

Asperger's Syndrome

“A good teacher is like a candle—it consumes itself to light the way for others.”

—Proverb

Asperger's Syndrome is a developmental disorder that can have wide-ranging effects on children. Difficulties include poor social ability and repetitive or ritualistic behaviors that make students stand out as “odd.” Differences in the way these children process sensory information create additional challenges at school.

Asperger's Syndrome is considered an *autistic spectrum disorder* and is sometimes referred to as *high-functioning autism*. While it features similar symptoms to more severe disorders on this spectrum, it is much less debilitating. A child with full-blown *autism* may be nonverbal; engage in isolated, repetitive play; and seem oblivious to the activity or people around him. Children with Asperger's Syndrome have some autistic tendencies, but often are highly verbal and have more social awareness. Strong rote memory allows them to excel in science, math, and other subjects that require concrete thinking.

Socializing is often the most severe difficulty for young people with Asperger's Syndrome. These students may not know what to say in social situations. They struggle taking turns in conversation and frequently interrupt others or talk exclusively about themselves or their own interests. Students also have difficulty understanding facial

■ Asperger's Syndrome occurs in about .05% of children. It is much more common in boys. Up to 40% of children with Asperger's Syndrome may have other mental disorders—most often Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in children and depression and anxiety in adolescents.

expressions, body language, and other nonverbal communication. They often show obsessive patterns of behavior and interests that further alienate them from peers.

Asperger's Syndrome and other autism spectrum disorders are on the rise, because people on the higher functioning end of the spectrum—those often not diagnosed in the past—are now being identified. While the cause of Asperger's Syndrome is still under study, many researchers believe there are strong genetic factors. Environmental toxins have also been cited to play a role in the disorder's development.

Behaviors and Symptoms to Watch For

As a result of limited social ability, students with Asperger's Syndrome have difficulties relating to people and forming friendships. Most often these children want friends but they have underdeveloped social skills. While alienation from peers may be the most obvious of these students' difficulties, many academic challenges also are seen.

Children with Asperger's Syndrome may:

Use formal language. Students frequently use words such as “frankly,” “typically,” “in fact,” or “ordinarily.” They may begin most of their sentences with “Well.” Children with Asperger's Syndrome often seem “book smart” but lacking in common sense. Their speech may also have an unusual tone or inflection.

Have a very literal interpretation of language. Literal interpretation can make it difficult for students to understand jokes, sarcasm, idioms, or nuances of speech. As a result they may respond strangely to questions. (Example: “Will you give me a hand with these books?” Student, looking confused, extends hand.)

Have poor ability to understand abstract concepts. While students may have a strong concrete understanding of language and factual information, their ability to think abstractly is limited. This leads to difficulties in language arts and other subjects that require abstract thinking. Their view tends to be in “black or white” terms; behavior is viewed rigidly as right or wrong. Students may frequently tattle on other students for rules violations.

Be preoccupied or obsessed with one or two areas of interest. Interests often include video or computer games, works of art, fictional books (frequently science fiction), or TV programs. Strong rote memory can make these children seem like “walking encyclopedias.”

Show poor conversational ability. Students may not know when to speak or may say things that are irrelevant to a situation. They begin, end, and interrupt conversations

inappropriately. Children with Asperger's Syndrome most often have little regard for another person's reactions, feelings, or interests. They go on at length, not realizing when others are bored with a topic of conversation. Poor social skills can result in these children being isolated or bullied.

Have problems understanding nonverbal communication. Social ability is further hampered in children with Asperger's Syndrome by an inability to read facial expressions, body language, and other social cues. They misinterpret others' expressions and react with inappropriate behavior. For example, a student may not realize that someone's expression indicates anger or irritation and continue showing the problematic behavior as though nothing were wrong.

Be tactless. Students have little knowledge or understanding of social etiquette. They may be extremely rude without realizing it. (Example: "It's obvious you have a weight problem. I wouldn't lean on that if I were you.") Children also have difficulties judging personal space and may ask invasive personal questions that violate another's privacy.

Show differences in sensory reactions. Students may be especially sensitive to sound, movement, light, temperature, and other classroom conditions. Their senses of touch, taste, and smell may also be strong.

