Supporting Autistic Girls in Schools

Women and Girls Conference

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National Autistic Society

Helen Clarke

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Supporting Autistic Girls in Schools

- Introduction
- Consider current issues affecting autistic girls and women
- Explore how we can support autistic girls in school
- Highlight how this can help autistic girls throughout their lives

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To support autistic girls in schools we must consider …

- the views of autistic girls
- current research regarding autistic girls and women (Sproston & Sedgewick 2017), (Moyse et al, 2015), (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2018)
- the broader life issues that affect autistic people (particularly girls and women) across the lifespan
- statistics relating to health and education
- the importance of working collaboratively with the child, the parents/carers, professionals and others involved with the child

This will inform *what* should be taught and *how* so that it is relevant to autistic girls.

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Current issues

- Autistic girls are under diagnosed and often mis-diagnosed. (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011)

- According to Amanda Spielman, “Those with autism … are waiting up to 2 years to be diagnosed, with some getting no education at all while they wait.” (Ofsted Annual Report, 2018)

- Children with identified S.E.N.D account for around half of all permanent exclusions whilst pupils with SEN support had the “highest permanent exclusion rate at …six times higher than the rate for pupils with no S.E.N.D.” (Department for Education, 2018)

- “…children and adolescents with autistic spectrum disorders …are at increased risk of anxiety and anxiety disorders.”(Van Steensel, Bögels & Perrin, 2011)

- Nationally, levels of self-harm are higher for young women than young men. (Public Health England, 2019)

- “… the mortality risk among those with ASD was nearly twice that of the general population. The SMR [Standard Mortality Rate] was particularly high in females.” (Mouridsen et al, 2008)

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Supporting autistic girls in schools

We want autistic girls to gain an appropriate diagnosis

to be able to access an education with the right level of support (according to their individual needs)

to be *included*, rather than *excluded* from school

to experience good physical and mental health

to learn from a tailored curriculum that takes into account how autistic girls learn and the issues autistic girls and women face across the lifespan

for autistic girls to live long, happy and fulfilled lives

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“Autism is seen as a male thing, and boys are often physical in expressing themselves when unhappy, whereas girls implode emotionally,”

Sarah Wild, Headteacher at Limpsfield Grange.

The Guardian, Angela Neustatter, 14.07.15

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Emma, aged 15. Diagnosed as Autistic at 8 and has Auditory Processing Disorder. Emma was previously educated in a mainstream secondary school and has since moved to another, smaller mainstream school that is currently meeting her needs.

- Discrepancy between home/school regarding observed behaviours
- Anxiety
- Sleep problems
- Physical illness
- School refusal
- Poor attendance
- Sensory overload
- Exhaustion/burnout
- Feeling on high alert
- Fight/flight response
- Self-harm
- Suicide ideation

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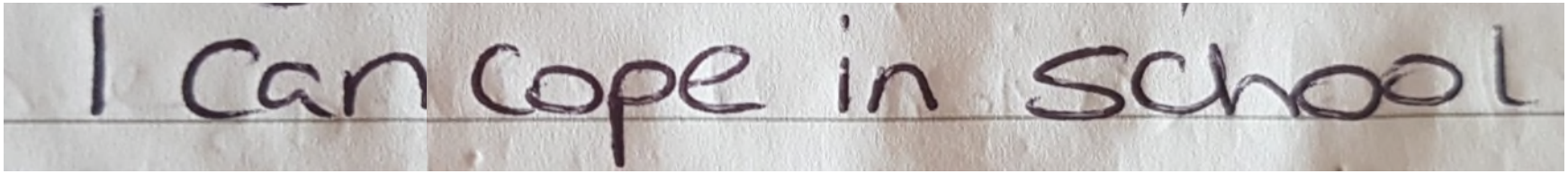

"I have a good friend there that I knew before I moved schools. I have been placed in her class for a few lessons…she is a very good support for me".

"They have class seating plans. I was struggling to filter out noise. I am now at the back …not near a door, or window."

"There is a one way system in the corridor".

"The school is only half full …so there's a quieter environment, not as much pressure"

What's working well in school?

"The S.E.N.Co at [the new school] met with us and said if her attendance didn't improve she couldn't stay. In July 2019 she received a 100% attendance certificate.

The move has been amazing. My now 15 year old is finally learning again. The teachers at parents' evening were singing her praises. She came home from school one day and told me she loves revision, she loves school! She's been asking the teachers for extra work!"

"A positive parents' evening."

"Merits, positive learning type awards and comments from teachers, encouraging me, asking me if I'm OK"

"Attendance"

"Knowing I can sit out in P.E relieves the pressure".

