

WHAT ABOUT THE GIRLS?

Understanding Autism in Girls and Young Women



In their own words:

What do you consider some of the most commonly misidentified or overlooked traits of autistic girls?

...One of the biggest things that has been missed...has been... "the chameleon effect." I was raised...to blend in..... It's not without a tremendous amount of effort, it was hammered into me as a child, and it's incredibly uncomfortable.

-Christine Langager, writer, advocate, parent

That we exist at all!

-Patricia George, writer and artist

Many autistic girls... are very social, even overpoweringly so. This can actually be an extreme attempt to replicate what they perceive as "normal " relationships.

-Olley Edwards, writer and filmmaker

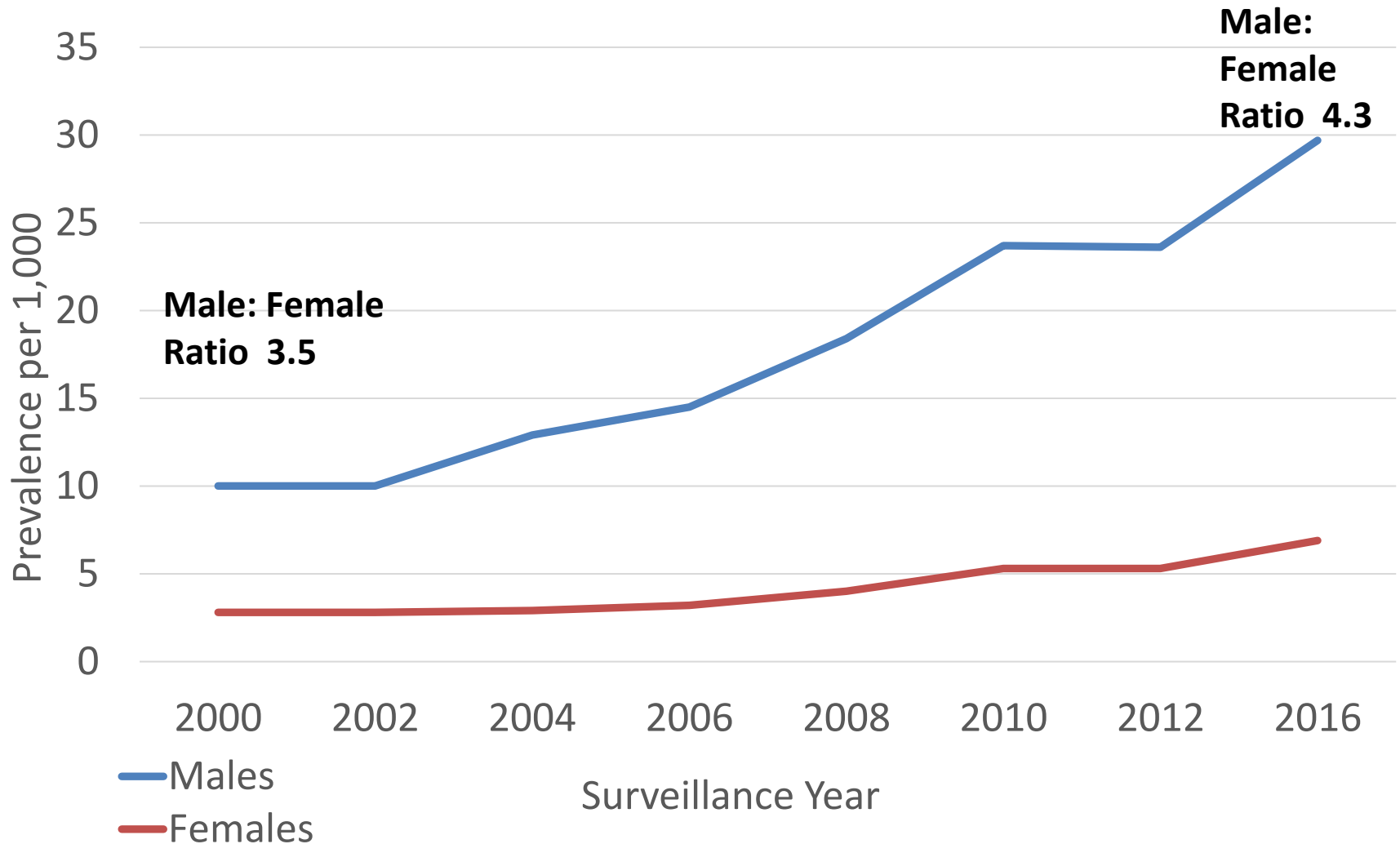
Why is it so hard to diagnose autism in girls?

