



# How do autistic female adolescents experience friendship: a qualitative systematic review

Liz Lane\* & Fiona du Boucher-Ryan\*\*

\*Trainee Educational Psychologist, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick  
\*\*Educational psychologist, National Educational Psychological Service, Cork



## Introduction

- Friendship is considered to have a central role in supporting adolescents to develop self-esteem, a sense of wellbeing and an ability to deal with challenging life events (Watkins et al., 2015).
- Having a mutually positive friendship is a protective factor against mental health difficulties and recent Irish policy educational guidelines encourages schools to support the development of positive peer relationships (National Educational Psychological Service, 2015).

## Friendship and ASD

- Recent research has demonstrated that autistic girls' friendships differ qualitatively to those of autistic boys (Tomlinson, Bond, & Hebron, 2020).
- Autistic female adolescents may engage in camouflaging whereby they mask their difficulties or copy their neurotypical peers during social interactions (Lai, Lombardo, Auyeung, Chakrabarti, & Baron-Cohen, 2015; Meng-Chuan et al., 2011).
- A desire to fit in or not to be noticed can be a strong motivator for autistic female adolescents in social situations (Atwood & Grandin, 2006).
- Psychological theories relevant to the gender differences in social experiences include: brain difference theory (Greenberg et al., 2018), extreme brain theory (Baron-Cohen, 2002), social cognitive theories of gender expectations (Bussey, Bandura and Bjork Robert, 1999).

## Rationale for current study

- The current internationally recognised prevalence ratio of autistic boys to autistic girls is close to three to one (Loomes, Hull, & Mandy, 2017). This may be a factor as to why there is an over-representation of the experience of autistic boys in the field of autism research (Gould, 2017).
- However, due to the differences in how autistic boys and girls socialise, there is a need for separate research that focuses on the social experiences of autistic female adolescents. Understanding the female autistic experience of friendship will lead to a more nuanced intervention approach in schools (Kirkovski, Enticott & Fitzgerald, 2013).
- Previous systematic reviews have just focused on research pertaining to the female experience of ASD and school (Tomlinson et al., 2020; Williams, Gleeson, & Jones, 2019).
- Given the important role that friendships play in well-being and self-esteem, it is important to collate what is known about the experience of friendship for autistic female adolescents.
- This study will focus solely on the experience of autistic female adolescents (i.e. not their teachers' or parents' views). This is in line with recent impetus to focus on perspectives from the autism community (Pellicano, Dinsmore, and Charman 2014).

## Research Question

What do we know about autistic adolescent females' experience of friendship?

## Methodology

### Research design

A qualitative systematic review was conducted in order to answer the research question. The Enhancing Transparency in Reporting the Synthesis of Qualitative Research (ENTREQ) statement was followed (Tong, Flemming, McInnes, Oliver, & Craig, 2012).

### Search strategy

A comprehensive literature search was carried out on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 2021 using the following electronic databases: PsychINFO, PsychARTICLES and ERIC (EBSCO). The following search terms were used: (asd OR autism spectrum disorder OR autism OR Asperger's) AND (girls OR adolescents OR female adolescents) AND (friendships OR friends). Six studies were identified after the inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied.

### Critical appraisal of studies

The included studies were appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018). All the studies achieved a score of 7 or above, out of a possible 10. Common weaknesses across the studies were related to researcher reflexivity, ethical considerations and validity measures.

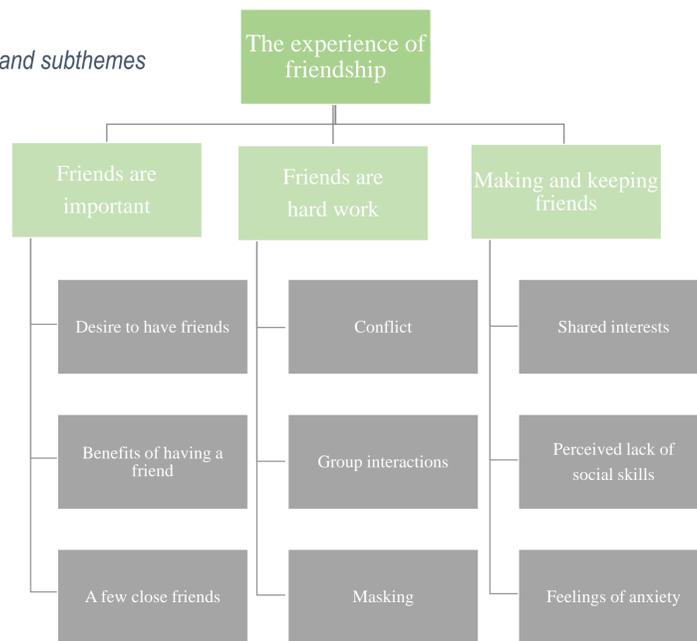
### Data synthesis

Thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) was employed to synthesise the findings of the included studies. This process involved three stages. Firstly, the results section of all the studies were coded line by line. In the second stage, descriptive themes were developed. The final stage involved the creation of analytical themes.

## Results

Following the data synthesis, three main themes were identified, as displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1  
Themes and subthemes



### Friends are important

- All participants reported that friendship was important to them. Emotional support, feelings of acceptance and an increase in overall happiness were all listed as benefits of friendship. Many participants spoke about their preference for having one to two close friends over a larger friendship group.

### Friends are hard work

- Even though participants wanted to interact with others, it was considered hard work at times. Conflict and friendship loss was a common theme across the studies, along with peer rejection. Many participants commented on how they found it difficult to navigate group interactions. Being on the periphery of a group was common and some experienced relational aggression. Many participants reported using masking in an effort to fit in.

### Making and keeping friends

- Participants generally found that having shared interests was a way to connect with others. In contrast, participants felt that their lack of understanding of the hidden social rules created misunderstandings and confusion. Feelings of anxiety about social interactions sometimes led to avoidance of social events.

## Implications

- This study has highlighted how autistic adolescent females conceptualise friendship.
- In order to support their social needs, training for school staff about their unique presentation is important.
- Autistic female adolescents may need support to navigate the hidden social rules of post-primary school, especially in relation to conflict resolution.
- In conjunction with this, schools should promote a culture that accepts and appreciates difference and in which both neurotypical and neurodivergent cultures are valued. This may lead to a reduction in masking behaviours and the mental exhaustion that can accompany it.
- Interventions for all adolescents on how to understand relational aggression and how to respond to it effectively would be beneficial for all.
- The participants noted that shared interests was a way of connecting with others. Lunch-time clubs in schools based on interests may be worthwhile.

## Limitations

- This review only considered the views of adolescents in mainstream settings. Future research could incorporate the perspectives of adolescents in special classes and special schools.

## Conclusion

- This review has demonstrated that autistic female adolescents want to have friends but sometimes, this can be difficult for them. Schools can support these students by understanding their profile and by providing interventions at both whole-school and individual levels.

## Key References

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\* Marks the studies included in this review.