

Where are the gaps in the evidence? Gender, friends and arguments

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Friendship experiences of adolescents

- Majority of autistic teenagers in mainstream schools (60%, DfE 2014)
- Positive friendships have positive life outcomes
- Differences between genders may be key – expect differences by gender in non-autistic teenagers, so why not autistic teenagers?



Autism and friendship: gender differences

- Greater social motivation (Head, McGillivray & Stokes, 2014; Sedgewick et al., 2016)
- Greater language development (Goddard et al., 2014; Krahn & Fenton, 2012)
- Different friendship patterns – younger/older, parallel play (Barbu, Cabanes & LeManer-Idrissi, 2011), recreating stories (Knickmeyer et al., 2008), more included/ignored (Dean et al., 2014)



Friendships in special education settings

- 46 teens total (13 girls with and without autism, 10 boys with and without autism)
- Significant differences between autistic boys and all other groups
- Autistic girls were more similar to non-autistic girls than to autistic boys
- Conflict was a point of departure from this pattern

Sedgewick et al., 2016, JADD



Conflict in school

- Bullying: more common in mainstream (Rowley et al., 2012), more likely autistic than other SEN (Humphrey & Symes, 2010)



- Relational aggression: unstudied in autism, in typical teens would expect more in teenage girls and that it is especially difficult to manage (Murray-Close et al., 2007)



Early Findings: conflict

- Autistic teenagers have lower quality friendships, although similar levels of conflict with best friends



"My best friend is great because she doesn't get cross about things I do, she understands me and gives me space"

- Autistic teenagers are involved in more conflict with peers in general, and are more likely to be victims

"People are mean to me sometimes, like I get into fights because they pick on me more than other people."



Early findings: overall summary

- Autistic girls have similar friendship strength to neurotypical girls
- Autistic girls and boys have different friendship patterns
- Girls overall experience more relational conflict
- Autistic girls respond to this differently to neurotypical girls



Conclusions

- Autistic girls appear to have qualitatively different friendships to autistic boys
- According to autistic girls and their parents, they are not being supported in forming and maintaining positive peer relationships
 - all existing support is targeted towards boys and doesn't address what girls are going through

