

# Preparing to fly - fleeing or soaring?

how do we ensure that autistic girls access the education to which they are entitled? how do we enable and equip them on their journey to adulthood?



National Autistic Society Women and Girls Conference  
Dr Catriona Stewart London 2018

## Getting it right for every child GIRFEC

“...is the Scottish government's approach to making a positive difference for all children and young people in Scotland. Its principles help shape all **policy**, practice and **legislation** that affects children and their families.



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## Curriculum for Excellence

### Building the Curriculum 3: A Framework for Learning and Teaching: Key Ideas and Priorities

The purpose of the curriculum, planned on this basis, is to make sure that learners acquire the four capacities of *Curriculum for Excellence* to be:

- successful learners
- confident individuals
- effective contributors
- responsible citizens



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## **Included, Engaged and Involved Part 2:**

A Positive Approach to Preventing and Managing School Exclusions (2017)

“There can be no greater responsibility than working to improve the life chances of all our children and young people”

John Swinney MSP Cabinet Secretary for Education



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## **“Not Included, Not Engaged and Not Involved” 2018**

“We strongly believe that the experiences of autistic children who are missing out on their education should be seen as a priority for action for those in positions to make positive changes and ensure these children’s rights are fulfilled”

Scottish Autism, National Autistic Society Scotland, Children in Scotland



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## “Not Included, Not Engaged and Not Involved” 2018

SWAN: from girls and parents, and narratives of adult women of their school experiences, this picture, of ‘informal’ (illegal) exclusion, is often described



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## where can we be what we are?

Stewart C 2012 Where can we be what we are? Good Autism Practice 13 (1) May 2012 Birmingham: BILD



'Home' defined by Van Manen as 'where we can be what we are'



where can we be what we are?\*

not really anywhere



## SWANS\*

appearing to glide across the surface of life -  
paddling furiously underneath

at 8/9 years?

\* Pete Ludlow 2005



## SWANS\*

appearing to glide across the surface of life -  
paddling furiously underneath

at what cost?

\* Pete Ludlow 2005



## girls

- expected to 'fit in' with the mainstream
- constantly challenged to meet other people's expectations
- constantly 'failing' (in their own terms)
- are constantly trying to improve their 'performance'



## school

- school environment : physical, sensory, cultural
- noise, chaos, lack of discipline, lack of clarity of language
- targeted for being 'swotty'
- targeted for not 'fitting in', being 'weird' (by teachers as well as students)



girls are:

- u expected to to have higher levels of social awareness
- u socialised to adopt caring, nurturing roles
- u expected to be more 'other focussed' than self-assertive
- u discouraged from building assertive, leadership qualities



girls are:

- u expected to focus on appearance, social inclusion, 'romance'
- u friendships are high priority
- u subject and interest choices highly gendered



## school environment

“The school environment, from the classroom setting to the common social areas, the corridors and stairs and the dining rooms, often cause high levels of stress and anxiety, inhibiting the girls’ abilities to function comfortably and leading to somatic symptoms”

(Stewart 2011,12)



## bullying

“Girls with AS experience intolerance and marginalisation in the mainstream school setting.” (Stewart 2011, 12)

**Bullying is generic, the form it takes is often gendered.**



## issues around gender identity

- girls may prefer male friends/companions
- they may have difficulties accepting their body's transitions
- they may have difficulties feeling that they 'fit in' to what is expected of them as girls



## issues around gender identity

- autistic adult women often report having felt judged or marginalised through manifesting 'unfeminine' traits and of having questioned their gender id
- some girls may feel they are in the wrong body or that they have no gender id at all



## anxiety

- social differences - the effort of cognitively (as opposed to intuitively) processing and de-coding every social exchange depletes resources
- sensory perceptual differences (within the school environment): overwhelming, bewildering
- organisational challenges ie executive functioning theory in practice

**anxiety levels usually chronically elevated**, significantly affecting ability to function, affecting core identity, self-esteem, mental health





## swans

appearing to glide across the surface of life  
but frantically paddling underneath just to stay afloat...

*anxiety; being overwhelmed; exhaustion  
withdrawal loneliness,  
depression*



## swans

appearing to glide across the surface of life  
but frantically paddling underneath just to stay afloat...

*high risk behaviours; self harm,  
school refusal; Anorexia nervosa?  
gender id issues?  
suicide*

## gender bias

- some clinicians still unaware of females, presentation, challenges and needs
- autism previously/currently believed more common in males than females: male to female ratio of 4.3:1 = most research has involved males (current thinking varies widely)



## why?

- masking and masquerading?
- alternative female autism phenotype?
- inappropriate assessment tools?



