
ASPERGER SYNDROME: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

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Asperger Syndrome is a developmental disability that is defined by impairments in social relationships and in verbal and nonverbal communication and by restrictive, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. In some cases, there may also be rituals and routines. It is often considered to be on the high functioning end of the autism spectrum. It is not an emotional disturbance, and bad parenting does not cause it. In fact, researchers believe that biological factors are involved and that there is probably a genetic basis for it.

Hans Asperger of Austria in 1944 first identified the disorder. However, it wasn't until 1994 that the American Psychological Association recognized Asperger Syndrome as a pervasive developmental disorder.

The prevalence rate is estimated to be approximately 0.5%, and educators are now realizing that Asperger Syndrome, while still considered a low incidence disability, is not rare. Many families are now requesting appropriate educational services to meet their children's needs as awareness increases, and more information regarding interventions in the classroom is desperately needed to assist these children. Communication between the home and the school is essential in developing programs that will help children with Asperger Syndrome. Parents often may find assistance by attending local support groups, reading books and magazines, joining Internet groups, and joining national, state, or local organizations.

Theory-of-Mind

Theory-of-mind deficits. Individuals with Asperger Syndrome have varying degrees of difficulty with inferring the thoughts or beliefs of others, a concept referred to as *theory-of-mind*. Typically developing children begin to understand the concept that other people have unique thoughts, intentions, desires, and beliefs by age 4. Although some with Asperger Syndrome have developed a theory-of-mind, they often cannot apply these skills when informally conversing with others. Many times they appear rude or manipulative when, in fact, they truly do not understand the thoughts of others. Many of them are bullied and taken advantage of by others who prey on their naiveté. It is believed that theory-of-mind deficits lead to a number of difficulties, including explaining behavior, understanding emotions, predicting the behavior or emotional state of others, understanding the perspective of others, inferring the intentions of others (may interpret being used as friendship), understanding how behavior affects how others think or feel, applying social conventions (such as turn taking and politeness), and differentiating fact from fiction.

Theory-of-mind strategies. Direct *mind-reading* instruction is suggested to remediate these difficulties. Howlin, Baron-Cohen, and Hadwin's (1999) practical guide to teach mind-reading and Carol Gray's *Comic Strip Conversations* (1994) are two intervention strategies that have been used in the schools (see "Resources"). It is not helpful to ask these children *why* they behave the way they do; they frequently do not know why. Instead, invite these children to problem solve the situation with an adult to examine the cause and effect of the behavior.

Social Skills

Challenges. Children with Asperger Syndrome lack appropriate social skills and do not seem to understand many of the unwritten rules of communication and social behavior that children their age learn naturally. They often have difficulty developing or maintaining friendships and may face challenges at school owing to their difficulty learning conventional social and work-related behaviors.

Social skills strategies. Parents and educators can provide social support and encourage skill development in the following ways:

- Guard the child from bullying and teasing by providing supervised activities. Involve the child in a social skills group such as Circle of Friends where he or she can be taught how to read and respond to social cues, make friends, and deal with frustrations; arrange opportunities for practice such as using peer buddies.
- Provide opportunities in school for *direct* social skill instruction focusing on areas such as reading and responding to social cues, making friends, and dealing with frustrations.
- Use visual reminders to prompt social skills, informally or through visual scripts, Power Cards, or Social Stories (see “Resources”). Teach and practice mind-reading skills by using Gray’s Comic Strip Conversations or the guide from Howlin and colleagues.
- Realize that the child may have had more than enough social contact at school and may need some time alone during the school day or at home to relax.

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication Skills

Challenges. Children with Asperger Syndrome appear to have strong verbal skills and some even speak in a sophisticated manner. However, they have difficulty using language for social purposes, particularly in beginning and maintaining conversations. They use language more as a means to a specific concrete end than as social talk. They may speak endlessly about their particular interest, completely unaware that others are bored and not joining the conversation. Sometimes their conversations just do not seem to hang together, or they use words in an odd or repetitive manner. They also have difficulty understanding that words have multiple meanings; that is, they tend to take comments literally and misunderstand jokes. They may mistake indirect and polite commands used in school, such as, “Can you take out your notebook?” as real questions.

Children with Asperger Syndrome also display problems in social behavior that reflect their difficulties with nonverbal communication. For example, they may demonstrate limited gestures and facial expressions, awkward body language or body postures, or a peculiar eye gaze. They have difficulty interpreting and reading others’ body language, as well as using this form of communication themselves in a spontaneous and appropriate way. They may violate rules of personal space and may not realize that they are standing too

close to others.

Communication strategies. Parents and educators can help children with Asperger Syndrome to develop and use and understand more appropriate social communication:

- Be brief and explain things simply. Less language is usually best.
- Be concrete and specific in requests.
- Get the child’s attention before giving instructions.
- Allow time for the child to process verbal information.
- Check for understanding. Do not assume understanding just because the child parrots what he or she heard.
- Provide training on nonverbal communication skills including tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, and personal space.
- Provide direct instruction in multiple meaning words and idioms.
- Furnish training on how to begin, end, and maintain conversations.