“Cheyenne’s” Story

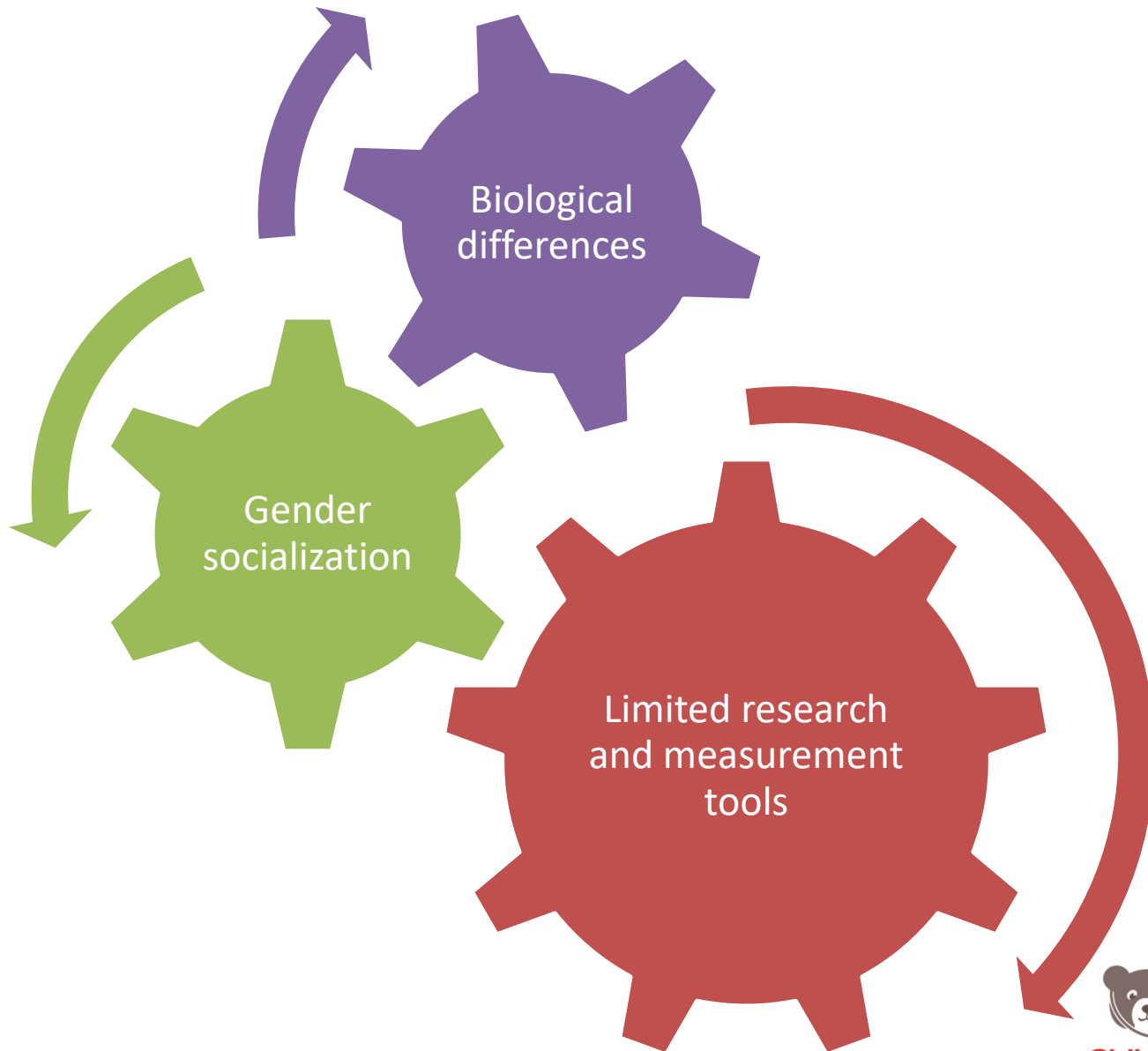
- 10 year-old girl
- Achieved developmental milestones on time
- Early sensory challenges and unusual play
- Difficulty in preschool with academics and social boundaries
- Diagnosed with auditory processing disorder at 8
- Sudden chronic pain onset at 9
- By age 10 had been seen by 50 different medical professionals when a concussion specialist suggested autism



