

Parents or caregivers often find themselves wondering what they did wrong; the reality is they have done nothing wrong. As parents/caregivers, we need to understand the early symptoms and advocate for increased screenings and evaluations at an earlier age, because the later the diagnosis the more difficult it is to catch-up our children in the areas of appropriate behaviors and social skills/necessary life skills. There are many signs to look for, that are often ignored, overlooked or passed off as shy or even considered “normal” for girls. Females with autism often present differently from males, and can exhibit or display the following behaviors and characteristics:

- tend to be more aware of the need to socialize and will copy or mimic what their peers do for social interaction
- limited interests that are very restricted, but ones that often focus on animals or people (can change over time)
- tend to be shy or passive
- have increased and more robust language & linguistic abilities
- sensory challenges
- very low frustration level, including age-inappropriate meltdowns
- episodes of depression, anxiety and moodiness with signs of obsessive compulsive disorder (statistically higher rates of depression, anxiety and eating disorders in females)
- difficulty making and/or keeping friends
- unaware or not interested in fashion, hair styles and social status (ie: what’s popular and trendy)
- extremely shy and quiet, often to the point of hiding and avoiding social interactions
- social communications to be increasingly difficult and stressful during puberty/teen years
- Epileptic seizures, often unnoticed because they are often silent seizures;

Bringing up a child with autism can be challenging and stressful, which is why it’s so important for parents to become educated advocates for their children. As the parent of a child with autism, the best thing you can do is to get a diagnosis and start interventions and treatment right away. If you think something doesn’t seem right with your child, don’t wait to seek help or assume your child will outgrow behaviors. Studies have shown that the earlier children with autism get help, the greater their chance of treatment success. Early diagnosis with early interventions and therapies could mean a much more happy and productive life for your child and a lot less stressful for the family as a whole!

Community Resources for Parents

Local (Maryland):

- Maryland Coalition of Families: <http://www.mdcoalition.org/>
 Wrap-Around-Maryland: <http://www.wraparoundmd.com/>
 Parents Place of Maryland: <https://www.ppmo.org/>
 The Arc of the Chesapeake: <https://www.thearccc.org/>
 Pathfinders for Autism: www.pathfindersforautism.org
 Pediatric Developmental Disorders (PDD) Clinic at Kennedy Krieger Institute: <http://www.kennedykrieger.org/patient-care/patient-care-programs/outpatient-programs/pediatric-developmental-disorders-clinic>
 The Kinera Foundation: <https://www.kinera.org/about-us.html>

National:

- Autism Speaks: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/>
 Autism Navigator: <https://autismnavigator.com/>
 Spark for Autism: https://sparkforautism.org/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_term=%2Bautism%20%2Bresearch%20%2Bintitute&utm_campaign=q-us-search-nb-autism-bmm&utm_content=451367211487&qclid=CjwKCAjwsO_4BRBBEiwAyagRTVLdc8RTIk5VF-cNABCn9bUCdojf127ON_5BUz0zDEiv3ebpw1p4AfRoCqaUQAvD_BwE



Amanda

My Story @ 16



I was born a healthy baby. But it seems there were always oddities. I did walk by the time I was one but because my mom kept encouraging. I never crawled through.

My Gastrointestinal issues started at five weeks and have never gone away. I didn't talk until after I was two and potty-trained until between three and four years. My momma, poppy and mom-mom were always encouraging me throughout my development.

I never made my own friends, but my mom had me in many activities and arranged playdates. I found it easy to play along; we lived in the small town of Centreville on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. At five, I started medication for ADD. Over the years, I saw several psychiatrists, was given several diagnosis, including bi-polar and borderline personality disorder to name a few. I was on a lot of medication that made me very moody. Needless to say, my mom removed me from their care fairly quickly.

I never had a dad in my life so when my poppy died when I was 8 and we found we had to move shortly later, I was devastated. We moved to Easton with my mom's boyfriend. She put me in a parochial school, but they didn't provide the support and services that I needed. I really hated leaving the only home I had I ever known. It wasn't

long before I started to pull my hair out. My mom had saved money and bought us a nice home, but I was so sad. Even though she and I had a stable place of our own, we argued a lot. My mom became so worried and put me on the list to be evaluated for Autism at Kennedy Krieger.

I continued to pull my hair throughout 8th grade and became the target of bullying. I started to suffer from Post Traumatic Syndrome Disorder symptoms, yet the school never told my mom. I was in a program where my therapist would see me at school but I starting ditching those sessions. My mom didn't know for months.

I didn't attend classes the last part of my 8th grade and relied on my mom to help me complete work. At the end of April of the 8th grade year, we finally got an appointment after nearly nine months of waiting at Kennedy Krieger Institute (KKI). I was diagnosed with ASD level 1, ADHD inattentive presentation, unspecified anxiety disorder and trichotillomania. The emotions of the diagnosis are hard to explain, ASD!. Really? But finally an explanation to my feeling of being so different!

Ninth grade came and it was even worse. I had taken to wearing a hat to hide my hair. I refused to have any part of anyone and withdrew completely. The psychiatrist changed my medications 25 times in 5 months, I found out I was anemic, likely IBS and spent two weeks home from school, B-12 deficient, and epileptic. My mom was struggling to help me keep up in school and I began to not care. Music had been the one thing I cared about but the high school director was nothing like my middle school director. I was ready to quit. My mom and the advocates she found kept fighting, I was lucky to spend a week at CampWright last summer. It was a week I can't explain. I had hoped to go back this year as a counselor in training but COVID-19 has changed everything.

I worked so hard to even be accepted into National Honor Society and now I feel COVID-19 that has changed everything. I really hope and pray for everyone because I know I'm not alone, but it sure feels like that a lot of the time.

However, I have learned to advocate for myself with a lot of encouragement from my mom and therapist. I was able to attend classes. I played UNIFIED tennis, joined the FFA and almost performed in the pit for the school play, but COVID-19 stopped that. I'm very close to completing my Girl Scout Gold Award. I got a part-time job on my own and I go my Learner's Driving permit. I still don't have close friends, but I hope someday that changes.

Autism is Often Overlooked in

Information and statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggests autism spectrum disorder (ASD) affects one in 54 children in the United States across all ethnic groups and is four times as prevalent in boys than in girls. One reason is because girls on the spectrum, particularly girls with high-functioning autism, learn to hide their social skill deficiencies and differences than boys. Parents of girls with autism have observed that their daughters work so hard focusing on solving the social puzzle and assimilating throughout the day in school, that by the time they come home to their safe place, they experience meltdowns, frustration, sadness and even depression.