" I struggle with Maths but I like my new teacher"

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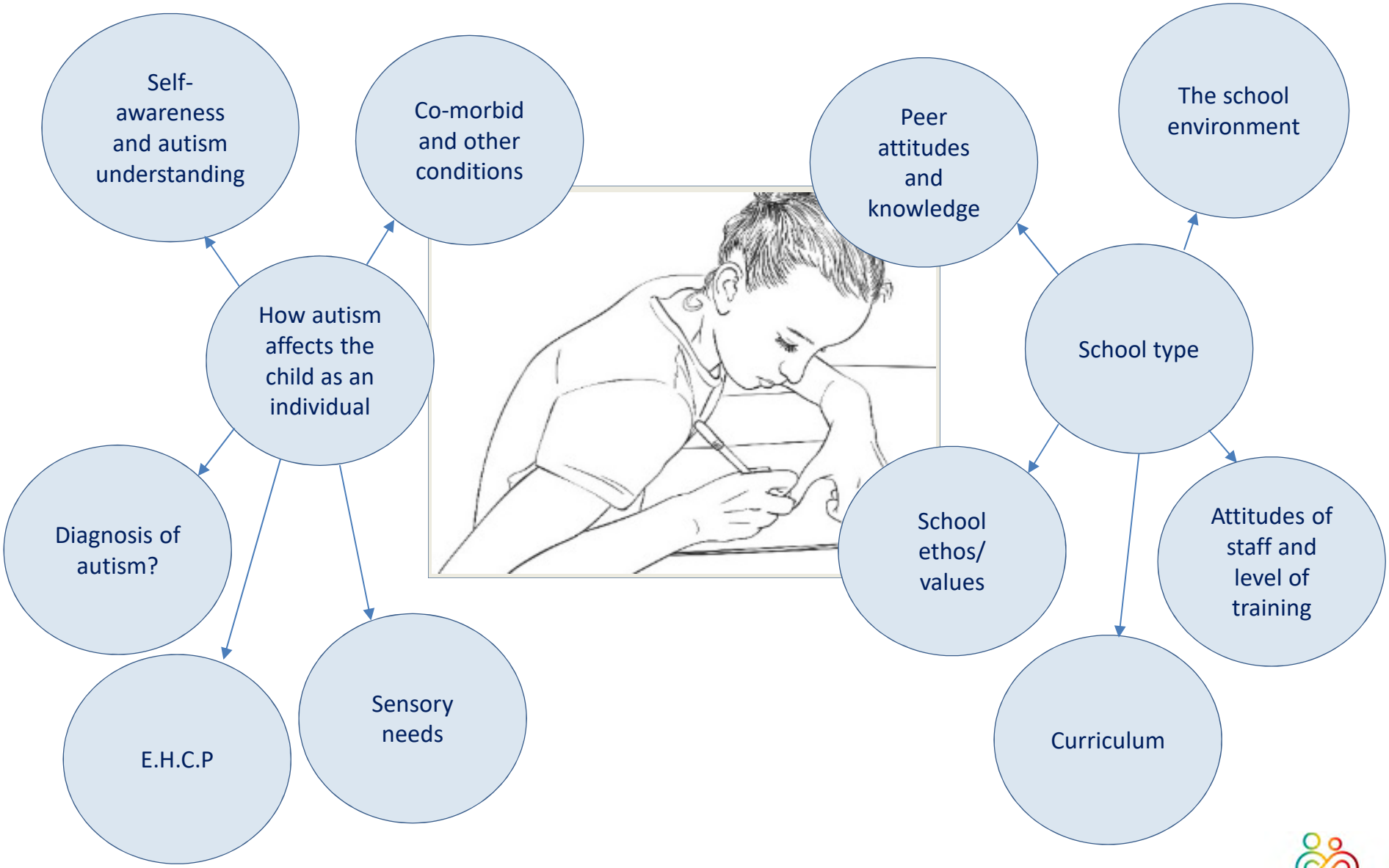
Factors affecting the education of autistic girls



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BE SAFE
BE EXPRESSIVE
BE CALM
BE HEALTHY
BE INDEPENDENT
BE UNIQUE

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The Curriculum - Academic and Social/Life Skills.

- Teach autistic girls how to keep themselves safe
- Adapt the P.S.H.E and RSE (Relationship and Sex Education) curriculum for autistic girls
- Risk assessments
- School policies
- Behaviour Support Plans and Individual Support Plans
- Role play situations
- Support girls with communication (social scripts, what to say)
- Some girls may be compliant (do what people tell them) some may be naïve and trusting and may find it hard to be assertive
- Some girls may find it difficult to read the intentions of others and so are vulnerable
- Need to be taught to stay safe online and understand that people may not be who they say they are
- May be socially isolated and vulnerable
- Signpost girls to support services and organisations
- Learning real life skills to aid independence

BE SAFE

BE INDEPENDENT

BE CALM

Supporting autistic girls to feel calm and comfortable in the school environment will help them to learn.

The physical environment

Provide structure in the environment (organised classroom)

A low arousal environment

Provide routine and predictability

Provide visual, written or colour coded timetables and a simple, clear map of the school (numbers on rooms, staff photographs on door if possible)

Visual prompts in the environment

Be aware that the school environment can cause sensory overload and can be overstimulating e.g. bright lights, noise (school bell, hand dryers, dining hall)

Difficulty coping with the hustle and bustle of crowds

In lessons, keep your instructions concise and provide visual and written lists

Self-regulation

Calming strategies (some girls will be able to make suggestions about what will help, others will need support)

Transition and change

Transition around school, from task to task, change from one school to another

Puberty, growing up

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BE UNIQUE

What is autism and how does it affect me?