Have difficulty understanding and discussing feelings. While these children are highly verbal, they have a limited ability to discuss how they are feeling. As a result they become very upset (or even explosive) with little indication as to what is bothering them. This can make it especially challenging to address a student's difficulty. In addition, students have little ability to empathize with or attribute feelings to others.

Have difficulty coping with changes in routines. These students often feel the need to engage in repetitive routines. Students may become upset or defiant when routines are changed.

Have difficulties with attention and organization. Students may appear to be listening but instead be thinking about something else—often one of their favorite interests. Staying on top of work at school can be difficult for these students because of poor organizational skills.

Have poor motor skills. Students may walk or move in peculiar ways that draw attention (or ridicule) from others. Children may perform poorly in physical education classes, sports, and other activities. Because extracurricular activities are a way for students to socialize, motor difficulties can further separate children from peers. Weak fine motor skills can create handwriting challenges for these students.

CAUTION! At times, a student with Asperger’s Syndrome may have a “meltdown.” Children will scream, cry, run out of the room, or become aggressive. If a situation gets out of control, immediately get help from someone else on staff.

Classroom Strategies and Interventions

Students with Asperger’s Syndrome show a variety of behaviors that call for multiple interventions. Depending on a student’s particular needs, social development often needs to be as much of a priority as academic achievement.

The following strategies and accommodations can be helpful.

Work together with the school staff, parents, and any outside professionals.

Though students with Asperger’s Syndrome usually are able to participate in general education settings, many may also qualify for special services. It’s important to align your efforts with those of classroom aides, counselors, and other school staff. Asperger’s Syndrome also affects children at home. Parents and mental health professionals can provide valuable insight into classroom coping strategies.

Use precise and literal language. Clear, specific directions are important to address a student’s literal interpretation of language. Students with Asperger’s Syndrome might miss or misinterpret a nonverbal signal or facial expression that would seem obvious to other students.

Teach rules in a step-by-step manner. Students may need to be taught rules and social behavior in specific detail. A written “tip sheet” can be helpful.

EXAMPLES OF TIP SHEETS

Answering a Question in Class

1. Raise your hand if you want to ask or answer a question.
2. Wait until a teacher calls on you before you speak.
3. Put your hand down if the teacher asks another student to answer a question.

Hallway Behavior

1. Walk the same speed as other students are walking.
2. Walk on the same side of the hallway as the students going in the same direction as you.
3. Try not to touch or bump into other students.
4. Speak in a voice that's only loud enough to be heard by a person next to you.

Establish a structured environment and minimize surprises. Students with Asperger's Syndrome thrive on predictability, structure, and routine. They may become anxious when they don't know what to expect or when plans change suddenly. Prepare these students in advance for any anticipated changes in routine. This might take the form of frequent explanations of contingency plans. (Example: "This afternoon we're going to watch a DVD about the solar system. But if for some reason the DVD isn't available, we'll be doing our regular science work.") Visual schedules also are useful so students can refer to them throughout the day to know what's coming next. For more information on establishing consistent classroom routines and expectations, see "Effective Classroom Policies and Procedures" on pages 19–25.

Explain classroom rules. Students may acknowledge a rule but not understand why it exists. Without this basis of understanding, they may fail to comprehend situations in which it may be broken. (Example: "You must raise your hand and be called on if you want to answer a question. If you answer out loud when you haven't been asked, you might be interrupting the teacher and not letting other students have the chance to answer a question.") Be cautious, though, as students may wish to engage in extended debates about rules.

Modify instruction to match student strengths. Students with Asperger's Syndrome have difficulties with abstract and critical thinking. As you work to develop these skills in students, match up content work to their strengths. Rather than compositions or essay tests, for example, these students will benefit from assignments and tests that require short, factual answers. They're more comfortable with topics that are fact-based and involve data. Also consider curriculum that incorporates a student's learning styles and interests. For more teaching methods, see "Effective Teaching Strategies for Meeting Diverse Student Needs" on pages 31–33.

