

Supporting Autistic Girls in Early Childhood

Resource Guide

A resource for Parents, Educators & Policy-makers

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Supporting Autistic Girls in Early Childhood Education

Background

The Uniting Preschool Field Officer Program received a Warrawong Grant, which was used to fund Yellow Ladybugs to create a series of videos for early childhood educators about the presentation and support needs of autistic girls attending early childhood education and care services.

Our goal was to capture up-to-date information combining our parent community's experiences, lived autistic experience, and professional knowledge from the allied health and early childhood education sectors.

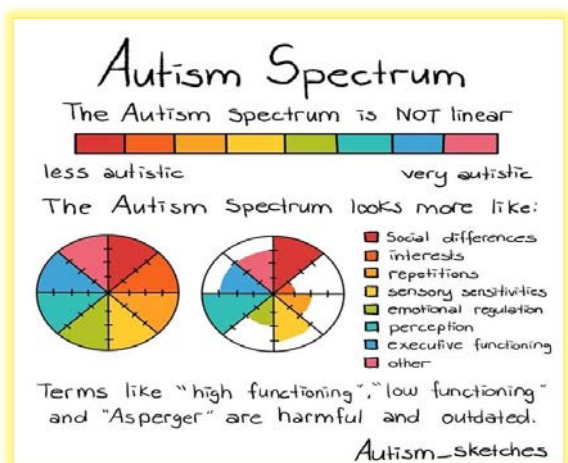
We developed a survey on the experiences and understanding autistic girls in their early learning setting, which we then put out to the Yellow Ladybugs community.

The survey data helped us to develop the key themes from which we created five videos. This resource outlines the key information contained in the videos. This resource uses neuro-affirming, identity-first language and refers to autistic people rather than people with autism. This reflects our beliefs that being autistic is intrinsic to our identity and that functioning labels are harmful.

Autistic girls have many amazing strengths, but this doesn't mean they don't need support.

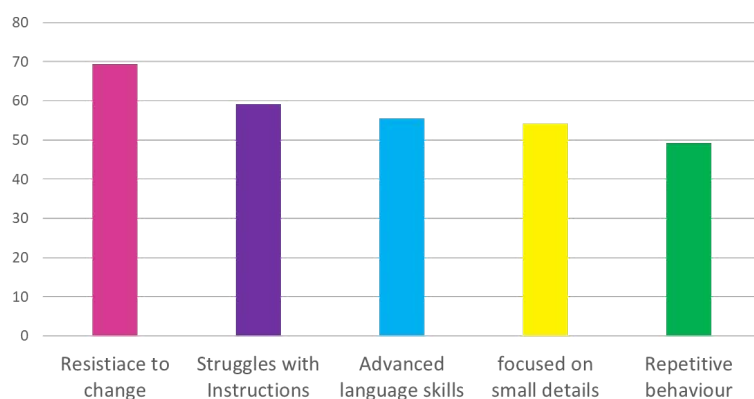
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Autism and Girls in Early Childhood



Autism is a difference that affects how a person thinks, feels and experiences the world. It can result in differences in language, communication, cognition, sensory processing, motor control and social behaviours.

In addition to the traits listed in the table, other traits in early childhood may include separation anxiety, anxiety, shyness, selective mutism, clumsiness, noise sensitivity, people pleasing, sensory seeking/avoidant behaviour (nail biting/hair twirling/toileting struggles/selective with food). Autistic girls in early childhood settings may also mask to fit in (being overly compliant, mimicking) making them easy to miss.



Autism may not always present the same way and can be either internal or external in presentation. Girls may have a more internal presentation and therefore may be missed.

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Misconceptions & stereotypes

It is time to change the misconceptions and stereotypes around autistic girls and look out for those with a more internalised presentation who are often missed. Girls may seem like they are coping (by masking) in early childhood, but they are still worthy of supports.

She can make eye contact

She is too social

She is too verbal

She is just shy/anxious

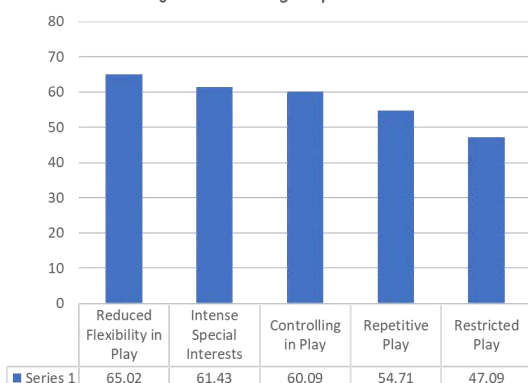
She will grow out of it



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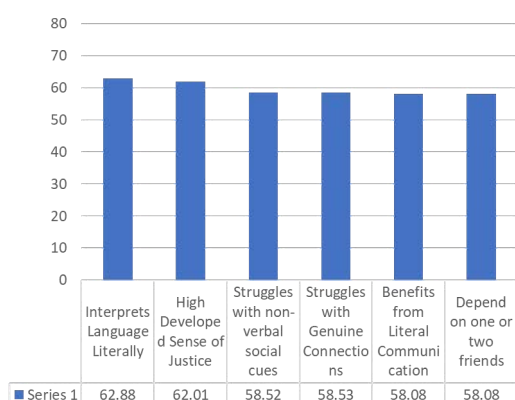
Autism and Girls in the Early Childhood Setting