- Self-awareness
- Role models
- An inclusive school ethos
- Identity – building a positive self identity

Celebrating diversity in our school community

- Displays
- Autistic role models
- The curriculum
- Assemblies
- School culture

Staff understanding of autism – staff training
Peer understanding of autism

BE HEALTHY

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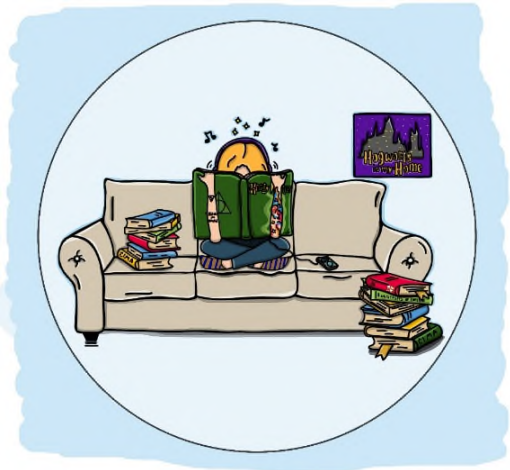
Photographs: With thanks to Gillian Loomes, Siena Castellon, Agony Autie

BE EXPRESSIVE

"I am over empathic with my friends. I get upset for them."

- Understanding and expressing feelings
- Visuals to aid understanding
- Feelings thermometers
- Use of Comic Strip Conversations™ (Carol Gray)
- Pupils to express themselves through their own interests (music, art, poetry etc)
- Safe spaces
- Communication skills
- **Friendships**
- Clubs that enable girls to pursue shared interests
- Types of friendships
- Break and lunch times- some girls may wish to spend time alone



Intense interests

- Recharge the batteries
- Strengths
- Employment
- Fulfilling

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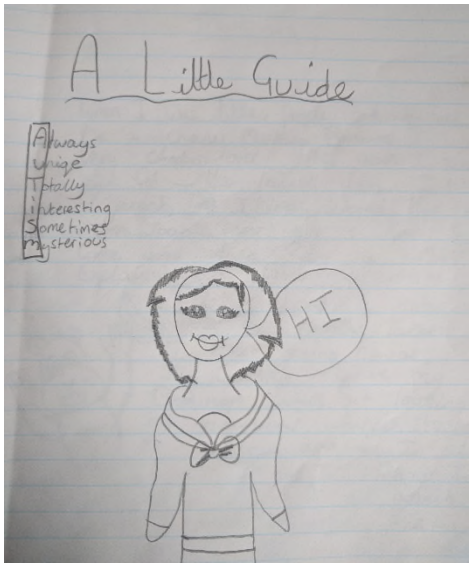
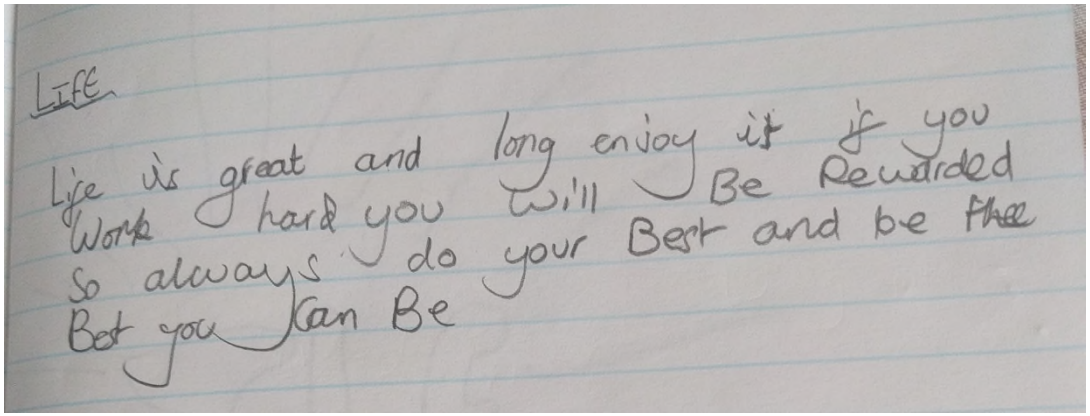
Grace, aged 11





What would you like people working in schools to know about autism?
"To try to understand how hard things can be for us and don't use too many words."

What advice would you give to autistic girls?
"Be yourself and try to be happy with who you are and find comfort to feel safe."

How can schools better support autistic girls?
"By listening and trying to understand."

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I wanna cry I'm so anxious 8:50 am

I've had an amazing day 3:38 pm

Enter message

SEND

National Autistic Society

The Women's Organisation

With **thanks** to all those who work to support autistic girls, have contributed to this presentation and those who have supported me to help others.

Thank you.

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