Monitor sensory hypersensitivity. Students with Asperger's Syndrome may be particularly sensitive to sound, light, touch, taste, and smells. Noisy, crowded environments (such as the cafeteria or playground) can overstimulate and be upsetting for students. Work to minimize exposure to a student's particular sensory sensitivity. Their sensory needs may require that you get the help of an occupational therapist to eliminate environmental stressors (such as bright, glaring light) in your classroom.

Establish provisions for times when students are emotionally upset. Make sure there's a private place where students can go and a person (such as a school counselor or psychologist) they can see when they are having emotional difficulties. The "Student Coping Plan" on page 30 can help you set up provisions.

Teach and model social skills. Students with Asperger's Syndrome often need to be taught basic or obvious social skills. Emphasize turn-taking, tact, manners, nonverbal behavior, and rules of conversation. Some social skills activities and resources can be found in "Building Social Skills in Students" on pages 37–39.

Closely monitor children at unstructured times. Students' lack of social skills can be apparent especially during unstructured periods like recess or lunch. Observe students closely during these times to ensure they are not being teased or bullied. "Establishing a Safe and Caring Classroom" (pages 35–36) provides other ways to create school environments supportive of all children.

Assign a student buddy. Choose an empathetic student who naturally helps others to provide a child who has Asperger's Syndrome with quiet classroom guidance and aid in social situations.

Gently discourage inappropriate classroom commentary. Students with Asperger's Syndrome may talk endlessly about something that is off-topic or of interest only to themselves. Not only can this create classroom disruptions, but it may also alienate other students. Tell the student that he can talk with you further about a topic after class.

Appreciate a student's difficulties. Realize that students aren't acting or speaking this way to deliberately upset you or other children. A student's behavior is often the result of a lack of social understanding. Don't take inappropriate comments personally.

If the student and family approve, educate your whole class about Asperger's Syndrome. Classmates are less likely to tease (and more likely to befriend or help) a student when they understand why she acts the way she does. In taking this step, ensure you have written student and parent permission and involve a guidance counselor or school psychologist if possible.

Note: Some of the strategies and interventions for helping students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (pages 135–146), Nonverbal Learning Disability (pages 129–133), and Pragmatic Language Disorder (pages 104–107) may also be helpful with students who have Asperger’s Syndrome.

WHAT IT’S LIKE . . .

From a thirteen-year-old who has Asperger’s Syndrome:

“Apparently I am very pedantic and speak slowly and monotonously. I am also told that I have a problem with communication because I do not know when I am boring someone. I like to talk about computers and don’t usually realize that others don’t want to. Well actually I do, but when I am thinking about computers I am not thinking about anyone else. Sometimes, well most of the time, my mind is so full of computers that I don’t stop to think about myself or other people at all. It is very difficult for me to recognize that I may go on too intensely about my special subject as I am me and cannot imagine myself as any different.

“For any kid, whether they enjoy it or not, school is a whole minefield of challenges and new experiences. For kids on the autistic spectrum it seems as if we spend all of our time stepping on these mines (don’t worry kids reading this, there are no mines really—I am just using metaphors) and the whole school experience becomes a very difficult one. School is one place where children are expected to be sociable and have friends. It is very difficult for kids with Asperger’s Syndrome to have these expectations pushed on them as well as having all the hassles of school to contend with.

“Asperger’s people have a great difficulty with social stuff. There seem to be lots of hidden rules and subtle ways of speaking and behaving that are just impossible to fathom. Most Asperger’s kids don’t usually even bother. Difficulties with facial expressions, the use of language, and body language all make us targets for ridicule.”

PROFESSIONAL TREATMENTS

Treatment for children with Asperger’s Syndrome will vary a great deal depending upon the pattern and severity of behaviors. Most children benefit from social skills development in individual or group counseling settings. Many will work with someone to develop study and organizational skills. Others may be helped by an occupational therapist who can address sensory problems and difficulty with motor skills.

Some students with Asperger’s Syndrome also experience anxiety, depression, or attention deficits and take medication to address these problems. Children should be very closely monitored when taking medications—especially early on. Possible side effects of medications include increased feelings of depression, drowsiness, insomnia, stomachaches, headaches, nervousness, and weight gain or loss. Any troubling symptoms you observe in a child taking medication should be immediately shared with the school nurse and parents. •