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STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE: REMOVING BARRIERS

SUPPORTING GIRLS WITH AUTISM THROUGH PE AND SCHOOL SPORT



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Through an innovative new programme, girls with autism spectrum conditions (ASC) are being given a voice and chance to connect with their peers.

In an ever more 'connected' world, girls in particular find the demands of our current environment increasingly complex. Friendships often hinge on attention to feelings and rapid communication – in person or via social media. No matter how much they want to connect, girls with ASC can find themselves 'locked out'.

Autism is a life-long developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others¹. People with autism may see, hear and feel the world differently to others. As a practitioner you may see girls in your school copying or mimicking behaviour from others around them. They can appear exhausted due to the constant effort to appear similar to other people.

Often, in the case of very young girls, they are unaware that they are 'masking' in the first place. Recent statistics highlight that ASC are the primary type of need for pupils with a statement / Education Health Care plan, and numbers are rapidly increasing². Research suggests there is also a very pronounced gender difference – with the ratio of females to males typically reported as one to four. This could be due to the challenges around diagnosis, particularly in girls due to their abilities to mask and be almost like 'social chameleons'.



This results in the likelihood that girls with ASC in schools often find their needs are not identified or understood. The social impairments, isolation and social exclusion of girls with ASC are most likely to fall 'under the radar', with girls more likely to receive targeted support for learning and behavioural needs than for improving social skills and building friendships³.

Through 'Find your Tribe' Youth Sport Trust Lead Inclusion Schools⁴ are exploring, designing and developing innovative ways to support girls with ASC through PE and sport. 'Find your Tribe' is a practice-led, enquiry-based approach that considers delivery style as

well as giving recommendations on the tools needed to increase girls' voices and help them to find their team of people.

One of the tools being used is 'Chateez' cards where girls, through inclusive focus groups, are encouraged to express their feelings and emotions through phone emoji style cards.

"Sometimes it's hard to open up about your feelings, particularly if you have a million thoughts running through your head and Chateez cards are there to spark conversations among children, young people and adults" Natasha Rego, Silver Lined Horizons, Founder.

Through the use of these cards girls with ASC are telling us:

- **Belonging** – to a club and team is a key feature for girls. Many girls involved have never been a part of a school sports team or event and consequently have not experienced the social benefits.
- **Ownership** – identifying girls' interests is key, for example selecting the sport club name or logo.
- **Individual targets** – for girls with ASC, group PE can be challenging due to the increased demand on their already heightened sensory systems. This can cause anxiety and stress, which can affect ability to participate and achieve.
- **Timings** – schools involved recommend 20 to 30 minute blocks of activity followed by a break or change of task to promote enjoyment and minimise disengagement.

To support schools more broadly in ensuring young people with ASC have the opportunity to participate in a high quality and inspiring PE and school sport offer, the YST developed an 'All About Autism, All About Me' resource with Clare Mount Specialist Sports College in Merseyside to share examples of practical educational tools such as sensory circuits to both regulate and energise pupils. Doing one of these at the beginning of the school day can support pupils to regulate sensory processing, having a positive impact on concentration and attention, whilst lessening anxiety and unwanted behaviours.

Done right, PE and sport can be a powerful tool to support all pupils with ASC to develop physically, emotionally and socially.



For more information:

- To access 'All About Autism, All About Me' visit bit.ly/sendgateway
- To find out more about girls with ASC, access training (free for one year) available on bit.ly/train_autism
- Engage with other professionals such as your SENCo or Pastoral lead in school and also consider schools in your area. Speak with your local YST Lead Inclusion School to access Chateez emoji cards and receive support on facilitating inclusive focus groups. www.youthsporttrust.org/inclusion-lead-schools
- To access TOP Sportsability for guidance on inclusive sport visit topsportsability.co.uk
- YST School Open Day on 29 April 2019, 9am-2.20pm, All About Autism, All About Me, Clare Mount Specialist Sports College, www.youthsporttrust.org/school-open-days

¹ www.autism.org.uk

² www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-january-2018

³ Girls and Autism: 'Flying under the radar' Nasen, 2016

⁴ www.youthsporttrust.org/inclusion-lead-schools

⁵ This is supported by research which suggests that to maximise the attention of young people with additional support needs, tasks should be kept brief or structure longer tasks into short blocks (SPELD Foundation LITERACY AND CLINICAL SERVICES, date unknown)
There should be frequent movement around the room to maximise engagement from the students (City of York Council, 2008)