



UNDERSTANDING NEURODIVERGENCE IN GIRLS

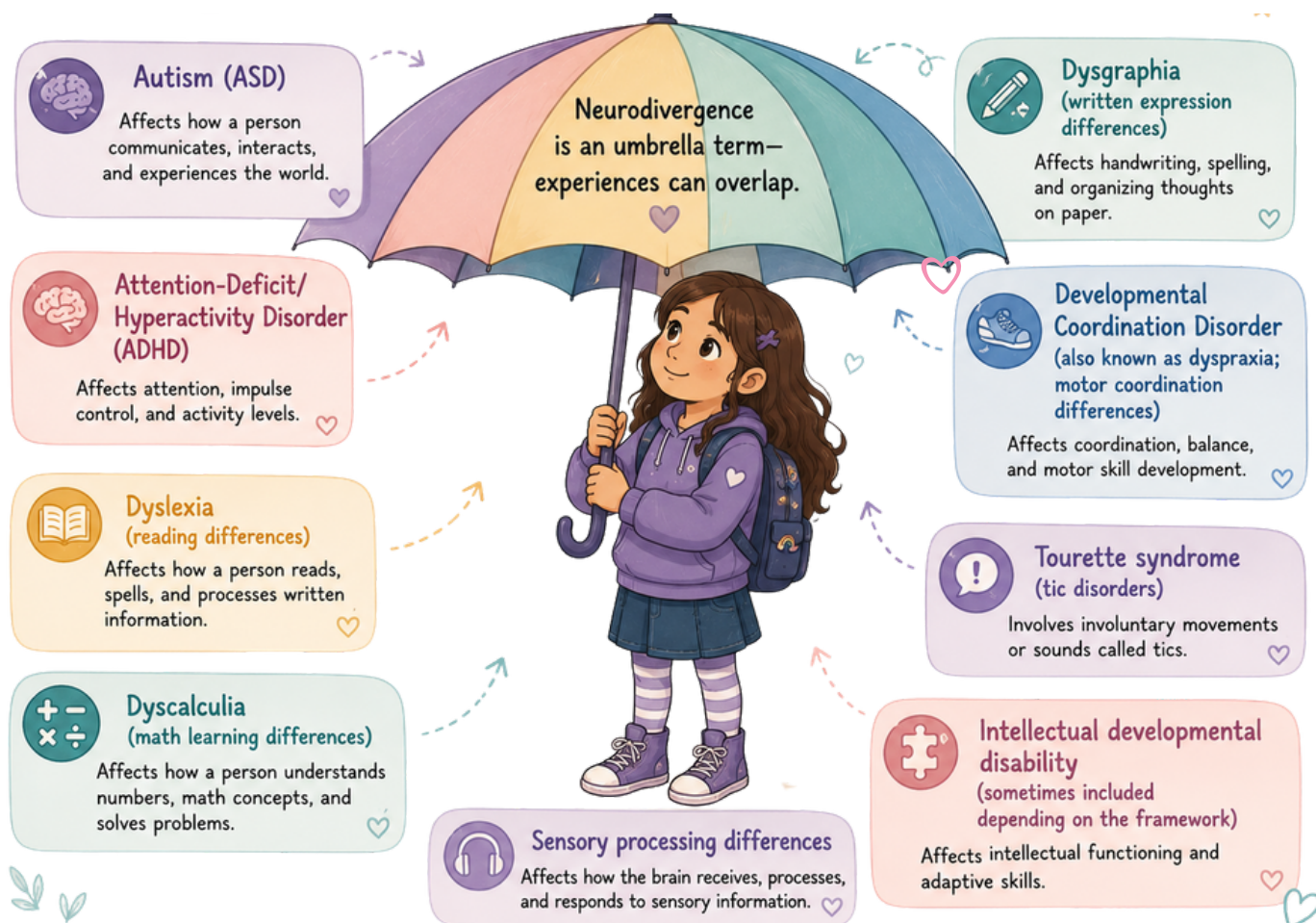
A Parent & Teacher Guide

Girls with autism and ADHD are often missed because their presentation can look very different from the “typical” signs people expect to see. Many girls work incredibly hard to keep up socially, mask their difficulties, and appear as though they are coping at school, even when they are feeling completely overwhelmed underneath.

WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term describing natural variations in the way people think, learn and interact with the world.

Common diagnoses that fall under neurodivergence umbrella include:





WHAT NEURODIVERGENCE CAN LOOK LIKE IN GIRLS

Neurodivergent girls may present with a mix of neurodevelopmental traits in ways that differ from more commonly recognised male profiles. These presentations are often more subtle and internalised, and can be easily overlooked or misinterpreted in everyday settings. For example neurodivergence may present as:



ATTENTION & EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

- Daydreaming or “zoning out”
- Forgetting instructions or losing items
- Starting tasks but struggling to finish
- Asking the same questions repeatedly for reassurance or processing
- Difficulty organising belongings or schoolwork
- Appearing capable but inconsistent
- Hyperfocusing on interests while struggling with less preferred tasks



EMOTIONAL REGULATION

- Emotional meltdowns immediately after school
- Holding emotions in all day, then “exploding” at home
- School refusal or school avoidance
- Anxiety and perfectionism
- Low frustration tolerance
- Frequent crying or emotional overwhelm
- Burnout from trying to keep up socially and academically



PHYSICAL & SENSORY SIGNS

- Frequent stomach aches, headaches, nausea, or fatigue
- Sensitivity to noise, clothing textures, smells, lights, or busy environments
- Difficulty sleeping
- Exhaustion after social interaction or school
- Needing movement, fidgeting, or sensory input to focus
- May use a different voice or accent



SOCIAL DIFFERENCES

- Copying peers to fit in (“masking”)
- One intense friendship rather than groups
- Appearing socially confident but struggling underneath
- Rehearsing conversations beforehand
- Difficulty understanding hidden social rules
- Talking excessively when comfortable, but becoming quiet in unfamiliar settings
- Strong sense of justice and fairness





WHY GIRLS ARE OFTEN MISSED

Research shows girls are frequently under-identified because many do not fit traditional stereotypes based on male presentations. Girls often:



Mask their difficulties socially
They may appear confident, okay, or unbothered while struggling underneath.



Copy peers to blend in
They may imitate others' interests, behaviours, or opinions to fit in.



Internalise distress rather than externalise it
They are more likely to feel anxious, sad, or overwhelmed inside rather than outwardly act out.



Perform well academically despite high anxiety
They may achieve and seem capable, but experience constant worry, pressure, and self-doubt.



Use compensatory strategies that hide support needs
They find ways to manage, prepare, and cope so their struggles aren't always visible to others.

As a result instead of being diagnosed, they are often labelled as:



Anxious
When they worry often or experience anxiety.



Dramatic
When they have big feelings or struggle to regulate emotions.



Lazy
When they seem unmotivated or overwhelmed.



Oppositional
When they resist, shut down, or say "no."



Overly sensitive
When they are affected deeply by things others may not notice.



Perfectionistic
When they set extremely high standards for themselves.



WHAT CHARACTERISTICS MAY SHE HAVE?

Girls with autism and ADHD are often seen as:

- ♥ “Shy”
- ♥ “Sensitive”
- ♥ “Emotional”
- ♥ “Chatty”
- ♥ “Perfectionistic”
- ♥ “Anxious”
- ♥ “Well behaved”



Because many girls mask their difficulties, teachers may not immediately recognise the underlying neurodivergence.

HOW NEURODIVERGENCE CAN LOOK AT SCHOOL

Neurodivergent traits can present differently across home and school settings. Girls often mask at school, which can make it harder for teachers to notice their underlying needs. However, there are usually subtle signs that can still be observed when you know what to look for.

