

IF I'M SO SMART, WHY IS SCHOOL SO HARD?

Supporting Students with Asperger Syndrome in Elementary General Education Classrooms

Background and Characteristics

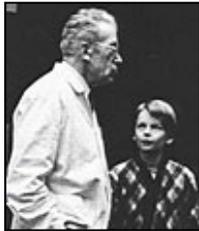
What is Asperger Syndrome?
What are the characteristics that impact functioning at school?

Asperger Syndrome AS Aspie

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1944

- Austrian psychiatrist Dr. Hans Asperger describes a disorder that later becomes known as Asperger disorder. Viennese physician.
- Published "Autistic Psychopathology in Childhood" in 1944,
- He believed in a biological, rather than a psychological cause.

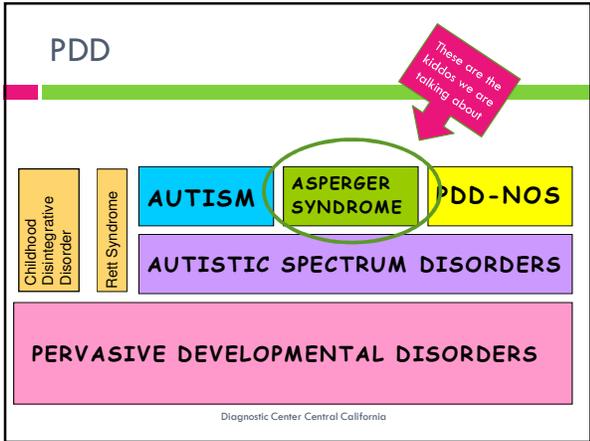


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A Little Bit of Background

- Asperger's syndrome was named by Lorna Wing in a 1981 medical paper, after Dr. Hans Asperger.
- AS was not recognized internationally until 1990.
- First used as a formal diagnosis in the US in 1994.
- Often believed to have a strong genetic link.

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Characteristics of Asperger Syndrome that Impact School Performance

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Problems Understanding the Perspectives of Others

- ❑ Can't "stand in another's shoes."
- ❑ Can't imagine what another person is thinking.
- ❑ Can't guess about how or why a person will respond/act a certain way.



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Difficulty Understanding Emotions

- ❑ May only understand a limited number of emotions.
- ❑ There is little understanding of subtleties.
- ❑ They have difficulty even recognizing their own feelings.



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Problems Understanding How Others Think and Feel

- ❑ May see no connection between their actions and others' reactions to them.
- ❑ Can't imagine that others think about them.
- ❑ Don't understand that others remember things about them.



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Difficulty Explaining own Behaviors

- Even highly verbal individuals will have difficulty explaining why they did something....that requires one to think about motivation and intention.



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Difficulty predicting others' behavior or emotional states

- Have no idea how someone will act or feel.
- Do not see the connection between what is happening and how someone may act.
- May lead to fear and avoidance of other people.



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Difficulty Reading the Intentions of Others

- May not know the difference between being laughed at and being part of the joke.
- May not understand when they are being taken advantage of.
- Inability to deceive, or to understand deception.
- Extreme gullibility.



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Communication

- Real strength in **language**
 - Great vocabulary
 - Great control of grammar
 - Typically very “chatty” – loves to talk
- Weakness in all aspects of **pragmatics**
 - How much to say
 - How often to talk
 - What to talk about/not talk about
 - When to be formal or informal
 - Lack of reciprocity in conversation--talks ‘at you’

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Odd Use of Language

- Many students sound like “little professors” in that their use of speech is highly precocious for their age.

You know, I was just remarking to my father how intrinsically pristine the flowers in our garden are today. My mother is an expert gardener and loves flowers. I love flowers too. They have such a wonder and a beauty about them. They majestically make me very happy. 10 yr old

- Some words may be used incorrectly.
- They are typically extraordinarily literal.

Problems Reading Non Verbal Communication

- Approximately 85% of all communication is non-verbal. People with AS are put at an incredible disadvantage because of their pronounced difficulty in reading and displaying non-verbal cues.
 - Non-verbal communication cues are abstract and somewhat ambiguous (they never look exactly the same)
- This weakness sets students up for ridicule by peers.
- Keeps them from knowing when to back off or change tactics.

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Listening

- Listening is negatively impacted by:
 - Lengthy content
 - Listening in a group is typically more difficult
 - Demanding eye contact interferes with listening and comprehension
- The delay in response time may put them at a disadvantage when they need to process what is being said.
- Rapid-fire responses are almost impossible for many students.
- Auditory processing is further impeded when anxiety builds.

