

## **Aspergers Syndrome and Education**

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At first, we didn't realize our son had a problem. His development had progressed normally compared to other children his age. His speech and vocabulary were miles ahead of his peers. However, Jonathon was about six months old when we began to notice he hated sudden loud noises, and would cry from hearing a vacuum cleaner or a power tool. Faces that appeared unusual, clown faces or faces with heavy makeup, scared him. He did not like areas with unstructured noise, like a swimming pool or an auditorium. Otherwise, Jon "zoned out" sounds around him. You could talk to him, even in a quiet room, and he would ignore you. Daycare providers were totally baffled by his reactions to things. Something would set off a crying fit or he would start hitting another child, apparently for no reason. Teachers viewed Jon as a behavior problem when in actuality, Jon's problem was developmental. His brain worked differently than most people. Jon has been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome.

Asperger Syndrome is a mild, high functioning form of autism (Bauer, 1996). It is often grouped with four other conditions called "autistic spectrum disorders" or "pervasive developmental disorders" (Mayo Clinic, 2006). These disorders can vary in severity, but basically are characterized by problems with social skills and communication. Asperger's Syndrome is considered one of the milder disorders on the autism spectrum. (Bauer, 1996)

Most people with Asperger's Syndrome range in intelligence from normal to superior. In general, their IQs are age appropriate. Compared to other autism disorders Asperger children have normal basic language skills. However, their social skills are poor. They may have difficulties understanding slang, body language, or teasing – ways some people use to communicate. This can cause social problems, since they cannot interpret what others are saying. (Bauer, 1996; APA, 2000 as cited in Bauer, 1996). Children with Asperger's also experience language problems. They sometimes have socially and emotionally inappropriate responses, or repeat words or phrases over and over. (Gillberg as cited in Bauer, 1996). Asperger children also experience intense, limited interests, and an extreme preoccupation with parts of objects (Bauer, 1996; APA, 2000 as cited in Bauer, 1996) and social awkwardness. Less structured settings such as the cafeteria, physical education, or buses, where routines and expectations are less clear, tend to be difficult for Asperger's children. (Bauer, 1996) The most obvious characteristic of Asperger's is their preoccupation with "special interests". They latch on to a specific topic, and then research it to death. They want to learn everything they possibly can about their particular interest. Interests may range from maps, astronomy, weather, dryers, vacuum cleaners, dinosaurs, Pokemon, rockets, you name it. In some cases, childhood fascinations turn into life-long careers. (Bauer, 1996).

There are various classroom accommodations that can be arranged for students with Asperger's Syndrome. Teachers should keep classroom routines as consistent, structured, and predictable as possible. When there is a change from the normal routine, prepare the student in advance. Staff should take advantage of the child's areas of special interest, since the child will learn best when their special interest is on the agenda. Special interests can also be used as a reward to a child for successful completion of work. Use visuals to teach as much as possible - schedules, charts, lists, pictures. Break down and simplify abstract language and concepts. Care should be taken to protect the child from teasing both

in and out of the classroom, since it is one of the greatest sources of anxiety for older children. (Bauer, 1996)

Parents who care for children who have Asperger Syndrome know that there must be modifications made in the home in order to facilitate academic success. To do this, create an area that is only used for homework and supervise the child's assignments (Attwood, 2000; Holliday-Willey, 2000). If the child has trouble remembering assignments, etc. get a small recorder for the child to use in class. Teacher instructions will then be recorded for later use. Get a homework planner and teach child to use it to write down assignments or see that his/her aide or teacher writes down assignments in the planner. (Attwood, 2000). "Have lots of shelves, bins, boxes, and file cabinets, anything that will serve the purpose of organizing ... school stuff." (Holliday-Willey, 2000) Then, help your child get organized and help her maintain that organization. Be sure to keep your child on a specific schedule as Asperger's children need routine; the more consistent, the better. Last, establish some sort of reward system for completing homework. (Holliday-Willey, 2000) Realize that there are special education services out there for your child that he/she is entitled to. Do some research, or contact your local school district.

If those accommodations are not provided and a child's needs are not met, the child may become frustrated, angry, or depressed. The child may act out aggressively, run and hide, or shut down completely and refuse to do any homework at all. When he was in third grade, Jon stood up in the middle of class, ripped his homework in two, said, "I can't do this," and walked out of the classroom. Another time in sixth grade, my son curled up beside the wall of a school hallway and refused to move. Students and teachers were in the hallway at the time. He was over-stressed and had shut down completely. Hiding in his head allowed him to shut out the commotion around him. If stress is not alleviated by numerous breaks or appropriate teaching styles, the Asperger child may become anxious and develop problems with paranoia or clinical depression (Bauer, 1996).

At the time of the writing of this article, our son was 14 years old and in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Jon was very much afraid of crowds at this point in his life. He could not stand to go in a Wal-mart or a K-mart. He tolerated restaurants, but would refuse to use the men's room alone. At 14 years of age, he still needed his father or some other male figure to take him to the restroom.

Jon has been a victim of the ups and downs of our school system. He had good years, where the education providers adjusted their thinking and accommodated his needs. But he also had years where teachers refused to change their "ways of doing things". These years have contributed to many paranoias and fears in my son. At the time of this article, Jon was on the verge of shutting down and giving up. He had very little hope for a successful future. Jon had just transitioned to a new school. The educational system was broken into three levels – grade school, middle school, high school. As opposed to a smaller system of grades 1-12, children attended a grade school (grades 1-5), then moved to a middle school (grades 6-8), and finally were transferred to a high school (grades 9-12). With each transition, Jon had new people to teach him. Each transfer to a new school brought days, weeks, even months of stress to Jonathon as my husband and I tried to "teach" the teachers methods of instructing our son. Some teachers were open to suggestions, some were defensive about their methods.

If you want to teach children with Asperger's Syndrome, teachers must understand that traditional methods of teaching (lectures, large classes, strict discipline, too much commotion) will not work. Teachers must be open to trying different methods of teaching

and be positive about them, as children with Aspergers will sense negative feelings and shut down. Teachers should be sensitive and caring and understand that odd behaviors or a failure to do homework does not mean the child is purposefully misbehaving. They should also realize that they should not be offended if an Asperger child criticizes them. If the child is not cooperating, teachers and administrators must look for a reason why – is the child overwhelmed, confused, upset, lost? When a child with Aspergers is not on task or visibly upset, the best thing a teacher can do is remove him/her from the current situation. Give the child a break. Go to a quiet isolated place and ask them what is going on in their mind. Keep calm, patient, and speak slowly and clearly. Children with Aspergers overreact to anxious, hyper, irritated, disapproving emotions. Be kind and courteous. When you are attentive to a child with Asperger's syndrome, they will sense that and open up to you. The learning will follow, naturally.

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