Asperger’s Syndrome:
A Workshop for Teachers and Parents

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Why Me?

One foot in and one foot out is what Asperger’s is all about.
Sometimes I think why me;
Other times I think it’s the best way to be.
A little different from the rest…
Makes you think you’re second best.
Nobody quite understanding
A hard life which is very demanding.
I look like any other child
But little things just make me wild.
Strengths of Children with AS

• Well-developed oral language
• Excellent memory for details
• Concrete, sequential thinking
• Ability to visualize
Clinical Features of Asperger’s Syndrome

• Lack of empathy
• Naïve, inappropriate, one-sided interaction
• Little or no ability to form friendships
• Pedantic, repetitive speech
• Poor non-verbal communication
• Intense absorption in certain subjects
• Clumsy and uncoordinated movements and odd posture
Non-Verbal Communication Deficits

- Limited use of gestures
- Clumsy, gauche body language
- Limited facial expressions
- Inappropriate expressions (e.g., smiling at inappropriate times)
- Peculiar, stiff gaze
Causes

- Brain differences
- Genetic influence
- Combination of genetics and environmental influences
Areas Considered in Diagnosis

- Social behavior
- Language, particularly pragmatic language
- Interests and routines
- Motor skills
- Cognition
- Sensory sensitivity
Pathways to Diagnosis

- Diagnosis of autism in early childhood
- Recognition of social awkwardness and motor problems when child enters school
- Diagnosis of a genetic relative with autism or Asperger’s Syndrome
- A secondary psychiatric disorder (e.g. depression)
- Residual symptoms as an adult
Special Help at School

Having the medical diagnosis of Asperger’s Syndrome does not automatically guarantee that the child will receive any special services at school. AS is not one of the 13 categories of disability recognized by the special education law. Even though AS falls in the Autism Spectrum, children with AS will not be eligible for special education under the category of “autism.”
Possible Categories of Eligibility

Special Education

• Learning Disabilities
• Speech/Language Impaired
• Other Health Impaired

Section 504
How AS Affects School-Related Skills

- Difficulties with reading comprehension
- Deficits if math skills, particularly geometry and abstract concepts
- Deficits in visual-spatial skills (completing puzzles, mazes, drawing, making and reading maps)
- Handwriting
- Organizational skills, particularly managing time, planning long-term projects, getting work done
- Behavioral problems related to poor social skills or non-compliance with routines
- Inefficient work habits, easily distracted by other interests or irrelevant details
Student Needs

- Routine and time to settle in
- Quiet, well-ordered classroom
- Atmosphere of encouragement rather than criticism
- Practical support in terms of a teacher aide
- Consistency (e.g., home/school; among teachers)
- Alternatives to the usual discipline procedures (e.g., viewing behavior as a result of AS, not simply defiant, willfully disobedient, or emotionally disturbed)
Helpful Accommodations

• Reduced length of assignments
• Bypass handwriting
• Provide class notes or an outline for note-taking
• Visual strategies (e.g., instructions taped to desk)
• Executive function help (e.g., homework log)
• Assignment checklists (e.g., break down longer assignments into manageable chunks)
• Day planners
• Help-seeking routines
• Scaffolding for group work
• Test taking with more time and in a quiet environment
• Oral testing
• Make abstract concepts as concrete as possible
• Teach rules for understanding stories (e.g., who, what, where, when)
• Highlight or color-code important information
• Encourage paraphrasing
• Use manipulatives for teaching math
• Set up a behavioral plan
• Prepare for transitions (e.g., familiarize with new building, new classroom, new teacher or aide)
“Ideal” School Situation

- Consistent routines and rules
- Consistent places to keep materials and ways of collecting assignments
- A posted classroom schedule
- Use of clear, simple, unambiguous language
- Provision of written instructions
- Preferential seating near the teacher and away from distractions
- Special work station where noise will not disrupt
- Allocation of sufficient time for instructions, repetition of instructions, and individual assistance
- Frequent monitoring of student work pace and work product
- Directing questions toward the student to see that he/she understands the work and is attending.
- Immediate feedback on performance, including reinforcement for both effort and productivity.
“Ideal” Teacher Qualities

• Calm disposition
• Predictable in emotional reactions
• Flexible with curriculum delivery
• Able to see the positive side of the child
• Keen sense of humor
Key to Success