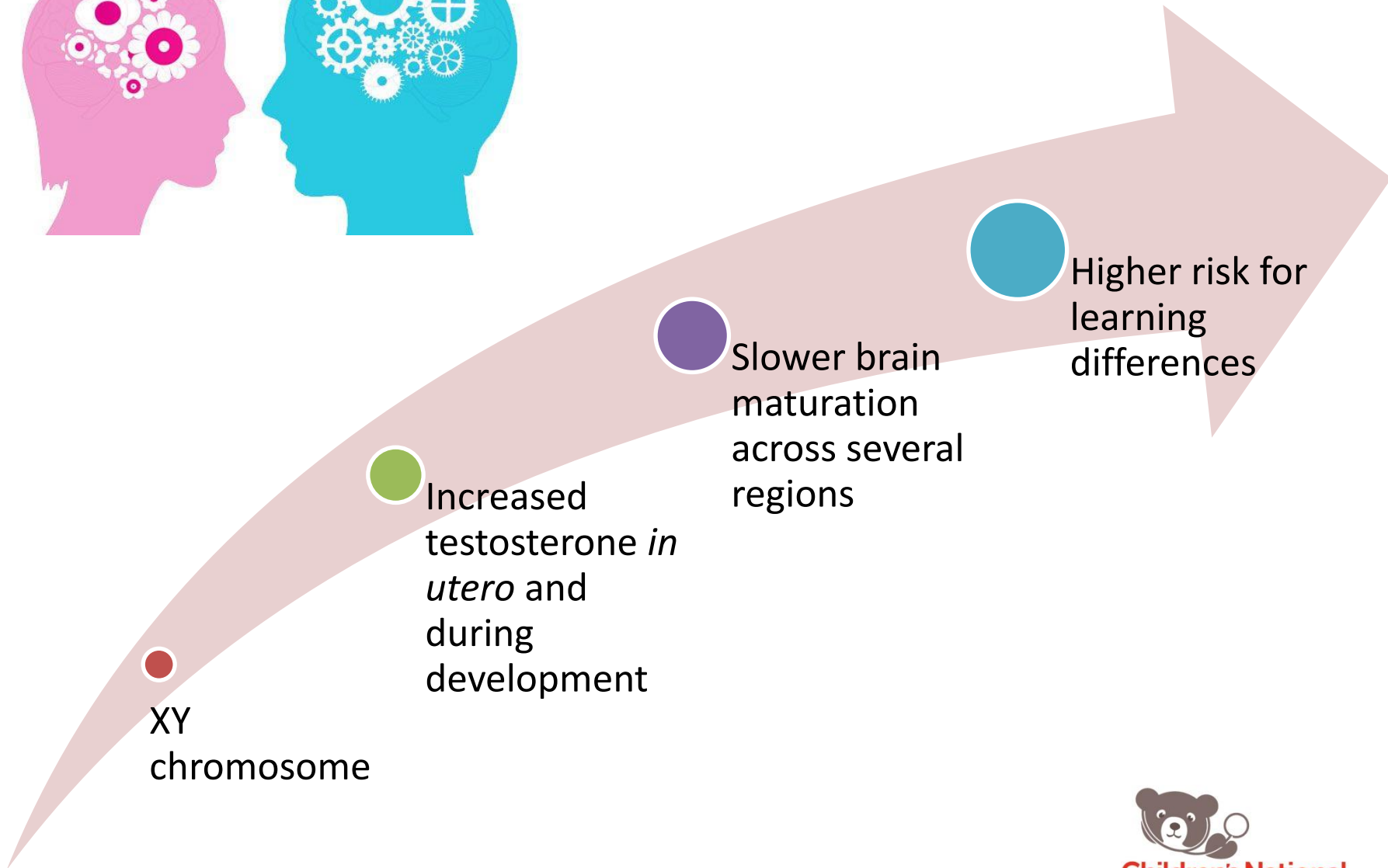
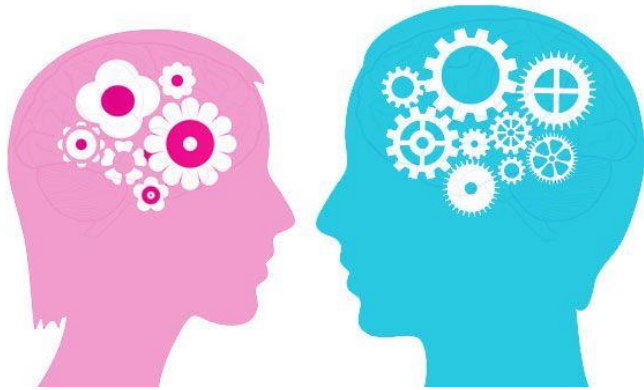
Autism Sex Ratios by Surveillance year in CDC



