

SEND

Your school has at least one girl on the autistic spectrum

Female pupils are at risk of sexual exploitation and poor mental health because the condition is masked

WILL HAZELL



EVERY SCHOOL has at least one female pupil on the autistic spectrum – a frequently undiagnosed condition in girls that leaves them vulnerable to sexual exploitation – an expert has warned.

Barry Carpenter said that undiagnosed girls were also at greater risk of developing mental health problems. He told *TES* there was “most certainly” a girl with autism in every school in the country. However, many were not identified because “lots of the stuff we use for diagnosis was standardised on men”.

“Every teacher needs to be aware of this,” added Professor Carpenter, chair of the national Autism and Girls Forum.

It used to be thought that boys outnumbered girls on the autistic spectrum by five or even 10 to one. But recent research suggests that there are in fact only two or three times as many boys as girls affected, with many girls missed because their autism manifests itself differently.

Undiagnosed issue

The issue was highlighted in a major *TES* feature last year, and discussed again at a conference in London last month. Francesca Happé, an expert on autism at King’s College London, told the event that many girls with anxiety, eating disorders and other mental health conditions had undiagnosed autism.

“When they get to a clinician, the clinician diagnoses that problem but doesn’t look any further,” she said.

One recent study involving a small sample found that seven out of 10 young women presenting with eating disorders fulfilled the diagnostic criteria of autism.

Picking up the autism as well as the mental health condition was crucial, Professor Happé

said, because it might “change the way the appropriate treatment can be found”.

Professor Carpenter said teachers should be aware that girls might also be more effective at hiding their autism than boys.

“If a teacher cracks a joke, the girl with autism in the class will actually scan the room very quickly and check that every other girl is laughing and she’ll be the last one to laugh,” the honorary professor at the University of

Worcester said. “[She] doesn’t understand the humour – but she’ll laugh.”

But this “camouflaging” often led to problems. “They’re vulnerable because they are mimicking and camouflaging their autism and it’s exhausting, so they’re getting mental health issues,” Professor Carpenter said.

‘Groomed by gangs’

According to the academic, the desire of autistic girls “to be like the others” also means they are at greater risk of sexual exploitation.

“When girls start to say, ‘Oh I’ve got a boyfriend’, they then want a boyfriend, but they get themselves into risky situations,” he said.

Girls with autism could end up being sexually groomed by gangs, he added. They could develop a belief that “the only way to have a relationship with a man is to enter into a relationship sexually”.

But Professor Carpenter said that safeguarding autistic girls could be challenging because a “black-and-white thinker” who was “desperate for friends” might believe that engaging in risky behaviour was better than the apparent alternative – being “excluded” and “isolated”.

He suggested that girls with autism could be supported by giving them a “space to talk” and learn “social strategies” – for example, through a weekly gender-specific lunch group.

The Department for Education needed to commission research to develop the right strategies, the academic said. “There is no educational research happening,” he warned. “We’re doing best-guess stuff in schools... there’s no tried-and-tested methodology.”

‘Girls are vulnerable because they camouflage their autism’

Girls with autism: three things every teacher can do

Robyn Steward, 30, has Asperger’s syndrome and a number of other disabilities.

She is an autism consultant, artist, musician and broadcaster, and the author of *The Independent Woman’s Handbook for Super Safe Living on the Autistic Spectrum*.

At school, Steward was bullied and regularly called a “spastic” and a “retard”.

While she feels she was let down by the system, there was one teacher, Ernest, who she says “really changed my life”. She adds: “He did three things...that any [teacher] can do for an autistic person.”

Listen

Because she often had difficulty processing her feelings, Steward carried “all this stuff around with

me” that she needed to “offload”.

Ernest was willing to listen.

“Pretty much every day, I would go up into the IT suite and I would just talk to him. Sometimes when things are bad in my life I actually need to offload. Ernest just seemed to get that,” she says. “I felt that the school system didn’t value me and Ernest did.”

Set clear boundaries

“Soft boundaries that make the world easier to understand can be so important for autistic people,” Steward says. “I have found, and I know other [autistic] people have found, the world is so confusing, there’s so much information you have to process all the time.”

This meant she was always asking questions at school

– but was given short shrift by most of her teachers.

“Rather than reject me, which is what most people did – ‘Oh Robyn, go away!’ – Ernest understood. So he just gave me a three-a-day question limit.

“That was a clear boundary and it meant I wasn’t constantly being rejected.”

‘Work with what you’ve got’

While Steward left school with no GCSEs, she did better at college and got good grades at university. Over time she learned to play to her strengths and use her talents – and Ernest helped her on her way.

“The third thing Ernest did – and this was about working with what you’ve got – he gave me the opportunity to take photographs in school, for the school website.”