Imaginative Play Experiences

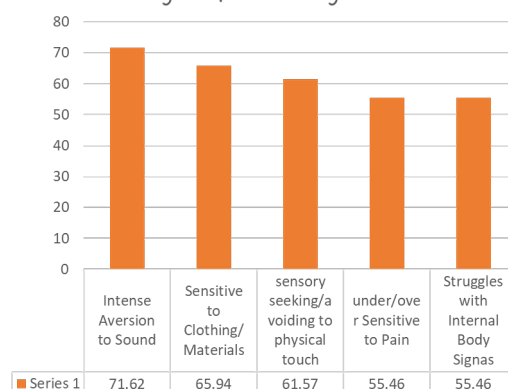


Autistic girls can struggle in early childhood settings in the following areas and may need additional support: peer interactions, social communication, executive functioning, imaginative play and sensory processing.

Social Interactions

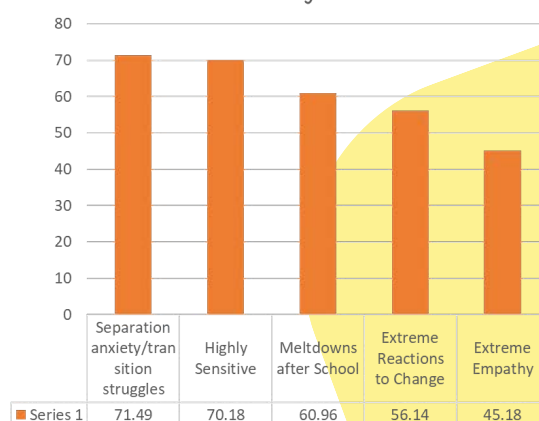


Sensory Profile in Early Years



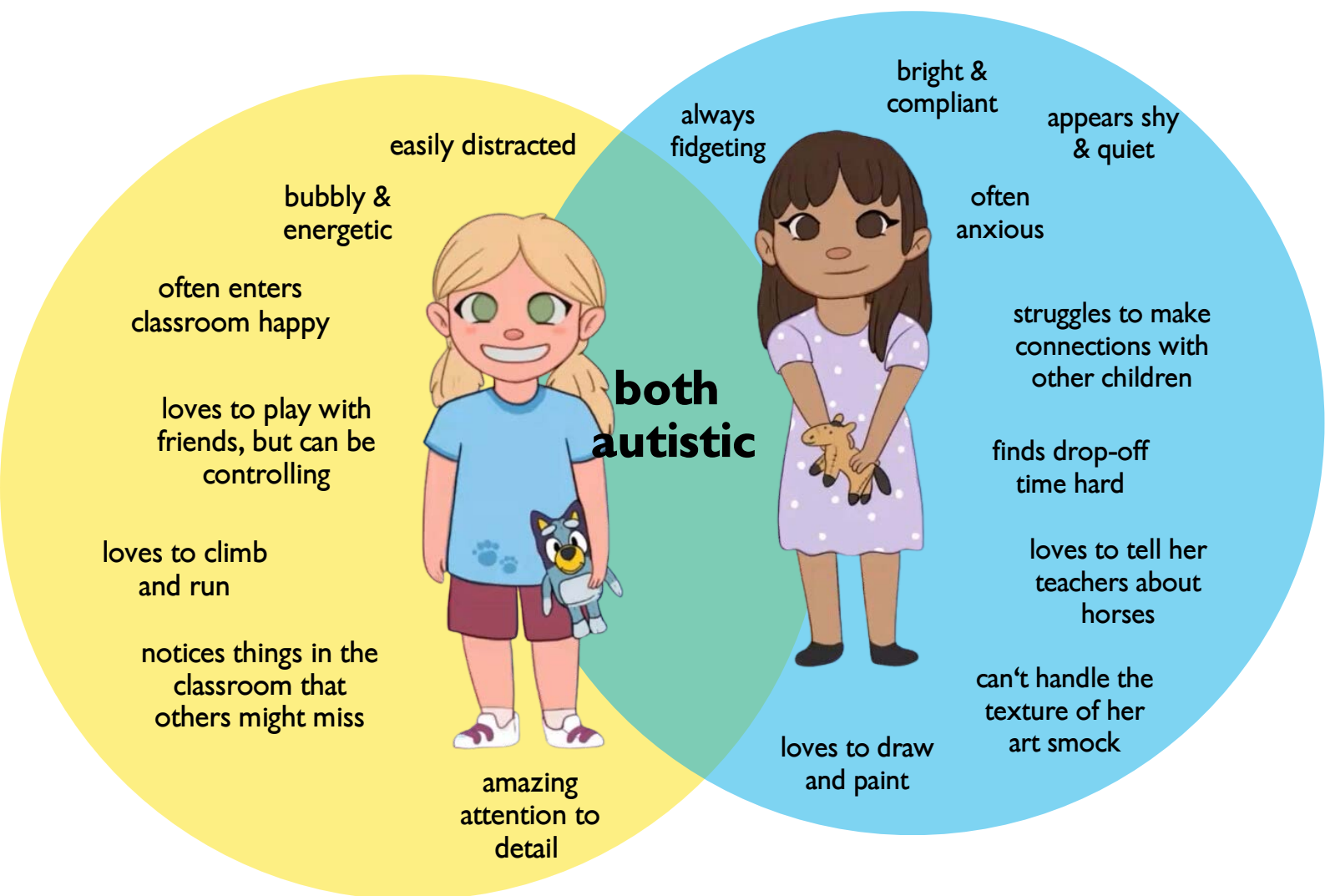
Autistic girls may demonstrate different challenges and capacities depending on the day and you may notice certain patterns such as increased dysregulation or poor motor skills when sick, tired or hungry.