IN THE CLASSROOM, IT MAY LOOK LIKE:

- ✓ Asking repetitive questions for reassurance or clarification
- ✓ Difficulty transitioning between tasks
- ✓ Trouble following multi-step instructions
- ✓ Forgetting homework, books, or equipment
- ✓ Slow task completion despite understanding content
- ✓ Difficulty starting written work
- ✓ Becoming overwhelmed in noisy classrooms
- ✓ Emotional shutdowns or withdrawal
- ✓ Appearing distracted or “not listening”
- ✓ Perfectionism leading to avoidance
- ✓ Strong academic skills but poor coping skills
- ✓ Increased dysregulation after unstructured times such as lunch or group work





HELPFUL SCHOOL SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

Supportive teachers can make a significant difference to a child's wellbeing, confidence, and participation. Some ways schools and teachers can better support neurodivergent girls include:



SUPPORT ATTENTION & LEARNING

- ♥ Break tasks into smaller steps
- ♥ Use visual schedules and checklists
- ♥ Provide written and verbal instructions
- ♥ Allow extra processing time
- ♥ Reduce workload when overwhelmed
- ♥ Check understanding privately



You've got this,
one step
at a time.



SUPPORT EMOTIONAL REGULATION

- ♥ Create predictable routines
- ♥ Prepare students for transitions and changes
- ♥ Offer calm spaces or regulation breaks
- ♥ Respond to distress with curiosity, not punishment
- ♥ Recognise that meltdowns are signs of overwhelm, not manipulation



It's okay
to take a
break.



SUPPORT SENSORY NEEDS

- ♥ Reduce unnecessary noise where possible
- ♥ Allow movement breaks or fidget tools
- ♥ Offer flexible seating options
- ♥ Be mindful of sensory triggers in the classroom



SUPPORT SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

- ♥ Avoid forcing eye contact
- ♥ Respect different communication styles
- ♥ Support safe friendships
- ♥ Reduce pressure to "fit in"
- ♥ Encourage strengths and interests



Different
is not less.
Different is
just different.



THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

Many girls mask their difficulties at school, meaning they may appear capable while quietly struggling with anxiety, sensory overwhelm, attention, emotional regulation, or social demands.

Without appropriate accommodations, students may spend most of their energy trying to cope rather than learning. Accommodations help reduce stress, overwhelm, and burnout, allowing students to access the curriculum more successfully.

Supporting regulation, sensory needs, and executive functioning can improve participation, confidence, emotional wellbeing, and school engagement. Early understanding and support can reduce the risk of school refusal, chronic anxiety, low self-esteem, and mental health difficulties over time.

Accommodations are not about lowering expectations — they are about removing barriers so students can demonstrate their strengths and abilities. Small changes, such as providing movement breaks, visual supports, flexibility with workload, quiet spaces, transition supports, or extra processing time, can make a significant difference and benefit all students, not just neurodivergent learners.

Feeling understood and accepted at school can have a powerful impact on a student's sense of safety, belonging, and identity.

WHAT NEURODIVERGENT GIRLS BRING TO THE CLASSROOM

When accommodations are provided, neurodivergent girls strengths are able to shine. These may include:

CREATIVITY AND IMAGINATION

♥ They see the world in unique ways and turn ideas into something beautiful.



DEEP EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

♥ They feel deeply and care so much about others and the world around them.



STRONG PASSIONS AND INTERESTS

♥ They dive deep into what they love and become true experts in their own way.



CURIOSITY AND INNOVATION

♥ They ask questions, explore ideas, and love to solve problems in creative ways.



BIG-PICTURE THINKING

♥ They make connections others might miss and see the bigger picture.



HONESTY AND AUTHENTICITY

♥ They value truth and are often refreshingly real and genuine.



STRONG MEMORY FOR PREFERRED TOPICS

♥ They remember incredible details about the things they love.



DETERMINATION AND PERSISTENCE

♥ When they set their mind on something, they keep going—even when it's hard.



STRONG SENSE OF FAIRNESS AND JUSTICE

♥ They notice what's not fair and want to make the world a better place for everyone.





FINAL THOUGHTS

Neurodivergent girls are often working extremely hard behind the scenes - even when they 'look fine' from the outside to people who don't know them well.

When adults recognise the signs early and provide supportive, strengths-based environments, girls are more likely to experience:



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