

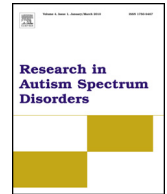


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# Understanding the social experiences of adolescent females on the autism spectrum

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Adolescent females with autism spectrum disorder often face numerous challenges when socially interacting with their same-sex peers. This is an area previously unconsidered in empirical research, due in part to the predominance of males with ASD. However, female teenage relationships constitute a unique culture, necessitating specific social skills. For the adolescent girl on the autism spectrum, varying degrees of difficulties with social communication and social relationships may result in unique perceptions regarding friendships with other girls.

**Method:** Utilising a phenomenological approach, an inductive thematic approach was used to analyse the self-described accounts of social experiences and expectations, by adolescent females on the autism spectrum.

**Results:** Through written accounts and interviews, participants revealed both a desire for, and a mature understanding of the characteristics of both friendships and best friend relationships. Participants all reported conflict with peers, and had more difficulty ascertaining the expectations of peers or socialising in groups.

**Conclusions:** Findings: from this study contradicts stereotypes that people on the autism spectrum are not capable of developing quality friendships. The participants in this study engage in quality relationships with their female peers, but also require time to de-stress and pursue their own interests. The information disclosed by the participants in this study facilitates an understanding of the social experiences and perceptions of social expectations of adolescent females with ASD, as a unique and often unrecognised phenomenon.

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## 1. Introduction

Adolescence is a time of changing social dynamics and complex social interactions, (Seifert, Hoffnung, & Hoffnung, 2000), particularly for adolescent girls. During this time, friendships and intimate relationships take on a particularly important role (Brown & Klute, 2003; Masten, Telzer, Fuligni, Lieberman, & Eisenberger, 2012), due to the link between friendship and well-being, adjustment and protective factors for adolescent girls (Bauminger, Shulman, & Agam, 2004; Mazurek & Kanne, 2010; Waldrip, Malcolm, & Jensen-Campbell, 2008). For girls on the autism spectrum however, adolescence can be even more challenging as they are faced with navigating the more complex social rules and dynamics that develop within friendships (Landa & Goldberg, 2005).

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Autism spectrum disorder is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition, characterised by differences and difficulties in social communication and restrictive and repetitive behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Researchers have suggested, however, that females on the autism spectrum may have different experiences than their male counterparts, particularly in their social interactions and friendships (Mandy et al., 2012; Sedgewick, Hill, Yates, Pickering, & Pellicano, 2015).

During adolescence, girls on the spectrum may find that their peers' expectations for social interactions have changed and have become more complicated than they were during their primary school years (Holliday-Willey, 1999). Relationships are no longer based on the proximity or functionality characteristic of early childhood friendships, but are established from mindful decisions, and shared interests, values and attitudes (Attwood, 2007). Reciprocity becomes much more important in adolescent friendships, as friendship entails not just shared activities, but the equal exchange of emotional resources (Laursen & Hartup, 2002). For example, during adolescence, close friends provide each other with acceptance and validation, and provide clarification and feedback to each other, while exchanging opinions and beliefs about themselves and the world around them (Seifert et al., 2000).

There is a great deal of research on the topic of friendship, due to the many correlations found between mutually responsive friendships, and increased emotional, cognitive, and social skill development (Demir & Urberg, 2004; Waldrip et al., 2008). To date, however, little research has explored the perceptions of adolescent girls on the autism spectrum about their social experiences and relationships at this stage of their life. The present study was conducted to address this gap.

Helm (2005, p. 1) defines friendship as “a distinctively personal relationship that is grounded in a concern on the part of each friend for the welfare of the other, for the other's sake, and that involves some degree of intimacy.” Researchers exploring adolescent friendships have consistently found differences in the ways that adolescent girls form, maintain and engage in friendships when compared with boys of the same age (Berndt, 1982; Lever, 1978; Raffaelli & Duckett, 1989). Girls tend to socialise in smaller social groups, engage in different leisure activities, demand higher levels of exclusivity, and expect a greater amount of intimacy and self-disclosure with their friends, when compared with adolescent boys (Frith, 2004; Lever, 1978). Researchers suggest (Raffaelli & Duckett, 1989) that during adolescence, girls may spend up to nine hours a week talking with their peers, while boys are more likely to interact with their peers through structured games, such as sporting activities (Lever, 1978).

These findings reveal the unique and increasingly complex nature of social interactions between females during adolescence. Whilst the studies discussed (Lever, 1978; Raffaelli & Duckett, 1989) involved neurotypical adolescents, Kuo, Orsmond, Cohn, and Coster (2013) suggest that similar patterns can be observed in social interactions and friendships of adolescents on the autism spectrum. Whilst investigating the friendships of adolescents on the autism spectrum, Kuo et al. (2013) found that the majority (71%) of female participants frequently spent time talking with their friends, whereas male participants primarily spent their time with friends playing video games. Sedgewick et al. (2015) also identified distinct differences in the way adolescent males and females on the autism spectrum socialise, noting girls' descriptions of friendship focused on shared talk significantly more than shared activities, an element which was absent in the boys' descriptions of friendship.

Although Kuo et al. (2013) and Sedgewick et al.'s (2015) studies indicate that girls on the spectrum engage in similar activities as their neurotypical female peers, other researchers (Head, McGillivray, & Stokes, 2014; Solomon, Miller, Taylor, Hinshaw, & Carter, 2011) suggest differently: that girls on the spectrum have different skills in social interactions than their neurotypical female peers. Head et al. (2014) found that adolescent girls on the autism spectrum scored significantly higher on measures of friendship quality, understanding and empathy than males on the spectrum, but significantly lower than neurotypical girls. Similarly, Solomon et al. (2011) noted that although adolescent females on the autism spectrum did not markedly differ from their male peers on measures of language and social abilities, they did demonstrate significantly less skill on these measures, when compared with other neurotypical adolescent girls.

These studies emphasise that adolescent girls on the autism spectrum may face a different social dynamic and social expectations in their interactions with peers than their male peers, and thus may experience unique challenges in their social interactions. To date, however, little research has explored the complexities of social interactions between adolescent girls on the spectrum and their female peers, as the afore mentioned studies focused on *gender differences* in social capabilities (Head et al., 2014; Kuo et al., 2013; Sedgewick et al., 2015; Solomon et al., 2011). Given the important role that friendships may play on emotional development, research is needed to examine the perceptions of adolescent girls on the autism spectrum regarding their social experiences and friendships with their neurotypical peers, in order to gain a better understanding of what enables them to feel confident, in their social lives.

## 2. The study

The purpose of the present study was to explore the insights and perceptions of adolescent females on the autism spectrum regarding their social experiences and relationships with their female peers. Specifically, this study considered how adolescent females on the autism spectrum understand and make sense of the expectations and qualities, they, and their female peers, bring to social interactions and friendships.

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