University College London, in the UK.

RV: So Felicity, let's talk about the results for girls first. During the semi-structured interviews, you identified nine themes in the girls' responses and grouped them into three broader themes: the nature of social networks, conflict experiences and wanting to fit in. Could you talk me through those findings?

Felicity Sedgewick: The overarching themes were interesting because often autistic and non-autistic girls talked about very similar things but in very different ways. So, for example, on the nature of their social networks, all girls talked about having best friends but autistic girls tended to just have one or two best friends, whereas non-autistic girls said they had maybe four or five best friends. And importantly, non-autistic girls also had a wider social group of friends who they spent time with, which the autistic girls generally didn't. Autistic girls instead tended to focus all of their social energy and all their friendship on one or two best friends because they found it much easier to manage the social demands of friendship with just one or two people, rather than trying to do all of that friendship work with a wider group.

And so something else that was really important on the nature of social networks was that all the girls talked

about their friends as people who are there for you, so giving you emotional support and social support, they were people you could talk to about your problems and that was the same, regardless of whether they were autistic or not. In terms of the conflict experiences, again autistic and non-autistic girls were very similar in terms of the types of conflicts they were experiencing. This was something which was called 'relational conflict' which is the type of aggression that you typically associate with girls – it's gossiping about people, or giving someone the silent treatment, being very sarcastic about them – so it's all very subtle, social aggression, rather than the more overt bullying that we tend to think of.

Those behaviours were something that all girls were experiencing and having directed at them sometimes but it was much worse for autistic girls who were being victims much more often and who found it much harder to understand and to navigate. They also handled conflicts very differently, both with their peers and with their best friends. So, non-autistic girls tend to talk to whoever they have the problem with and try to sort things out. Autistic girls, in contrast, tended to take a very all or nothing approach to sorting out ... or trying to handle conflict. So, they would either assume that everything was their fault and they would do everything they could think of to make the other person like them again. Or they would totally withdraw from the friendship because they thought it was totally unresolvable, the person was going to hate them forever. And obviously both of those have the potential to leave an autistic girl quite vulnerable, either to being manipulated or being very isolated – neither of which are good outcomes.

And that tied into the final theme of wanting to fit in. So it's this growing research on something called 'camouflaging' in autism, particularly in autistic girls and women, which is the idea that they maybe try to camouflage or mask their autistic behaviours to try and fit in with wider society and be more accepted. That was something we did see in the autistic girls and particularly in how they might try and do friendships and sort of try and perform being what they think a stereotypical friend is. But, it's worth pointing out that non-autistic girls do this to a degree as well and talked about doing things simply so they fitted in and liked by everybody else. So it might be that some social behaviours are autism-specific camouflaging but we need to look into where the line between camouflaging and teenagers who want to be like everybody else kind of lies.

RV: Really interesting. And now Felicity, let's move onto the results for boys because you identified four themes. Could you explain what each of those were?

FS: So the themes for boys echoed those for the girls in quite a lot of ways, although their answers were very different to the girls. So the four themes were friends are people you do things with and friends are people who do things for you. And then in terms of conflict it was about taking things too far and then again, conflict resolution strategies. So, overall, non-autistic boys talked about having a best friend or a couple of best friends and a wider group – such as the boys they play football with at lunchtime and things like that, so quite a large, wider group. But autistic boys tended to have fewer friends, generally, and were more likely to say that they didn't have a best friend at all. Although, what I will point out is that several of those autistic boys were not particularly upset by that fact. They were doing the friendships they wanted to, regardless of how it looks from the outside. What was interesting was that boys all talked about their friends as people they 'did' things with – like gaming, hanging out, playing football – rather than people they talked to about their emotions like the girls did. They also talked about the support from their friends being much more practical – so friends are people who do things for you, things like help with homework. Rather than listening to problems and lots of conversations – which is what the girls valued. And that was for both autistic and non-autistic boys.

