Girls and Women on the Spectrum: Challenges with Diagnosis and Intervention

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Learning Objectives

1. Understand the complexities of diagnosing girls and women with ASDs
2. Understand the biological differences between typically developing girls and girls with ASD, and how these translate to behavior
3. Learn what challenges are specific to girls and women
4. Consider the available interventions and think about how those may be customized to better fit girls and women with ASD
1. Understanding the power of social communication; the purpose of effective communication; the way that the social world works related to understanding communication

1. Understanding the possible purposes of restricted behavior; of repetitive behavior and of special interests in establishing a secure world.
“While ASD affects more males than females, there is a growing awareness that ASD in females may be underdiagnosed, potentially due to differences in the manifestations of ASD in females, such as less disruptive behavioral disorders and stronger ability to recognize emotions in facial expressions, which mask symptoms.”
“ASD is diagnosed four times more frequently in males than females.... In clinic referred samples girls are more likely to show accompanying intellectual impairments, suggesting that girls without intellectual impairments or language delays may go unrecognized because of subtler manifestations of social and communication difficulties.”
Are current diagnostic criteria based on a male prototype??
In gauging the severity of impairment, clinicians compare affected girls to affected boys, rather than comparing affected girls to their same-age typically developing peers.
We all know men and women act differently
Sex differences exist in:

- Socialization & Communication
- Behavior

Developmental stages:
- Baby
- Toddler
- Preschooler
- School age
- Teenager
- Young adult
- Older adult
Socialization

- face recognition
- emotion recognition
- recognition of other’s distress
Communication

“display rules” for emotion
prosocial behavior
recognizing nonverbal cues
Behavior

- showing empathy
- taking the perspective of another
- socialization in dyads
- more language-based play
“Sociolalia”*

• Mimicry of salient gender-normative behaviors
• Emulating social behaviors
• Adopting social scripts
• Camouflaging

*Els Blijd-Hoowys, PhD. Groningen, Netherlands
Imaginative play

- Obsessive interests
- Scripts
Restricted and repetitive behaviors seem less pronounced....
When are differences between the sexes in social & communication noted?
Unique challenges

a. Grooming/dress
b. Privacy
c. The language of being a girl
d. Common interests
e. Social behavior
f. Social conversation
g. Same-sex friendships
h. Opposite sex relationships
i. Self soothing/emotional regulation
j. Educational & work settings
Grooming/Dress
Privacy

- Explicit rules with explanations
- Problem solving together
- Internet
- Phone calls
- Texting
• Girls and women discuss emotions and interpersonal relationships as a way of establishing friendships

• For boys and men, friendships are organized through a focus on activity-related or interest related themes

• For girls and women, friendships are organized through sharing of thoughts and emotions, and conversation will reflect social themes.
The language of being a girl/woman

• Thoughts and feelings with appropriate boundaries
• Attention to social connections
• Sharing interests with other women
• Learning to understand boys/men and how to relate to them
• Learning how to relate to parents, and other adults as a young adult
• Display rules
Social behavior

• Physical distance/boundaries
• Emotional distance/boundaries
• Expectations regarding friendships
• Ability to use casual pleasantries to establish connections
• Ability to engage in reciprocal conversation
• Ability to recognize nonverbal cues indicating interest, boredom, discomfort
• Ability to interpret facial expressions
• Learning specific guidelines regarding phone use, texting, using Facebook and other forms of on-line communication
• Understanding the dangers of “on-line” chatting/ cyber-bullying
Same-sex friendships

- Boundaries
- Privacy
- Respect
- Communication
- Social problem solving
- Developing a personal identity
- Sexuality
- Avoid sensitive topics
- Telephone/texting skills

RELATIONAL AGGRESSION!!!!
Intimate relationships

- Defining sexuality
- Defining intimacy
- Sexual values
- Set boundaries
- Model appropriate behavior
- Interpret social/sexual signals
- Guide with regard to moral values related to family values
Educational settings

• Recognizing the landscape of a college setting

• Understanding the differences in relationships between college professors and students versus high school student and teachers

• Understanding the relationships of students to other students, *depending on the context of the college or vocational setting*

• Having the skills needed to function in an independent way with regard to personal care, finances, phone skills, self-advocacy skills, and independent study skills
Work settings: soft skills

- Understanding the “rules” of the employment setting vs. the expectations in the work setting
- Understanding the relationship between employer and employee
- Developing positive relationships with co-workers and administrators
- Understanding the implicit implications for promotions and advancement
- Developing increased responsibility in the work setting with the understanding that this leads to greater advancement
Self-soothing and self-regulation

How do we systematically address problems with managing emotions and behavior?
Stress Reduction
What is the goal for the child?

- comfort/socializing with immediate family
- socialize with extended family & friends
- having a friend to play with/hang out with
- socializing in a formal group
- socializing informally with peer group
- socializing with opposite sex groups
- Intimate relationship
Common interests
Visual strategies and supports

- Picture cues
- Picture sequences
- Schedules
- iPrompt

(grooming & dress; self-soothing and self-regulation strategies)
Peer mentoring

*mentor* \ˈmen-to(ə)r\ Gk.

- *n.* a wise and trusted counselor or teacher; an influential sponsor or support; a tutor
- *v.* to coach, instruct, guide, advise, aide

( grooming; dress; learning about privacy; the language of being a girl)
Narrative work (for teaching social behavior & social conversation)

- Use digital photographs of the girl/woman in context
- Provide picture sequences
- Add simple text to each photo/ or no text if possible
- Create a simple narrative of an experience that the individual can read/look at repeatedly
Video Modeling

Social behavior; social conversation; social problem solving

- 1st person
- Peer models
- Adult models
Direct Instruction

- Step-by-step instruction - include *checking*
- Reinforcement
- Repetition
- Chaining of desired behaviors
- Training in multiple contexts
- Fading of reinforcement
- Continue to provide cues in contexts over time to promote maintenance of the skill

(great for personal care objectives)
Self-monitoring

- checklists
- visual schedules
- smart phone
- watch with alarm

Personal care and independent living skills
Thanks!!!!!

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