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Joanna Tsirgiotis and Dr Clemence Due

**Friendship experiences of girls with  
high-functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder:  
Parents' and teachers' perspectives**

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# Acknowledgements

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## Background

Extensive literature examines the experiences of children with ASD, however studies typically include small samples of girls or exclude them entirely, despite the fact that one in five individuals diagnosed with ASD is female (Fombonne, 2003). This is problematic because recent literature suggests that boys and girls with ASD may present with ASD characteristics that differ in nature, severity and manifestation (Giarelli et al., 2010). Knowledge specifically pertaining to the experiences of girls with ASD, rather than generalising across genders, is important for an accurate understanding of the diagnosis and appropriate interventions related to ASD. As Thompson and colleagues reflect, “most of what we believe we know about autism is actually about males with autism” (2003, p. 351).

Many children with ASD experience challenges related to social interaction and developing friendships. Particular challenges faced by children with ASD surrounding friendships include difficulty interpreting social cues, interacting appropriately, regulating emotion and behaviour, and being subjected to exclusion and bullying by their peers (Cappadocia, Weiss, & Pepler, 2012). Moreover, girls with ASD may have different experiences with friendships because of the nature of neurotypical girls' friendships, which often involve high levels of intimacy, and emphasise conversation and reciprocity (Dean et al., 2014).

**This study therefore aimed to add to the limited empirical knowledge in this area by investigating the friendship experiences of primary school age girls with high-functioning ASD.**

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## Method

The University of Adelaide's School Of Psychology Ethics subcommittee approved the study in April 2016 (16/18). After participants provided informed consent, 14 participants (8 parents and 6 primary school teachers of primary school age girls with high-functioning ASD) were interviewed. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the interview data. Analysis involved the comparison of perspectives of perspectives of parent and teacher participants.

## Results

Analysis returned the following themes in relation to the nature of friendships in girls with high-functioning ASD (HFASD):

1. Friendships are crucial for the emotional wellbeing and social development of girls with HFASD
  - a. Friendships are often desperately desired by girls with HFASD, but may be influenced by individual characteristics.*
2. Forming friendships may be easier than maintaining them
3. Girls with HFASD may gravitate towards children with certain characteristics
  - a. This may be with other challenges (including ASD), siblings of children with ASD, or particularly mature and empathetic children;*
  - b. One 'intensive friendship' or friendship fixation may develop.*
4. Girls with HFASD may prefer relationships with adults, or with younger or older children
  - a. Adults: 'make allowances', 'are more predictable' and allow the child to dominate conversation;*
  - b. Younger children: allow for maturity-matched play and allow the girl with HFASD to dominate/control play;*
  - c. Older children: guide play and protect from bullying.*

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5. Gender norms may influence the nature of friendships in girls with HFASD
    - a. Typical 'girly' activities (e.g. gossip and role playing games) may make interaction harder for girls than boys with HFASD (less intimate activities e.g. sport are more common);*
    - b. It may be more difficult for girls to overcome conflict;*
    - c. Girls with HFASD may have stronger motivation to be social than boys with HFASD.*
  6. Girls with HFASD may have distinct notions of friendship that may be different to notions of friendship of neurotypical girls
    - a. May overestimate their closeness with peers;*
    - b. May be content with low-intimacy relationships.*

The following themes were identified in relation to barriers and facilitators for friendships for girls with HFASD:

**Barriers:**

1. Anxiety-related challenges (in general and specific to social interaction) may act as obstacles to friendship formation and maintenance
2. Fixed and restricted interests may alienate peers
  - a. These may bore peers;*
  - b. These may be inconsistent with the developmental age of peers.*
3. Difficulties relating to understanding social interaction may present challenges
  - a. Girls with HFASD may lack understanding of social rules and conventions;*
  - b. They may struggle to transfer social lessons to the schoolyard.*
4. Bullying may be a problematic and common occurrence
  - a. Girls with HFASD may be bullied by their peers;*

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*b. Or perpetrate 'bullying' behaviour toward other children (but with little knowledge of the harmful effects).*

5. Demands upon neurotypical peers may exacerbate challenges

*a. They may struggle to understand the thoughts and behaviours of girls with HFASD;*

*b. They may struggle due to relationship asymmetry (with respect to social support).*

### **Facilitators:**

1. Characteristics of girls with HFASD may assist in developing and maintaining friendships

*a. Personality characteristics may assist in the formation and maintenance of friendship;*

*b. Skills and abilities may also contribute to this.*

2. Mimicking of appropriate social behaviour may disguise HFASD characteristics and facilitate friendship

3. A supportive, inclusive and accepting environment may be crucial for friendship formation and maintenance in girls with HFASD

*a. School culture is essential in whether girls with HFASD will form friendships;*

*b. Parental and teacher support for the development of social skills is critical.*

## **Conclusion**

Friendships are desired by girls with HFASD, but constitute a difficult area. Therefore they must be fostered and supported. There is a need to encourage same-age friendships (e.g. for negotiating developmental milestones), and girls with HFASD may require more support in maintaining friendships than forming them. Neurotypical friends may require also require support in maintaining friendships with girls with HFASD.

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Finally, the study also supports theories suggesting that girls with HFASD may present differently to boys, including: more trouble with anxiety; apparently better social skills, and; less obviously atypical interests.

## Contact

If you would like any further information, please contact Joanna or Clemence.

Joanna Tsirgiotis:

[joanna.tsirgiotis@gmail.com](mailto:joanna.tsirgiotis@gmail.com)

Dr Clemence Due:

[clemence.due@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:clemence.due@adelaide.edu.au)

08 8313 6096

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