

Girls less likely to be diagnosed with special educational needs—new research

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The point when [a child with special educational needs \(SEN\)](#) is

diagnosed is an important moment in their lives.

It allows schools to provide them with access to additional resources, such as [assistive technology](#), specialized teaching programs or the services of professionals such as educational psychologists. These resources help to meet children's academic, emotional or [social needs](#).

But girls and boys don't fare equally. My [recent research](#) with colleague Hsin Wang, conducted using UK government data, found a consistent gender gap in SEN identification.

Of the roughly 1.5 million children in English schools identified for SEN services in 2022-23, only 0.5 million were girls. We found the same pattern across the country, with girls making up between 34% to 36% of all students accessing SEN support in most regions.

In some cases, this may be because certain disabilities are more common in boys. But it is likely to be also down to gender bias in assessment and from those referring children for assessment, as well as girls being better at hiding the challenges they face from some conditions.

An established pattern

When we looked at specific types of special educational needs we found that boys were more likely to be diagnosed for all of them. Boys made up 75% of those diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. They were also about two times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with speech, language and communication disorders, as well as mental health disorders.

We did find some changes when looking at SEN identification rates over time. Between 2015 and 2022, the proportion of girls out of all students identified with autism spectrum disorder increased from 17% to 25%.

Similarly, there was an increase in the proportion of girls being identified for specific learning difficulties—from 38% in 2015 to 44% in 2022.

However, this trend of increasing female identification does not apply to all disability categories. For example, from 2015 to 2022, girls consistently accounted for 44% of those identified with [visual impairments](#).

Past research has suggested several reasons for these [gender differences](#). Biological factors may make boys more vulnerable to certain disabilities. For instance, research has suggested that neurobiological differences between girls and boys make [boys more likely](#) to be diagnosed with speech, language and communication needs.

Gender bias

But [social factors](#) can also play a big part. [Past research](#) has suggested that gender bias among people who refer students for diagnostic assessment, like teachers, contributes to this unequal distribution. [One study of twins](#) reports that teachers may be more likely to refer boys because boys are more disruptive and command more attention, while girls go under the radar.

Research on autism also points out the "[camouflage effect](#)". This means girls may be better at masking or hiding their autism-related challenges, leading to under-identification or delayed diagnosis.

[Some researchers](#) have also reported that assessments used for diagnosis are typically based on male characteristics, and potentially overlook how [autism spectrum disorder](#) presents differently in girls.

This imbalance is likely to mean that some girls are not getting the

recognition and support they need.

[Past research](#) has found that girls have higher rates of mental health disorders such as anxiety compared to boys. Importantly, for some disability categories such as visual impairment or [intellectual disabilities](#), data on gender differences is scarce.

The low number of girls identified with disabilities is worrying. Early detection of disabilities is vital to provide students with necessary services to support their development. Delayed or missed diagnoses for girls can worsen their challenges and affect their long-term outcomes.

Awareness of the differences between [girls](#) and [boys](#) who need support for [special educational needs](#) is crucial. For example, teachers and schools should adopt standardized criteria for SEN diagnosis. This can help reduce subjective judgements that are influenced by biases and ensure fair support for all students.

More information: Johny Daniel et al, Gender differences in special educational needs identification, *Review of Education* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/rev3.3437](#)

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