Why are there sex differences in autism?



Biological Risks to Boys over Girls



XY
chromosome

Increased
testosterone *in
utero* and
during
development

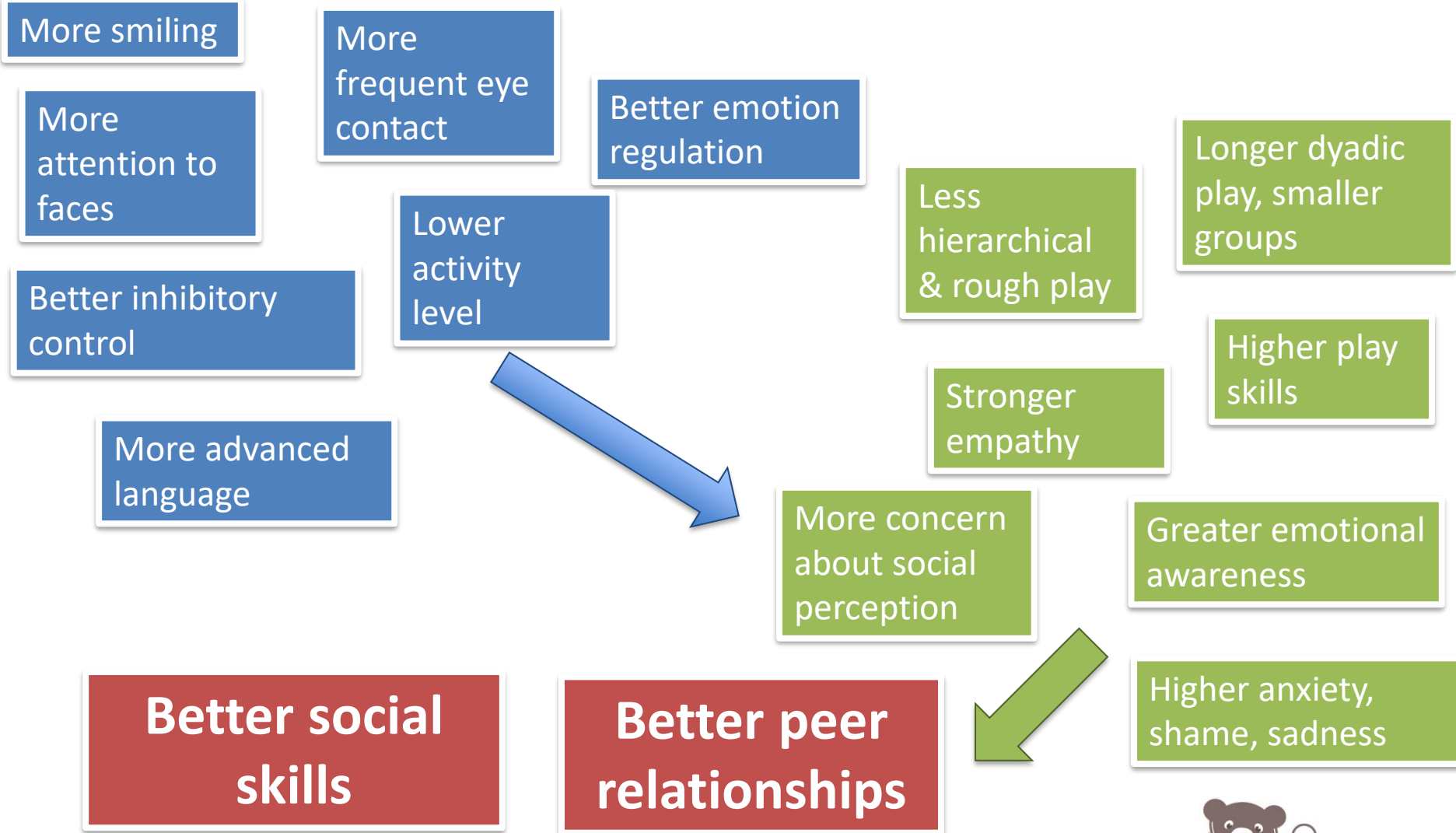
Slower brain
maturation
across several
regions

