

‘It’s different for girls’: Gender differences in the friendships and conflict of autistic and neurotypical adolescents

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In this research, we looked at the friendships (and difficulties with friendships) of autistic girls and compared these to autistic boys, neurotypical girls, and neurotypical boys. Over 100 adolescents took part (27 autistic girls, 26 autistic boys, 26 neurotypical girls, 23 neurotypical boys), aged between 11 and 18 years old. They completed the Friendship Qualities Scale (FQS), which looks at a specific best-friendship; the Revised Peer Experiences Questionnaire (RPEQ), which looks at bullying and being socially excluded; and they were interviewed about their friendships. Overall, we found that in many ways, the friendships and social experiences of autistic girls are similar to those of neurotypical girls – they have best friends, they do similar things with their friends, and friendship is just as important to both groups. Autistic girls, however, have significantly more social challenges than their neurotypical peers, experiencing more conflict, and finding that conflict harder to manage successfully. These experiences were distinct from those of autistic boys, who had their own unique friendship patterns. Regardless of whether participants were autistic, however, there were consistent gender differences in the type of conflict they experienced, with boys being involved in direct aggression (traditional bullying, like being chased or threatened) and girls being involved in relational or social aggression (things like being gossiped about or left out). These findings suggest that gender, rather than diagnosis per se, plays a critical role in the way that autistic adolescents perceive and experience their social relationships.