



A school's guide to Asperger syndrome

What is Asperger syndrome?

Asperger syndrome¹ is a developmental disorder on the autistic spectrum. The difficulties caused by the condition are there from birth or soon after and continue throughout life, although often people learn to cope better as they get older. There are genetic and other factors involved in the causation of the syndrome. It affects approximately 1 pupil in every 250, and the majority of those affected are boys. The average age for diagnosis for Asperger syndrome is around nine years old and it is entirely possible for an individual to remain undiagnosed well into adulthood.

Students with Asperger syndrome typically have a low average to higher IQ but comparatively low social performance and emotional awareness of others' feelings and thoughts, struggling to read facial expressions and body language. They have difficulties communicating effectively with others, often having problems interacting with adults and other children appropriately and adhering to the 'unwritten' social rules, which come naturally to other children.

Each pupil with the diagnosis will be different. Some will be very quiet, others will be noisy and 'in your face'. What unites each pupil is a fundamental difficulty in the understanding of other people (an inability to put themselves in the other person's shoes) and an inability to behave in a way that will make them make and keep friends easily.

Some of the indicators of Asperger syndrome in school age children

Having Asperger syndrome does not affect someone's physical appearance. The signs of whether a child has the syndrome are evidenced in a pattern of behaviour that requires careful observation. Asperger syndrome is more common than generally realised.

These are some of the behavioural signs that are indicative of Asperger syndrome. If the child demonstrates many of these signs you should contact the SENCO for further advice regarding discussing this with the child's parents, assessment and possible diagnosis. Does the child:

- i. Struggle to make and maintain friendships with children of the same age, due to poor social skills, or show little interest in other children?
- ii. Find it hard to understand instructions unless very clearly spelt out, have difficulty completing class exercises or homework, despite reasonable intelligence?
- iii. Often become a potential or actual target for teasing and bullying because of how he or she appears and reacts to other pupils? Act aggressively as a result of bullying?
- iv. Find unstructured social time difficult to use appropriately - for example, sits on his or her own at lunchtime or tries to join in games unsuccessfully at playtime?
- v. Show a poor awareness of others and how they may be affected by his or her behaviour - for example, contradicting or non-compliant to teachers, not sharing or allowing other children to join in his or her games, making inappropriate comments in class, talking too loudly, over-reacting to losing?
- vi. Find changes to his or her routine quite difficult to cope with - for example getting annoyed if he or she has a supply teacher or has to move classroom. Is he or she quite concerned if things don't happen in a set order?
- vii. Find group activities difficult, for example, because he or she has poor social skills or because he or she wants everything to be done his or her way?
- viii. Often appear quite anxious in busy, noisy social situations, for example dining halls or during P.E.?
- ix. Have body language that makes him or her stand out, for example, holds him or herself awkwardly, lacks spontaneity in gestures and displays limited or unusual facial expressions?
- x. Have a voice tone that is unlike those of his or her peers?
- xi. Communicate using words and phrases that are unlike those of his or her peers?

- xii. Exhibit behaviours or interests that make him or her stand out from the other children in the class?

What is it like having Asperger syndrome?

An alien culture

Imagine being suddenly placed in a culture alien to your own, where the people seem different from you, where you are always in danger of breaking social rules you don't understand, and you struggle to keep up with the flow of interaction that comes naturally to those around you. This is what it can feel like for pupils with Asperger syndrome in school: bewildering.

Reading people

As soon as we meet someone we make all sorts of judgments. Just by looking we can often guess their age and status, and by the expression on their face, what they are feeling. This enables us to judge what to say and how to say it. We intuitively adapt to the other person without much thought. This ability most people have is the central communication difficulty for pupils with Asperger syndrome.

