

# Colouring Outside The Lines

## Ask The Experts...

This is the second in a series of Ask The Experts publications designed to connect parents of autistic girls with autistic women.

As parents of autistic girls, members of Colouring Outside The Lines were asked what questions they would like to ask autistic women in order to help them support their daughters as effectively as possible. As a group, we strongly believe that by connecting our daughters with the autistic community, especially autistic females, we can ensure that their future is bright and their minds inspired.

Our first group of experts have kindly agreed to respond to various questions about school, support, diagnosis, relationships & careers.

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### Sarah Hendrickx

Autistic adult, author and autism consultant.

Sarah has been a keynote autism speaker at national autism conferences in the UK and overseas and specialises in speaking on all aspects of autism and Asperger syndrome including relationships, women, gender differences, employment and alcohol.

She has written six books on the subject of autism. Sarah was diagnosed autistic with Asperger syndrome at the age of 43 - after she had written several books on the subject.

Autism in women is so invisible that Sarah did not recognise it in herself! Sarah speaks openly about her wide and varied life experiences in her talks as an autism speaker, including 30+ failed jobs, life-long mental health difficulties and numerous disastrous relationships - all of which she shares with humour and brutal honesty.

## What are the best bits about being autistic?

That's tough to answer as I have no idea what it would be to be anything else. However, it does appear to me that I am more curious and excitable than most people of my age (49) and much more willing to do things that other people appear to be unable to do due to social constraints and the fear of what people will think of them.

I mean fun stuff like running on escalators and doing silly things in shops. As I am largely unaware of these rules and therefore not subject to them, I suppose that an advantage to being autistic is that sometimes I seem to be having more fun!

## Did you have an early 'diagnosis'? Did that help? If not, do you think an early 'diagnosis' would have helped?

I don't have the imagination to be able to know how it would have felt to be told earlier than in my 40s. I am happy not to have known earlier in some ways.

It may have saved me a lot of mental health problems and disasters, but I don't know that I would have been as resilient as I am now. I had to find my own way through with no knowledge or support and although I wouldn't recommend that we do that to our younger girls, I do think I am strong because I had no choice.

## How can parents help their daughters to understand/accept their diagnosis?

Show them people like Rosie King on Youtube and read Alis Rowe's Curly Hair Project books.

There are many young autistic women sharing their stories on social media which can show other girls that they belong to a very cool club and that they are perfectly fine just as they are.

## What is one thing that very positively affected your self worth and made you feel wanted and loved?

I have an autistic son who is now 20 and I think that the main thing that has benefited him is that he was completely accepted all through his life.

We respected his view of the world as valid — if he needed his mayo in one particular spot on his plate then we valued the importance of that to him and made sure it happened. As a result he is a capable young man with good self-esteem.

## How can I let my daughter know I empathize and support her, without stressing her further?

Leave her alone if that's what she wants. Hugging is just more sensory input, no matter how well intended. Just sit quietly next to her if she's OK with that.

The presence of a person is sometimes all that is required to not feel alone. Touch and speech are just more things to process.

## How can I help my daughter to develop and maintain friendships without being pushy?

As an adult, I have my autistic partner and 2 autistic female friends that I see maybe once a month for a couple of hours. We do an activity (cinema/food) and then leave. We rarely contact each other in between.

I have a few other friends who I only see once or twice a year even though they don't live far. They are autistic as well. I knew most of these people before any of us knew we were autistic, we just found each other. I am sharing this to give you some perspective of what might be an acceptable level of interaction for your daughter.

At the age of 12 she probably wants to be like her peers but wouldn't be able to handle a big and busy social circle with lots of maintenance to do. If she can find 1 or 2 like-minded friends (which may not be girls), she may find that feels valuable and not too much to manage. People are wonderful, exhausting and terrifying all at the same time. My capacity for people is small and I can't manage more than an hour or so with anyone. This needs to be taken into account when considering what her social life will look like.

## How do we educate our daughter about relationships and sexuality so that they are safe & can express their wishes

Good books on the subject of puberty, safety, relationships by Lianne Holliday Willey, Robyn Steward, Debi Allen and Shana Nichols.

## How do you deal with stress and pressure/demands so you can be both functional and happy in a working environment.

I have had over 35 jobs before knowing I was autistic and they never really worked out for me. For me self-employment is the only way, although this is not the same for everybody.

I think it is very important to know your own strengths and limitations and ensure that you can do what is required of you without becoming unwell. I have limited capacity for chat, environments (air con, lighting, noise etc.) but can work for many hours alone and when focused on a task in a comfortable place. It's all about finding the balance for the individual.

Did anyone ever suggest you should restrict your ambitions because of your autism? Or did it simply help you understand what working environment/ profession would be a perfect fit for you?

No one knew about my autism when I was growing up or trying to find work that fitted me. It has been a process of trial and error, but it has been very important for me to understand how best to use my skills and to accept that being clever is not enough to be able to cope in a work place. I have far less capacity than most people and will never reach the potential that people thought I had in a conventional career sense because I cannot cope with management, colleagues or environments. I have had to make my own path and do things my own way to be able to support myself and not be constantly stressed and ill.

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Claire Evans-Williams

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Coming up  
in our  
Ask The  
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