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Attention

- Many student's with AS have been diagnosed with ADHD before the AS diagnosis.
- Attention varies from intense on preferred topics or interesting tasks to very problematic (Quirky attention spans)
 - Withdrawal/Daydreaming common.

The supports that we are familiar with for students with ADHD are appropriate for students with AS

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Low Tolerance for Frustration

- Decreases their ability to function in the environment.
- Made worse by:
 - Sensory stimuli
 - Perfectionism
 - Unpredictability



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Difficulty with Multitasking

- This leads to rigidity and difficulty in managing the multiple demands of a typical school day.



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Special Interests – “Enthusiasms”

- The overwhelming desire to talk about a special interest can exclude almost all other possible interests. Peers find these obsessions incomprehensible.



Cultural Illiteracy

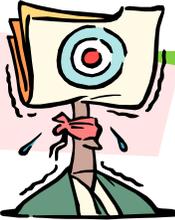
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- There is often a rather profound lack of motivation to understand what is happening in the popular culture.
- This puts the student at a social disadvantage with peers.



Stress and Anxiety

- Students with AS often experience high anxiety.
- Very common experiences such as riding a bus or entering a room may cause anxiety.
- Too much stress can lead to intolerable levels of anxiety and obsessions and may eventually lead to depression or psychiatric disorder.



How well do YOU problem solve when you are highly anxious??

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Reactions to Sensory Experiences

- Often hypersensitive to many sensory stimuli.
- Strong preferences /obsessions and strong aversions.



Sensory avoiding behavior



Sensory seeking behavior

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SENSORY SYSTEMS

FAMILIAR SYSTEMS

- Auditory
- Visual
- Smell
- Oral: taste, texture
- Vision



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Vestibular = balance, movement in space

- Provides information about where our body is in space and whether or not our surroundings are moving. Tells us about the speed and direction of movement. Keeps us balanced.
- This sense is located in the inner ear and stimulated by head movement and input from other senses, especially visual.



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Proprioception = muscles and joints

Receptors are found in:

- Muscles
- Tendons
- Joints
- Deep in the skin



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Repetitive and Stereotyped Patterns of Behavior and Activities

- Self stimulation activities such as rocking, spinning, arm flapping, etc. may be seen especially in younger children.
- Intense need for routine and consistency with anxiety when routines are not followed.

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Executive Function

Deficits in executive functions are similar to those seen in students with ADHD and TBI. Most common are deficits in:

- Preplanning
- Organizing
- Self monitoring
- Judging time-Scheduling time
- Prioritizing
- Initiation

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Lack of Imagination

□ There is a fundamental difficulty in imagining what isn't real or what hasn't happened. This can lead to enormous frustration when student is required to use imagination to complete an assignment.

- Pretend you are a balloon...
- Imagine if you were a civil war soldier...
- What would you do if you were _____?

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The "NT" World Baffles Individuals with AS

"Why don't we say what we mean? . . . Why do we so often make trivial remarks that mean nothing at all? Why do we get bored and impatient when someone with [AS] tells us hundreds of fascinating facts about [arcane topics]. . . Why do we care about social hierarchies--why not treat everyone in the same way? . . .why are we so illogical compared to people with [AS]" Lorna Wing, in Attwood, 1998 p.9.

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Reading Comprehension

- Expository text is typically not a problem.
- Narrative text is challenging because it requires us to understand the motives and personality of the characters-heavy dose of perspective taking.
- Prediction is difficult as is generating possible solutions.

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Motor Difficulties



- General clumsiness is typical.
- Find motor difficulties often leads to frustration and embarrassment when a work product looks like a much younger child produced it.
- Dexterity issues-slow to tie shoes, master zippers, open milk cartons-"all thumbs."
- Horrible penmanship-this is almost universal.
 - Pencil grasp fatigue

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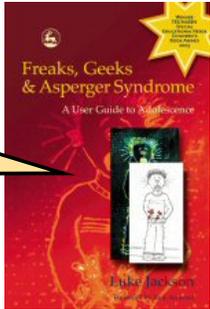
Comments on Handwriting

"Writing is something that I find very difficult. Holding a pen makes my hand ache and what I actually think never quite appears the same on paper. This used to get me very mad and I would go through masses and masses of paper writing just one little bit and then screwing it up and chucking it away."

Luke Jackson

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Freaks, Geeks & Asperger Syndrome by Luke Jackson www.jkp.com



Sit down and let me tell you what it is like to be a teenager with Asperger Syndrome

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