This 20-page publication, published by nasen as part of their mini-guide series provides schools with an introduction to the issues of girls with autism. It came out of the ASC and Girls Forum, hosted by the National Association of Head Teachers, and chaired by Professor Barry Carpenter, CBE.

http://www.nasen.org.uk/resources/?tag=miniguides
Gender ratio and the autism spectrum

- ASD prevalence is approximately 1 in 100
- The gender ratio of females to males is typically reported as 1:4.
- Among intellectually able individuals with ASD – approximately 1:10
- In groups with ASD and moderate to severe learning disabilities – approximately 1:2

(Dworzynski et al. 2012; National Autistic Society 2013)
‘There is a real issue of inequality in autism research; many studies explicitly exclude women and girls (because they expect low numbers), so we continue to base our knowledge of autism on findings from men and boys.’

Professor Francesca Happé
Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience and Director of the MRC Social, Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry Centre at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King’s College London

‘Many SENCOs believe the one girl to four boys scenario for ASD; they do not think past that. We have an undiagnosed population here, who are currently not getting the best from our education system.’

Professor Barry Carpenter, CBE, Ph.D.
Chair, National Association of Head Teachers’ ASC and Girls Forum
Schools currently misunderstand autism in girls

- ‘Too sociable’?
- ‘Autism is rare in girls’?
- ‘The same interests as their friends’?
- ‘No repetitive behaviours’?

Where are the ‘lost girls’ with autism?

- Diagnostic overshadowing / misdiagnosis
- Delayed diagnosis
- Lack of diagnosis
Sharonne Horlock
SENCO, Impington Village College, Cambridgeshire

‘Charlotte’ – What the teacher sees
Case study contributed by Felicity Sedgewick
PhD student, Centre for Research in Autism and Education, University College London

- A quiet, well-behaved 14-year-old girl in a mainstream school
- Some teaching assistant support for dyslexia
- In middle sets for all her subjects
- Sits at the back of class
- Almost never puts her hand up or answers questions
- Has a best friend

'This is not ‘Charlotte’
‘Charlotte’ – the reality

Case study contributed by Felicity Sedgewick
PhD student, Centre for Research in Autism and Education, University College London

- Charlotte’s behaviours – mask underlying autistic issues
- Sits at the back of class – so she can ‘work out’ what social behaviours to use by copying peers
- Good behaviour – relies on rules to make her feel safe
- Reluctance to answer questions – needs to know she can give the perfect answer (perfectionist)
- Shyness – doesn’t want to draw attention
- Best friend – developmentally younger, so fewer social demands
- Predicted to achieve good results – She feels she is struggling
- The reality – she feels isolated and permanently anxious.

Where will this lead?

‘We’ve had the usual comments…

“Are you sure she is autistic? She makes eye contact?”

‘Look beyond the exterior and understand that [these girls] are often feeling like isolated misfits who will never be like the other girls around them.

‘My teenager wears make-up, has her skirt rolled over and is obsessed with social media, just like her friends… except that often she does not understand the nuances of teenage girls’ conversation…

The daily minefield of worries… the concentration required to keep [her autism] hidden… takes up all capacity…
Mental health problems
and intellectually able girls and women with ASC

Compared with boys and men with autism, women and girls have:

• More thought and attention problems
• Higher average fear scores
• Tendencies towards self-deprecation and withdrawal
• Tendencies towards atypical depression and self-harm.

‘...it appears that many women with ASD either do not or cannot access satisfactory professional support to help them regulate or improve their mental health and wellbeing...point[ing] to the need for specialised counselling, psychology and social support services...’

_Baldwin and Costley (2015)_

‘There is a pervasive lack of recognition and understanding of the often subtle behaviours which relate to ASC, particularly for girls. Girls can become increasingly unwilling to attend school, participate in learning activities or work collaboratively. Their actions are misinterpreted by adults and peers. Girls who are exhausted from maintaining a social pretence may choose to exclude themselves through school refusal or truancy or may be excluded formally due to misunderstood behaviour issues.’

_Sharonne Horlock_
SENCO, Impington Village College, Cambridgeshire
‘We are different from the boys.’
(Limpsfield Grange girls with ASC)

This booklet also includes information about:
• ‘How ASC girls socialise with mainstream peers’
  – Felicity Sedgewick, PhD student, Centre for Research in Autism and Education, University College London
• ‘Supporting learning for girls with ASC’
  – Sarah Wild, Headteacher, Limpsfield Grange School for girls with autism
• Links and further reading

ASC and girls – the future

‘Girls and women with ASC need to be recognised, enabled and effectively equipped so they can make the life choices they choose and benefit from them. It is their human right.’

*Girls and Autism: Flying under the radar* (nasen miniguide)
Contact details:
Egerton.jo93@gmail.com

Photo sources:
• Autism and Girls: Flying under the radar (nasen miniguide)
  http://www.nasen.org.uk/resources/?tag=miniguides
• http://indiapulse.sulekha.com/local-pulse/miracle-girl-who-can-read-her-mother-s-mind_post_4046