In terms of conflict, the boys were very different to the girls, although autistic and non-autistic boys were very similar to each other. So the type of conflict they got into was very different, it was that overt conflict that I mentioned. Things like shouting at each other, losing your temper, being chased, name calling – those kinds of bullying behaviours. When boys came into conflict with their friends, it tended to be losing their temper in response to people taking a joke too far or taking teasing too far, rather than the sort of social aggression that girls were experiencing. So what was interesting as well was that because that sort of joking going wrong, it's a very different type of conflict, it was resolved very differently by the boys. They tended to just give each other time to calm down and then apologise, and then gave the impression that they'd moved on. They said 'sorry', they'd got over it. The longest any of the boys ever talked about holding a grudge was a boy who's friend had blown up his building in Minecraft, waited long enough so that he could blow up his friend's building in Minecraft, and then they got back together and built like a new building. So their conflicts could arise much more quickly but also were resolved much more quickly than the girls.

RV: For teachers listening to this podcast, what could they do in their own classrooms to better support girls with autism to effectively navigate the social expectations placed upon them?

FS: I think it's important to emphasise that we shouldn't push our ideas of friendship onto autistic girls. Most of the girls were finding the close friendships which work for them – and so even if they have fewer friends

than the other girls, it's important for teachers to check that the autistic girl is happy with her friendships before assuming that there's a problem. In terms of the conflict issues that autistic girls are facing, I think looking out for sudden changes in their friendships can be key because the rapid shifts in friendships, which are very typical of adolescents, are what are particularly difficult for autistic girls to navigate. And so if an autistic girl in your classroom is suddenly isn't speaking to or spending time with her friend, trying to find out what's going on and possibly trying to act as a mediator to try and balance out the 'all or nothing' approach I talked about before.

In terms of wider social expectations, these are a real challenge for autistic girls because they're judged by the same standard as non-autistic girls because you can't see whether someone is autistic and so people look at an autistic girl and assume that she has the same understanding and processing of social situations as everybody else might do, and then is judged more harshly for not necessarily living up to those expectations. So something a participant did with me, which I thought was really good, was respond to difficult questions with 'I'm buffering', when she needed more time to process what was going on. And I think making things like that normal and acceptable in your classroom can be a really easy support mechanism because it gives those young people time and the opportunity to show that they are thinking about what you said and they are going to respond – they haven't misunderstood, they're not ignoring you – but it gives them time to process what you've said, what they want to say back, find the words and say them. Whereas, if you assume that they've misheard or they've not got it [and] you ask the question again, you essentially restart that processing and so everybody gets a bit more anxious and wound up and that makes everything much more difficult as well. So putting in some very simple strategies can be really effective and encouraging the children and young people to use them with each other as well creates the space for that to be a very normal interaction as well.

RV: And what about for school leaders – are there any strategies that they could employ at a whole school level to better support students, both with autism and those who are neurotypical, with navigating their friendships?

FS: I think for school leaders, making the help that's available really clear is important. For example, we often say 'tell a teacher if you're being bullied or having a problem'. If an autistic young person (or any young person) doesn't know how that's actually going to help, what's actually going to happen, it can be easy for them to assume that it's just going to make things worse and so they won't say anything. Obviously, most teachers are already on the lookout for children who are obviously struggling, but in terms of autistic girls, knowing that or being aware that they may not show their difficulties in the same way is important.

Autistic girls are much more likely to become very shy and quiet, and they'll often maintain their academic performance. So, they become seen as 'the hard working quiet girl at the back of the classroom' and people stop paying so much attention to whether they're doing well in the other areas of their life, like their friendships. So it's often worth checking in with those children, especially in adolescence when the rules of how we do friendships change hugely from childhood, when it's about playing together, to adolescence when it becomes much more complicated. So I think checking in particularly at those transition times is really key. Navigating friendships is difficult for everyone but especially in adolescence, but it's especially challenging for those autistic young people who might struggle to understand those changing social rules.

That's all for this episode. If you're keen to find out more about this research, you'll find links to the full study in the transcript for this podcast, which is available at teachermagazine.com.au. To keep listening or to download all of our podcasts for free, whether it's more on The Research Files or our series on Behaviour Management, School Improvement, Teaching Methods, Global Education or Action Research, just visit acer.ac/teacheritunes or soundcloud.com/teacher-ACER.

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References:

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