



Participant Information Sheet for Parents/Caregivers

Name of Department: HaSS, School of Education

Title of the Study: Exploring peer relationships at school

My name is Sheila Cross and I am a Masters student at the University of Strathclyde, studying for my MEd in Autism. I also work at Middletown Centre for Autism, as a Research Projects Manager in the Research and Development team.

Should you require any further information about the study you can contact me at the following email addresses: sheila.cross.2014@uni.strath.ac.uk or sheila.cross@middletownautism.com, alternatively you can contact me by telephone on 028 3751 5750 (from 9.30am to 2pm Monday to Thursday).

What is the purpose of this investigation?

For my Masters dissertation, I am researching the peer relationship experiences of girls aged 13 to 15 years, *with and without autism*, who attend mainstream schools in Northern Ireland. A secondary focus of the study is to address the topic of identify (asking oneself the question "Who am I?" in terms of personality, thoughts or feelings about oneself) and how this personal perspective of identity may or may not influence peer relationships at school. Girls with and without autism will be recruited from single gender and mixed gender schools to further identify if similarities and differences exist between their peer relationships.

Previous research has highlighted that peers are of vital importance in the academic development, psychological wellbeing and social functioning of adolescents. Despite more girls being diagnosed with autism in recent years, those classified as having High Functioning Autism (HFA) and who are likely to attend a mainstream school are an under-researched population yet vulnerable to increased social demands. In Northern Ireland (NI), males are four times more likely to be identified with autism than females (Department of Health NI 2017). To help support teachers to recognise the social difficulties and behaviours displayed by girls with autism compared to their peers and male counterpart's further exploration into the life experiences of adolescent girls with autism within mainstream school settings is vital.

There is a notable lack of research into the voice of the individual with autism. At present, there is no research in Northern Ireland that has explored the first-hand experiences of adolescent girls with autism, in relation to their peer relationships. This study aims to address this gap.

Does your daughter have to take part?

Your daughter should only take part in this study if she wants to. Participation is voluntary. You and your daughter should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time up to the point of analysis. There will be no penalty if you or your daughter decide to stop taking part in this study.

Read the information sheets and consent forms together and decide if you wish your daughter to participate in this study. If you do, complete and sign the consent form and screening questionnaire and return it to me at sheila.cross.2014@uni.strath.ac.uk

What will your daughter do in the Project?

If selected, your daughter will be asked to:

- Complete an adopted version of the Index of Peer Relationships questionnaire. This questionnaire is designed to measure people's feelings towards their peer group. Once completed this questionnaire should be emailed back to me.
- I will set up a closed Facebook group so your daughter can take part in an online discussion group over a four week period. This closed group will ensure that non-members of the group cannot find or join the group if they are added by other members. Rules for participating in the online discussion group will clearly highlight that only I can invite anyone into the group. To further protect the privacy of your daughter I will email you/your daughter with a pseudonym name (a name given for the purpose of anonymity) so she can set up a Facebook account purely for the purposes of this study.
- A list of rules will be provided that your daughter must abide to when participating in the online discussion groups. It is important that should you and your daughter decide to take part in this research study, that you read the rules together to ensure they are fully understood.
- I will then invite your daughter, using their pseudonym name, to log into the discussion group for a period of four weeks.
- On a Monday of each week I will post a series of questions based on a theme for the week. Your daughter will be able to answer these in her own time up until Friday of each week.

Topics of discussions will ask about experiences regarding your daughter's peer relationships at school. For example, each week a different theme will be addressed.

☺ Week 1- Interests, likes and dislikes of school,

☺ Week 2 - Identity

☺ Week 3 - Feelings

☺ Week 4 - Friendships

At the end of each week (on a Friday) your daughter will also be asked to complete a short survey based on the theme for that week consisting of 3-4 questions.

The discussion group will commence in January 2018.

The information derived from the discussions, questionnaires or surveys will not be identifiable. The transcripts will be kept for a minimum of five years after the close of the study.

Why has your daughter been invited to take part?

Your daughter was identified by her school to take part in this research study because she is aged between 13 and 15 years old, attends a mainstream post primary school, has a formal diagnosis of autism or no diagnosis of autism. This is the group of girls that we are interested in finding out how they experience peer relationships within the school setting.

What are the potential risks to your daughter in taking part?

This research is of no known risk to your daughter. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what your daughter would experience on a daily basis.

The study will ask your daughter to think about school, her interests, how she self identifies and her friendships with others within her class/school. If your daughter should become emotional or upset when discussing these topics, participants will be reminded at the start of each discussion week that they (a)

have the right not to respond to questions or to take part in a discussion that makes them feel uncomfortable and (b) they should consider speaking to their mum or dad or the person who looks after them and/or (c) email me privately so I can provide them with details of support services or groups they can contact should they require.

Should your daughter disclose information which may impact her safety and wellbeing, then I will follow procedures outlined in the Child Protection Policy held by Middletown Centre for Autism for which I have received up to date training on. This may involve the need to share disclosed information with others, such as you, the school or child protection services, for example. The researcher will also seek additional advice from the University's Ethics Committee.

As I am employed within Middletown Centre for Autism, who provide training advice and support to parents/caregivers, if required, I will provide parents/caregivers of girls with autism with additional information regarding training available from the Centre that is free of charge. I will also, if required, signpost parents/caregivers of girls without autism to organisations that they too can seek advice on how they too can access services to support their daughter.

What happens to the information in the project?

All information relating to your daughter will be anonymised and held on a personal computer, by the Researcher, on a secure network provided by the University of Strathclyde. All data will remain confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see the data or information from the discussions held with your daughter will be the research team, including myself and the Chief Investigator at the University of Strathclyde. We may publish or present what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your daughter's name or school to ensure your daughter's confidentiality.

The University of Strathclyde is registered with the Information Commissioner's Office who implements the Data Protection Act 1998. All personal data on participants will be processed in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.

Thank you for reading this information – please ask any questions if you are unsure about what is written here.

What happens next?

If you and your daughter would like to register your interest in this research study, **please sign and return the enclosed consent forms and screening questionnaire to Sheila Cross by 8th December 2017**. If you and/or your daughter complete a consent form but later decide to withdraw from the study and do not want to be part of the project anymore, that is your decision, just let me know.

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, or experience an adverse event or unanticipated problem, email Sheila Cross at sheila.cross.2014@uni.strath.ac.uk alternatively, telephone me on 028 3751 5750 (from 9.30am to 2pm Monday to Thursday).

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, general questions, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638.

If you and/or your daughter do not wish to register an interest in this research study, that is also your decision. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for taking the time to consider your participation.

Upon request, a summary of the research findings will be made available to anyone who wishes to avail of them. Findings from the study may be published and or presented at educational/autism journals conferences and training with parents and professionals living or working with children and young people with autism.

Researcher contact details:

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This investigation was granted ethical approval by the School of Education Ethics Committee at the University of Strathclyde.

If you have any questions/concerns, during or after the investigation, or wish to contact an independent person to whom any questions may be directed or further information may be sought from, please contact:

Dr Virginie Theriault

Convener of the School of Education Ethics Committee University of Strathclyde,

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