

## BOOK REVIEW

**Girls and Autism: Educational, Family and Personal Perspectives** Edited by Barry Carpenter, Francesca Happé, and Jo Egerton, 2019 London, UK: Taylor & Francis, 194 pp., A\$62.99, ISBN 978-0-8153-7726-9

‘Where are all the autistic<sup>1</sup> girls?’ This is the question posed at the beginning of *Girls and Autism*, a recently published collection of essays edited by Barry Carpenter, Francesca Happé, and Jo Egerton. One answer appears to be that autistic girls are more present than prevalence studies and anecdotal observations have ever acknowledged. The ratio of boys to girls diagnosed with autism has for many years been accepted as 4:1, but recent studies referenced in this book indicate that the ratio is much closer to 2:1. In this collection of essays authored by autistic women, family members of autistic women, as well as educators and academic researchers, we learn about the implications of accurately recognising this increased prevalence.

The book is divided into five sections that cover the lived experiences of autistic girls, scholarly research, reflections on education, adolescent social health, and adult success beyond school. What becomes apparent across this collection of essays is that there are countless other dimensions to understanding autism as experienced by women than autism literature has traditionally considered. Take Chapter 9, in which Sarah Wild, headteacher at Limpsfield Grange School, a school for girls on the autism spectrum, explores the idea of building a specialist curriculum for autistic girls that focuses, in part, on the critical role that the language of emotions plays in this educational space. Educators and therapists are described as working alongside girls to continually expand the ways the girls can communicate their feelings and the needs associated with their peer relationships and their understanding of self. The author notes that visitors to the school ‘always comment on how chatty and open and reflective the girls are, and how much laughter there is’ (p. 77). This description is, in itself, one that might further build our comprehension of how social traits can present across the autism spectrum in ways that vary from traditional recognition.

The girls themselves provide their own reflections on autism in Chapter 5. ‘For me, autism isn’t something that I really think about’ (p. 34), says Year 9 student Lauren, while a Year 10 peer Phoebe considers the diagnostic criteria for autism and says, ‘To be honest, I don’t feel like that at all’ (p. 35). What these girls reveal through their lack of association with autism is something that is reinforced through the research: what we think we know about autism is often what we know about boys with autism. In Chapter 2, some of the reasons within academic research that girls have been excluded from a range of autism studies are explored. One reason is said to be the assumption that there are far fewer autistic girls to recruit and hence participant numbers will be stronger with a focus on solely recruiting boys. It is not difficult to see how this approach creates a self-fulfilling projection of a very particular type of autism that might exclude the unique variance of the spectrum exhibited by autistic girls.

Tough questions about this variance and its emerging implications are asked by family members who contribute chapters to the book. In Chapter 4 we hear from Carrie Grant, a mother of two autistic girls who asks, ‘Is it inevitable that all girls on the autism spectrum develop mental health problems or is it that school is so difficult that mental health problems occur?’ (p. 31). In the

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<sup>1</sup>Identity-first, rather than people-first, language has been adopted in this book review to mirror the language used in *Girls and Autism* and which is preferred by many in the autistic community.

epilogue of the book, Wenn Lawson, an autistic lecturer, author, and trans-guy, refers to research that shows that although autistic girls might readily be able to accurately answer questions about emotions, social skills, and how friendships and relationships work, the task of successfully implementing these skills can be a far more difficult enterprise. This literal understanding and recall of social behavioural norms is one reason that the needs of autistic girls can be overlooked as they seek to minimise the external presence of their own challenges. Across the book, the value of communicating, of demonstrating to these girls that they are being heard, of constructing ever new ways to open pathways for emotional expression and trust, and of recognising the types of strengths and interests that autistic girls can gravitate towards are shown to be important ways we can support the wellbeing of these girls as they grow into increasingly independent women in the world.

The broad scope of voices that fill this book, from young autistic girls and established autistic women sharing their wisdom, to the families, educators, support groups and researchers who work with them, is one reason this book is so important and such a success at shining new light on our understanding of such previously misunderstood members of our community. This book will be an invaluable resource for all those who work and live with autistic girls, as well as, of course, to those girls and women themselves. In learning more about girls and autism, we ultimately learn more about autism and the multitude of ways the autism spectrum contributes to our shared human experience.

Craig Warren Smith  
The Universal Sandpit  
Email: [craig@theuniversalsandpit.org](mailto:craig@theuniversalsandpit.org)  
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