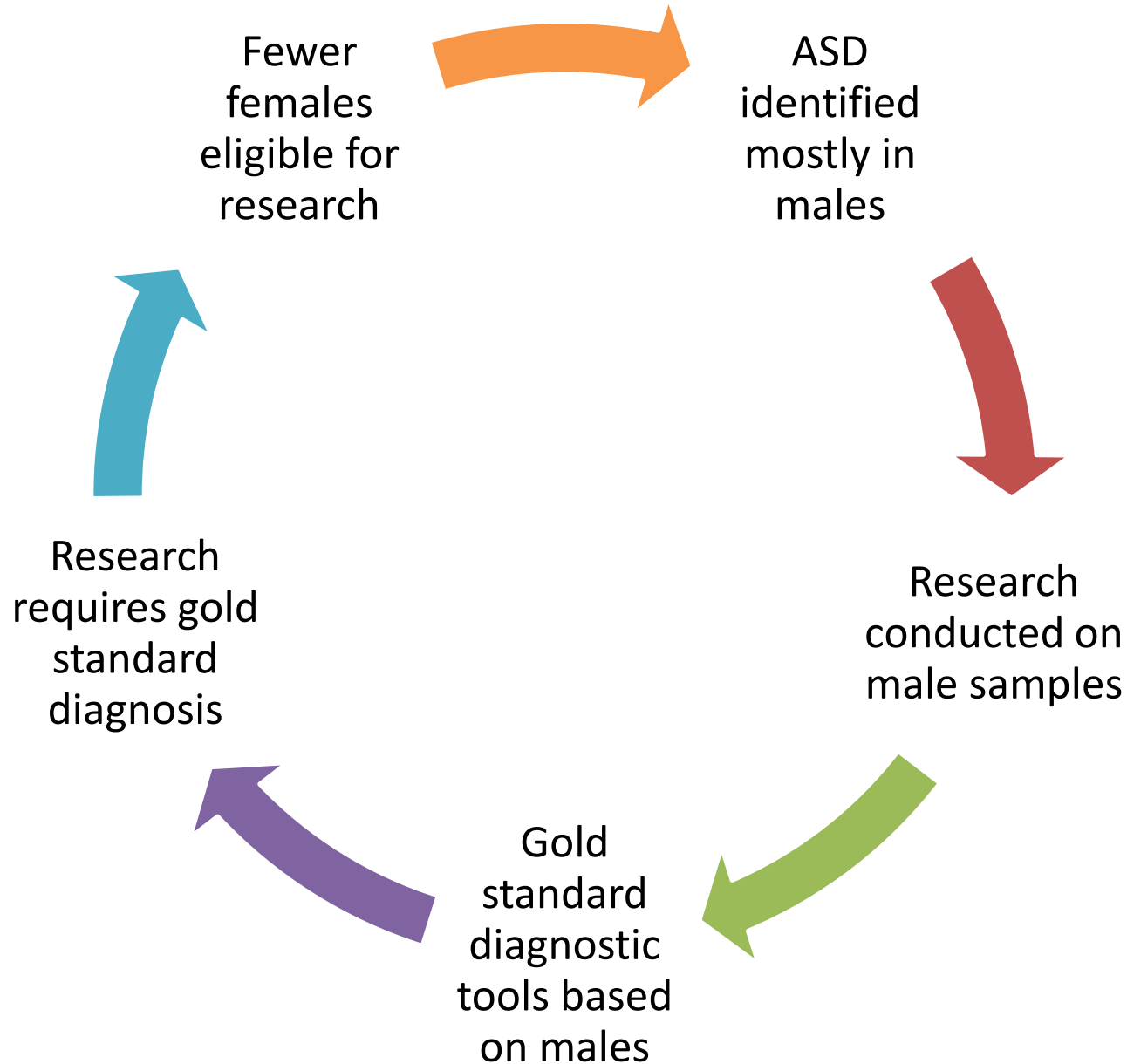
Higher risk for
learning
differences



Gender socialization starts in early development

Compared to boys, young girls show...





Girls' Experiences of Autism

- Tend to be diagnosed later than boys
- More social challenges and related mental health issues than boys
- Incorrect diagnoses and treatment
- May go undiagnosed until adulthood and be “self-diagnosed”



What does ASD look like in girls?

Social Communication

Interest in pretend play

Strong language skills

Able to mimic how others act

Seen as “shy” or anxious

May have some friendships

Good at meeting others but struggle to keep friends

Repetitive behaviors

Less unusual restricted interests

Perfectionism

Inflexible or “bossy” in play

Related problems

Anxiety/Depression

Eating Disorders

Trauma/Sexual victimization



Girls and the Art of Camouflaging

- Girls with ASD often learn to watch and mimic others' behavior to blend in
- Girls with ADHD may develop compulsive checking systems and work intensely to make up for their difficulties



“I honestly didn’t know I was doing it [social mimicry] until I was diagnosed, but when I read about it, it made perfect sense. I copy speech patterns and certain body language.” (P05)

Dr. Hinshaw's "Triple Bind"



Be a perfect
"girl"



who excels like
a "boy"



... and look sexy
while you do it

The "quadruple bind"
for neurodiverse girls:



Figure it out
with roadblocks

Being a Girl in a Boys' World

- Late diagnosis means playing “catch-up”
- Challenges of teen relationships
- Puberty brings a new set of challenges
 - Hygiene routines
 - Sexual vulnerability/ exploitation
 - Increased risks for anxiety, depression, and eating disorders



What can parents and family do?

- Tell her about her diagnosis!
- Create a community of neurodiverse friends and allies
- Provide opportunities to succeed and build self-esteem
- Identify the gifts of neurodiverse minds – find your autistic heroes

Intense focus

Strong memory

Persistence

Visual-spatial
skills

Fairness
& justice

Creative
perspective

Resilience

Deep empathy

Enthusiasm