How to communicate effectively with pupils who have Asperger syndrome

- Be patient is the number one guideline! A few pupils will seem to be intentionally aloof (avoiding eye contact), rude or disinterested. This is rarely the case. Students with Asperger syndrome usually do not have the basic social understanding to realise how they appear to others. Occasionally pupils will say or do things that seem to threaten a teachers authority. Try not to take this personally; deal with it in a calm way. The person's difficulties are the result of biological differences in the parts of the brain that regulate social behaviour and understanding.
- Be as clear in your communication as possible - say exactly what you mean! Anything merely implied will probably not be understood. For example, asking "would you like to get your work out now?" may get the very honest (but unintentionally annoying) answer, "no"!
- You will probably need to slow down your communication - allow several seconds for the pupil to process new information and to respond before you give more information, or repeat your request.
- Keep your language direct - avoid use of double meanings, sarcasm, teasing, complex open questions or subtle jokes, unless you are sure the person understands. Ensure you have the person's attention before communicating, use their name, but don't expect the person to give you full eye contact - this can be difficult for pupils with Asperger syndrome.
- Do not talk 'down' to the person, but do check he understands what he has to do. Don't assume he understands just because he can repeat back the instruction you have just given. Processing verbal information tends to be harder for the pupil with Asperger syndrome.
- Do not confront an angry/upset pupil by arguing or raising your voice. Firstly, many people with Asperger syndrome are sensitive to noise. Secondly, raising your voice will not help the pupil understand what you want. Instead try to divert and defuse the situation: for example, allow the pupil to 'exit', give a alternative choice, compromise if possible. Use a calm, neutral tone of voice do not shout, or expect the pupil to be able to read facial expression and gesture. Sometimes a visual support, such as a card with a photo of the quiet room, will enable the pupil to understand what you want him or her to do next. If there is no room for compromise, make the request a couple of times, allowing plenty of time for the child to process this information, then calmly, with few words, implement the consequences of non-compliance (which the pupil should already have been told).
- Ensure the pupil knows what is expected of her, for example, where she should be for each lesson period; how to negotiate around the school site; what homework is expected; where she is able to go at break and lunchtime; if being in the playground causes too much stress - what time the day trip will return to school. Most difficulties occur as a result of insufficient information about what to do in different social situations.
- Ensure there is an exit route available if a pupil has behaviour difficulties in class, for example, a quiet room he can go to for when stress levels get too high.

Circle of friends

This is a fairly straightforward and useful way to support a pupil with Asperger syndrome. It involves carefully selecting a small group of sensible pupils to look out for the person with Asperger syndrome. The group will need awareness and training on how to communicate and make the person feel more included. The form of support will depend on the pupil's needs, for example - helping the person join in

lunchtime games, walking the student home after school to prevent bullying, reminding the student about homework or getting them to the next class on time. The group usually meets one lunch-time every few weeks to review the support methods and progress, with close monitoring and support by staff. (Barratt, P. et al, 1998, British Journal of Special Education vol.25 no.2)

"We can't change the rules for one pupil ..."

People with Asperger syndrome think and learn differently. Therefore they require a different approach and this may mean different application of the rules on occasion.

This is not to excuse poor behaviour, but it is an understanding that punishing a pupil with Asperger syndrome is often counter-productive since their behaviour difficulties usually stem from their lack of real understanding.

For example, aggressive acts are more often related to anxiety from an inability to understand the behaviour and motives of other people around them. Attention seeking behaviour is often about feeling left out from being unable to follow the subtleties of everyday social interaction and jokes going on around them. Under the law schools need to make 'reasonable adjustment' for pupils with this disability (SEN and Disability Act 2001).

"He behaves OK at school, but at home he is a nightmare"

This is a common occurrence and is rarely the result of poor parenting.

The over-riding physical state for most people with Asperger syndrome is anxiety. This anxiety is a result of trying to constantly keep up with teachers' demands as well as other pupils jokes and conversation.

It can be difficult for people who have not come across Asperger syndrome before, to appreciate the level of anxiety especially as many pupils have learnt to develop a superficial veneer of coping - appearing to 'fit in' socially in order to avoid being labelled odd and because many pupils with the diagnosis are keeping up with school work.

However many pupils explain that by the time they get home they are feeling stressed, angry and worn out. These true feelings inevitably come out when they are at home and they can vent their frustrations in safety.

For advice and further details contact The National Autistic Society (NAS) information centre on 0845 070 4004. For staff training by the NAS contact 0115 911 3363.

References

¹ Although this factsheet uses the term Asperger syndrome the practical pointers and information will be relevant for all pupils who have a diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder including high functioning autism.

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If you require further information please contact the

NAS Autism Helpline

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