Emotional Regulation



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Both of these girls are autistic although their behaviour and experiences may differ.



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“Autistic girls may be anxious or shy presenting - the girls who are struggling to make sense of the world around them. And then there are the very lively, social performers or comedians who may be seen as bossy or attention seeking. Both are autistic and both need educators to look beyond the behaviour to figure out what they are communicating.”

Frances Brennan

“She spent hours setting up a play scene, but didn’t actually play with it.”

“She didn’t like textured foods, such as peas, and still does not like fruit.”

“She was a very fussy eater and was underweight.”

“Sounds/noises were distracting and impeded her ability to focus, listen, learn.”

“She would usually have her ‘person’, this would usually be an adult/educator who she would cling to.”

“She preferred playing with older peers and playing the same games repetitively.”

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Parent experiences of autistic girls in early childhood

Our research found a range of different experiences, but there were recurring messages:

Parents brought up concerns with educators only to be dismissed as child was meeting milestones/seemed fine

Parents raised concerns with staff only to be told THEY were the problem/overly anxious

Staff discussed concerns with parents, or concerns were raised by both sides

Out of the 230 responses, over 210 responses stated that at least one concern raised by parents was dismissed by either teachers or health professionals due to common misconceptions.

The survey results confirmed that there is a gap in understanding and knowledge because of unhelpful stereotypes and because girls have already learned to mask. These are the same barriers that autistic girls face in school.



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Behaviour = Communication

When an autistic child is happy or engaged, they may hum, dance, sing, repeat sounds, flap, spin or jump up and down. They may be quietly content or hyperfocused on a task in which they are finding flow and enjoyment.

When they are upset they may cry, they may show signs of distress when a parent tries to leave, or they may have meltdowns during playtime. Sometimes their behaviour may be loud or external and their distress easily identifiable. In others their distress may be more subtle and internal - they may withdraw.

Children cannot always find the words to tell us how they are feeling - but their behaviour can. Not all autistic children have the same needs or profile therefore they will not all have the same behaviour. It is our job to look beyond the behaviour to see/determine/understand/investigate what this might be telling us about the child and their needs.

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Neuro-affirming ways to support autistic girls

Neuro-affirming approaches are strategies that can be used in the learning environment that are inclusive and supportive of all neurotypes and needs.

I LIKE KNOWING
WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

- ✓ Acknowledge transitions and changes in routine are hard. Providing consistent, predictable routines and visual aids, allowing for different drop off/pick up times or inviting parents to stay longer may assist.
- ✓ Provide low sensory/decompression spaces with fidget toys, headphones and things that represent special interests. Provide regular movement breaks and do not punish stimming behaviour.
- ✓ Validate the feelings and experiences of autistic children even if you do not understand them. Don't force eye contact or participation.
- ✓ Break down tasks and provide more time for processing and questions. Provide context on why you are doing a certain task.
- ✓ Accommodate and support sensory eating needs and preferences.

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Providing accommodations for autistic children requires teachers and educators to build upon strong and meaningful relationships to understand their experience and interests as every autistic child has different needs. It is important to consider strength-based approaches when making accommodations. Get rid of the mentality that we need to fix the child and instead think about how we can guide and support their needs for equal opportunities in education and care.

Sally Baker



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Full Videos Available on Youtube

[Autism and Girls in Early Childhood](#)

[Autistic Girls in the Early Childhood Setting](#)

[‘Behaviour’ and Autistic Girls](#)

[Neuro-affirming Ways Early Childhood Educators Can Support Autistic Girls](#)

[Transitioning into an Early Learning Setting and/or School for Autistic Girls](#)



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