## why?

- masking and masquerading?
- alternative female autism phenotype?
- inappropriate assessment tools?
- girls and boys have access to different social survival strategies (Attwood)?
- society places different expectations on girls and boys?
- children learn at a very young age what those gender expectations are?



## consequences

- exhaustion, internalised responses, poor self-identity, mental health and life choice issues (Stewart 2012, 2016)



## girls grow up

- relationships
- sexual health and safety
- further/higher education
- employment



## girls grow up

- health and wellbeing including mental health
- employment
- pregnancy and maternity
- ageing



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what do we do about it?



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identify +



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identify +

SUPPORT AND ENABLE AUTISTIC GIRLS TO BE WHAT THEY ARE



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identify +

SUPPORT AND ENABLE AUTISTIC GIRLS TO BE WHAT THEY ARE

Getting it Right for Every Child - Curriculum for Excellence

- confident individuals
- effective contributors
- responsible citizens
- successful learners



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identify +

SUPPORT AND ENABLE AUTISTIC GIRLS TO BE WHAT THEY ARE:

THEMSELVES



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identify +

## Basic accommodations for autistic pupils:

easy to read school campus maps everywhere

less horrible school bells (do you actually need them at all?)

safe quiet places for girls to go

reduce artificial lighting - you'll find it's a pleasanter environment all round

concrete clear language used - keep autistic pupils in mind

etc etc





identify +

- positive narratives of autism
- role models
- develop a positive sense of self, robust self-esteem
- tools for survival and self fulfilment





identify +

- positive narratives of autism
  - language
  - being aware of challenges, acknowledging them in a supportive , accommodating context
  - focussing on strengths and abilities
  - **promoting a genuine school culture of inclusion and diversity**





identify +

- role models
  - autistic women
  - women who have moulded their own identities
  - authors, scientists, artists, actors, TV presenters...
  - autistic mothers





identify +

- role models
- <https://sa-ilearn.org/login/index.php>





identify +

- peer support
  - SWAN: Under Our Wing peer-mentoring project
  - SWAN Young Swans meet-ups





identify +

- build skills and confidence
  - focus on interests
  - focus on abilities - what they can do not what they can't
  - stretch and challenge
  - make it safe for them to fall and fail





identify +

- tools for survival and self fulfilment
  - focus on their interests
  - make it safe for them to fall and fail
  - assertiveness training
  - martial arts training?
  - tablets and apps





identify +

- teach girls about their autism and about their individual autism
  - focus on their interests and specific assets
  - positive language
  - person-centred
  - autistic-led



# Under Our Wing Mentoring Programme

autistic led peer support and empowerment



## Executive Functioning: Practical strategies

Knowing about, understanding and accepting these areas of challenge support executive Function challenges and can be empowering.

- u use of memory prompts (calendar, phone, tablet, notebook, diary, pc)
- u compiling lists
- u mindfulness
- u learning to recognise physiological indicators of emotional change.
- u learning about autistic inertia, procrastination and other diversionary techniques adopted



## autism myths

- empathy





## autism myths

- empathy <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>

is it innate or can it be learned?

do we feel the same empathy with everyone?

double empathy problem (Milton etc)





## autism myths

- relationships autistic females will not form long term relationships/marry?





## autism myths

- relationships autistic females will not form long term relationships/marry
- many SWANs are in successful long term relationships/married
- some are lesbian, some identify as non-binary
- some do have relationship difficulties
- some have described being in abusive relationships (SAJE describe high numbers of neurodiverse families in client group)





## autism myths

- parenting “Can autistic women be mothers” (title of presentation!!!)





## autism myths

- parenting “Can autistic women be mothers” (title of presentation!!!)
  - YES
- they may have specific needs for accommodations and understanding within services
- they may have to deal with a great deal of judgement, stigma, marginalisation within services, within society





identify +

- focus on strengths
- focus on interests
- focus on their RIGHT to be different
- teach them life skills
- accommodations





identify +

- Use existing legislation (while we have it) - equalities, education, human rights



# Under Our Wing Mentoring Programme

autistic led peer support and empowerment



pilot project, in partnership with Scottish Autism  
aims to evidence the benefits of autistic-led mentoring underpinned by peer support for autistic women and girls.

Scottish  
autism

with additional support by the Forestry Commission



Forestry Commission

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Any questions?

Thank you for listening



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