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# Supporting and developing friendships for women on the spectrum



# What do we know?

- Most research on friendship in autism focusses on males
- Gender differences in neurotypicals – women talk more, are emotionally supportive, tend to have a few close friends
- Women engage in socially subtle aggression – ‘relational conflict’

Does this generalize?

# Autism and friendship: gender differences

- Greater social motivation
- Greater language development
- More friends, 'social butterfly effect'
- Different friendship patterns – younger/older, parallel play, recreating stories, more included/ignored

# Friendships in adolescence

- Autistic girls have similar friendship strength to neurotypical girls
- Autistic girls respond to conflict differently to neurotypical girls
- Autistic girls appear to have qualitatively different friendships to autistic boys
- According to autistic girls and their parents, they are not being supported in forming and maintaining positive peer relationships

## So, adults...

If autistic girls are similar to neurotypical girls, but with more challenges, what happens as they grow up?

- Autistic women are likely to...
- be in long-term romantic relationships
- say they have friends
- have had problems with the social aspect of employment
- have experienced a wide range of social difficulties

# Friendships and relationships of autistic women

My research found that:

- AS women are similarly likely to have a best friend or romantic partner, and are similarly close to these people
- Fewer, more intense relationships
- Similar types of conflict to NT and adolescence – difference is management
- Some major difficulties with romantic relationships
- Increased self-assurance and self-esteem

# How do we support this?

- Safety: crucial
- Making friends: can be difficult for anyone: use interests, online community,
- Keeping friends: be open about expectations, preferred contact, understand life happens
- Fixing things: honest appraisal, talk(!), negotiate solutions...but also, know when to stand ground

# Conclusions

- Autistic girls have which are like those of NT girls, different to boys
- Autistic women also have relationships like those of NT women in many ways
- But both autistic girls and women are more vulnerable
- Friendships can be difficult, and take work to make and maintain, but most autistic women want and value them
- Supporting autistic girls and women in their friendships is key – but focus on helping with relationships \*they\* want, not \*should\* have

# Thank you for listening

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