Behavioral and Mental Health Concerns

Behavioral challenges. Children with Asperger Syndrome have a restricted range of interests that can take unusual or eccentric forms. For example, some children are interested in unusual things such as washing machines, bus timetables, or subway maps. Their obsessive interests may also be similar to the interests of typically developing students, but they are unlike other students in that their restricted interest is the *only* activity in which they participate. Their rigidity is often exhibited by their insistence on a specific order of events, compulsion to complete what was started, insistence on rules, difficulty with transitions, or a fear based on a single experience. They do not seem to recognize that there are times that rules can be renegotiated, bent, or broken. Predicting the future may be very difficult, so insisting that things happen in a certain order can be comforting.

Many have additional psychiatric diagnoses. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is the most common diagnosis for children, while adolescents and young adults are prone to depression and anxiety. Frequently, they lack the emotional resources needed to cope with the demands of the classroom and do not always demonstrate stress through their tone of voice or body posture. Therefore, their turmoil may escalate to a point of crisis before others around them recognize their discomfort.

Educators must to be vigilant to changes in behavior that may be indicative of anxiety or

depression, such as greater levels of disorganization, inattentiveness, and isolation. Remember that the student typically has difficulty identifying his or her own emotions and, therefore, may not be able to acknowledge that he or she is sad or depressed. Educators need to be aware of the child's signs of agitation in order to initiate interventions to attempt to avert an emotional or neurological crisis.

Behavioral support strategies at home and school.

Parents and educators can help the child with Asperger Syndrome cope more effectively with the daily demands of the social environment:

- Provide a predictable and safe environment in a way that avoids things that trigger rages or meltdowns and include predictable routines and clear rules.
- Set up consistent routines with clear expectations throughout the day. Warn the child of upcoming transitions and try to avoid surprises.
- Limit opportunities for obsessive talk about special interests by providing a specific time of day for this behavior. Use the child's fixations as a method to broaden his or her repertoire of interests.
- When trying to change an inappropriate behavior, teach the child an appropriate behavior to take its place. For example, teach the child to engage in appropriate waiting behavior (such as counting slowly to 10 rather than screaming when the parent is on the phone).
- Use humor to diffuse tension.
- Teach anger control skills.
- Teach cause and effect concepts, such as using the visual aid of a Consequence Map.
- Create a safe place for the child to go to when he or she feels a need to regain control. Similarly, consider safe escapes; that is, removing the child in a non-punitive manner from difficult situations, such as sending the child on a simple errand to avert a meltdown.

Academic Skills

Academic challenges. Children with Asperger Syndrome generally have average to above-average intelligence and frequently have good rote memory skills. However, they may lack higher level thinking and comprehension skills and have poor problem-solving skills. Many can decode words well, and their impressive vocabularies may give the false impression that they understand everything they are saying or reading. Instead, they may be parroting what they have heard or read, but do not understand it fully. Writing can often be an area of difficulty.

Academic strategies. Classroom teachers and parents can support academic progress by using these tactics:

- Teachers should capitalize on these children's exceptional memories and provide opportunities for them to demonstrate their factual knowledge in class, an approach that parents can reinforce at home. For example, if the child is interested in trains, parents can use trains to teach him or her to count and to solve math problems.
- Teachers should provide visual schedules so that the child will know what is happening throughout the day and can understand the world better (see "Resources").
- Teachers should design the academic program so that the child can experience consistent success. Parents can discuss classroom modifications with their child's teachers to ensure consistent opportunities for success.
- Teachers should check for understanding, keeping in mind that children with Asperger Syndrome often can decode words but cannot always comprehend what they have read fluently.
- Parents should inform teachers of their child's obsessive interest so the teacher can link the interest to the subject being studied in class.
- Writing is often a challenge. If the child has writing difficulties, teachers can shorten or modify the child's assignments. Parents can request that a word processor or computer be used to complete written assignments.

Summary

Although children with Asperger Syndrome exhibit difficulties in social skills, communication skills, and repetitive behaviors, each child is unique in the way he or she demonstrates those difficulties. There is no cookbook approach to help these children to be successful at home, at school, and in their communities. Each child must be viewed as an individual with different strengths and needs. Many of these children have strengths such as excellent rote memory, average to above-average intelligence, and the ability to focus energy and commitment in an area of interest. This intense pursuit of knowledge in a focused interest can lead to great accomplishments in life.

Resources

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Websites

- Asperger Syndrome Coalition of the United States (ASC-U.S.)—www.asperger.org
- Autism/Asperger's Digest Magazine; published bimonthly by Future Horizons—www.autismdigest.com
- MAAP (More Advanced Individuals with Autism, Asperger Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder/Not Otherwise Specified) Services for the Autism Spectrum—www.maapservices.org.

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