

**Friendship experiences of primary school age girls with
high-functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder:
Parents' and teachers' perspectives**

Joanna Madeleine Tsirgiotis

*This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Honours Degree of Bachelor of Psychology (Honours)*

School of Psychology
The University of Adelaide

October 2016

Word Count- 11,992

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Abstract

Literature pertaining to girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and more specifically high-functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (HFASD), is sparse. Characteristics associated with ASD impact greatly upon one's ability to form and maintain friendships, however how and to what extent this is true for primary school age girls is unknown. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore friendship experiences in this group of girls, including any that may be gender specific, from their parents' and teachers' perspectives. Fourteen participants (eight parents and six teachers) were interviewed surrounding their perceptions of the barriers and strengths surrounding friendships, their importance, and strategies employed to develop them in their daughters or female students with HFASD. The semi-structured interviews were analysed using inductive thematic analysis and results triangulated between participant samples. Fourteen themes were identified and categorised into three sections; the objective characteristics of friendships in girls with HFASD, barriers to forming and maintaining friendships, and facilitating factors for social interaction. Although participants perceived friendships as challenging for girls with HFASD, they considered them vital for social development and wellbeing. The typical nature of girls' friendships at this age was perceived to exacerbate social difficulties. Additionally, evidence emerged in support of theories suggesting the current ASD diagnostic criteria may not adequately capture the female phenotype; for example, girls may demonstrate apparently superior social skills learned by mimicking peers. Further research should build upon these findings, perhaps considering the views of girls diagnosed and their peers, in order to better inform gender-specific interventions and supports.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University, and to the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no materials previously published except where due reference is made.

I give consent for this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, to be available for loan and photocopying.

Joanna Madeleine Tsirgiotis

October, 2016

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor, Dr. Clemence Due, for her tireless support and guidance throughout this year. I am very grateful to have had this opportunity to work with, and learn from such a talented researcher, and kind and patient human being. Clemmi, thank you so much for mentoring and inspiring me throughout my project.

My parents, Kathy and Evan, sister, Philippa and boyfriend, Tim, have been pillars of undying encouragement and strength, and I am eternally grateful for all you have done and continue to do for me as I pursue my ambitions in psychology. Thank you also to my extended family, especially my loving Godmother Betty, for sharing your research insights and providing encouragement in bucket loads.

I would like to sincerely thank each and every one of my participants- it has been a privilege and a pleasure to learn from you and to gain precious insight into your lives. I hope that I can do justice to the depth and complexity of your experiences through this work.

Thank you also to Inclusive Sport SA, Novita Children's Services and Autism SA for supporting my study through the dissemination of advertisements.

I dedicate this thesis to my beloved uncle Panagiotis, who passed away in May of this year after a long battle with cancer. Nouno, I am eternally grateful to you for helping me develop the dedication, persistence, passion and grace without which this thesis would remain incomplete.

