

Gender, Autism (ASD) and PDA:

Why Support Matters



Gender and special needs including ASD and PDA is an interesting topic and one that may not often be discussed.

We therefore asked Klaudia Matasovska, a PhD student who is researching LGBT inclusion with pupils with SEND, to tell us about her ideas and experiences. Prior to her research, Klaudia qualified as a teacher with QTS and PGCE, and also has a MA degree in Education and a BA (Hons) Degree in English Language and Literature.

My Personal Story

I was 5 when I first realised the importance of one's gender identity being 'truly seen' by others. One day my father decided to take me to the hairdressers for a haircut. He asked for my hair to be cut very short resulting in me crying over the loss of my long hair. I loved that long hair. I liked how it felt and how I could style it in different ways. It made me happy to have it. It felt like me.

Unfortunately for me, my father thought short hair would be more practical and would suit me better. I disagreed but the hair got cut short anyway. The following day, my new look surprised my kindergarten peers and my day got worse when the hired photographer asked me to "stand in the row for the boys" whilst taking a picture of my whole class.

In my confusion I simply did as I was told by this stranger whilst my teachers quietly looked on and my female peers laughed in amusement. I remember feeling very upset when I saw the

photograph for the first time. I looked (and felt) misgendered in this photo and it hurt. Today this photo is a reminder of what this experience has taught me, namely that:

Firstly, *a child's voice matters.*

Secondly, *assuming a child's gender identity can be harmful to them.*

My Research about Gender Development



What inspired my decision to conduct PhD research about LGBT inclusion with children and young people with SEND was my LGBT inclusion-inspired work with my former pupils which seemed to bring them lots of joy and increased their awareness of LGBT concepts. I have an extensive SEN teacher background, and this combined with my current career working as a researcher enables me to talk about the SEND LGBT intersection from multiple angles. I am often asked about my research and it's good to see that parents and educators are seeking more information regarding the SEND LGBT research area.

Being 'Non-Binary' – is it a trend?

Occasionally I get approached by people who are of the opinion that autistic children who identify as non-binary are 'just confused about their gender' and this is just some 'trend that will surely pass with time'.

To try to answer this question, this article focuses on the intersections regarding gender, autism and pathological demand avoidance (PDA) and highlights some key information from existing studies in order to shed some light on young people's experiences.

The Importance of Talking about Gender Identity at an Early Age

I am of the view that we should start to talk to children about gender identity from an early age. This is so that when they start thinking about their own gender identity, they will feel a bit more prepared and have some awareness of this concept. If we avoid discussing topics that we don't feel comfortable discussing with children, then they might want to seek information from less credible sources.

Autism, Childhood and Gender

We know from previous studies involving neurotypical children that there is an awareness of gender before the age of 2. However, when it comes to autistic people, research shows that some autistic children view gender as completely irrelevant to their lived experiences as they grow and develop. Many autistic children and adults see gender as not significant. Autistic people often see themselves as gender neutral and autistic females experience gender variance more than autistic males.

What about Pathological Demand Avoidance?

The intersections of autism, childhood and gender are also evident in the PDA community. Some PDA children (who are also on the autistic spectrum) see themselves as gender neutral too. They struggle with demands made by others, including gendered demands. For example, a female PDA child is likely to refuse to give into demands of her as a girl, such as 'go and play with dolls'. PDA children are very sensitive to the language used around them and anything that feels like a request (a demand) can trigger high levels of anxiety in them.

This combined with the fact that many autistic children do not recognise gender as a binary construct, and this 'non-acknowledgement' can affect their gender development.

However, we know that being different is more than ok.

The question then is:

How can we best support neurodiverse children and young people when it comes to their gender identity?

Support Matters



There are various ways to support a child/young person when it comes to their awareness of the concepts of gender identity and gender diversity. Using gender-neutral language with children and young people would be a great start to create a gender-inclusive environment.

Use Gender-Inclusive Language

Phrases, such as 'Hello, everyone.' instead of 'Hi, boys and girls!' or using the words 'many' and 'some' in descriptive sentences might be good examples to start with the introduction of gender-inclusive language. It is important to let children ask questions and let them have opportunities to talk to others about (preferred) pronouns. They should be supported in expressing their gender identity not just through language but also through their choice of clothes, haircuts, make-up and so on.

Teach and Learn in a LGBT Inclusive Way

English and Literature

When it comes to teaching various subjects in an LGBT inclusive way, there are many ways to do so. For example, Literacy lessons could consist of writing activities about famous autistic and gender non-conforming people. Reading literature on gender diversity and families that break traditional models is also a perfect tool for tackling and preventing bullying. Both tutors and parents can invest in books about characters with various gender identities, such as 'I am Jazz' (by Jessica Herthel) which tells Jazz Jennings' story about being a transgender child.

Maths and Numeracy

Numeracy lessons can be adapted in a lot of ways in terms of LGBT inclusion. For instance, you could include people with different types of gender identity when creating tasks for your learners/children, such as collecting and analysing data which involves a variety of choices for gender categories: genderfluid, gender non-conforming, agender, male, female, nonbinary, transman, transwoman, and other.

Art, Music and Other Creative Subjects

When it comes to creative subjects, such as Art and Music, consider learning activities that challenge traditional gender roles. For example, state that pink or red are not necessarily a girl's colours...blue and green are not just for boys...ballet is not only a girl's activity...and so on. Engage children in creative activities based on the work of famous LGBT+ artists, such as Annie Leibovitz, Sam Smith, Caravaggio, etc. Using artists with intersectional identities, such as Frida Kahlo, who was both disabled and bisexual, could enhance their awareness of various intersections, such as the LGBT SEND intersection.

Creating a LGBT safe space

Your LGBT-inclusive activities could include discussions about different types of families and compare them with famous LGBT families to increase children's awareness of the different family lives people lead no matter what the religion, race, etc. Consider establishing 'Rainbow Clubs' involving children and young people in your community to create a safe space in which to enhance children's awareness of the LGBT concepts and broaden their understanding of more 'sensitive' topics, such as identity-based bullying which is common amongst children and young people of school age.

About the author:

Klaudia Matasovska is originally from Slovakia and has lived in the UK since 2002. She is a PhD student in the Department of Educational Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research centres around LGBT inclusion with pupils with SEND. Klaudia has a MA in Education from Goldsmiths, University of London. She also has a BA (Hons) Degree in English Language and Literature from the Open University. Klaudia has an experience of more than 16 years working in SEN schools in London. Prior to her PhD studies, she held a leadership position managing the Behaviour and Attitudes area in a SEN school in London. She is an Associate Lecturer in Education, Inclusion and SEND at the University of Derby and she also works as a researcher at Goldsmiths, University of London.



*If you would like to discuss any of the points mentioned in this blog or share your experiences with autism, PDA and gender development, then please get in touch and contact Klaudia via Twitter: @Klaudinka