Recognition of the variability in the expression of the disorder (cyclical nature of AS)

Good Day = concentrates, conforms, socializes, and learns reasonably well

Not-So-Good Day = self-absorbed, lacks confidence and ability to follow class routines
My Greatest Fear Is Myself

My greatest fear is myself.
Control is not absolute: it’s a constant struggle to maintain,
It drains my strength.
I am always tired: I never get enough sleep.
Events beyond my control happen around me:
I do things that scare me.
If I’m confused or angry or tired,
I slip up and my body takes over.
Watching your life like a void is scary.
It takes an effort of will to take control again
and not just let it happen.
I’m afraid of what I feel.
Emotion weakens my control.
When I think, I sometimes think of letting go,
just letting it all slip away.
It hurts fighting all the time.
I just want peace and rest.

David, age 13
Challenging Behavior

Some children with AS display challenging behaviors, such as hitting, screaming, throwing tantrums, repetitive arguing, non-compliance, or even self-injury. Managing these types of behavior is possible if these four guidelines are observed:

1. **Figure out what the child is communicating with the behavior**
2. **Try to change the situation so that the child is less likely to misbehave**
3. **Teach the child how to communicate needs in more appropriate ways**
4. **Practice the new way of communicating needs with the child**
5. **Reward the child for using a new strategy to get needs met**
6. **Be sure that the challenging behavior is not rewarded.**
1. Determine What the Child Is Communicating

- Confused and needs assistance
- Trying to express a feeling
- Wants to escape from the current situation
- Strong need for sameness, predictability and routine
- Wants social engagement but doesn’t know how to achieve it
- Wants to have control in a situation
2. Change the Situation

- Make the situation easier to understand, more concrete, routine or predictable
- If the child is not feeling physically okay, remedy the situation (e.g., provide food, rest, quiet, medical attention)
- Consider avoiding or reducing the amount of time spent in a difficult situation
- Provide plenty of advance warning of transitions and allow the child to have closure before changing activities
- Provide structured social activities with one child at a time
3. Teach Ways to Communicate Needs

- Ask for help by raising a hand, ringing, using a silent signal
- Ask for a demonstration when tackling a new task (e.g., setting the table)
- Teach the child to say: “I don’t like this,” when the child feels the need to escape.
- Hold up a stop sign or some other silent signal when the child needs a break.
4. Practice New Ways of Communicating

• Model more appropriate phrases or nonverbal signals

• Have the child practice the new phrase or behavior before the situation in which he/she is likely to be using it.

• During a situation, remind (prompt) the child to use the new phrase or behavior
5. Reward Use of New Strategy

• When the child requests help, immediately assist him/her.
• If the child breaks away and leaves the situation, praise him/her for taking a break when needed.
• If the child appropriately asks for attention, stop and provide some time, interest in and engagement with him or her.
• Be effusive in acknowledging when a child uses the new communication well.
• Honor steps in the right direction.
6. Don’t Reward “Bad” Behavior

• Leave the child no alternative for getting his/her needs met besides the new, appropriate method.
• Ignore inappropriate behaviors like screaming, throwing things, tantruming (unless there is potential for physical harm).
• Teach others to ignore the child’s inappropriate behavior.
Proactive Strategies

- Establish a set of concrete rules.
- Be as consistent as possible in enforcing rules.
- Make sure the child understands expectations. Write expectations down or illustrate them with pictures.
- Describe your expectations in terms of what he/she is supposed to do, rather than what he/she is not supposed to do.
- Have clear beginning and end of day routines.
- Have clear boundaries for activities and signal their beginning and end by using timers or visual cues.
- Provide concrete cues that an activity is coming to an end.
- Use preferred activities as rewards for completing non-preferred activities.
- Limit the time the child spends in nonproductive preoccupations by setting explicit (e.g., the child may ask three questions during reading period).
Characteristics of AS Social Behavior

- Inability to interact with peers
- Lack of desire to interact with peers
- Lack of appreciation of social cues
- Socially or emotionally inappropriate behavior
- Lack of awareness of “unwritten” rules of social conduct
Social Lessons

- How to start, maintain and end play
- Flexibility, cooperation and sharing
- How to avoid social play
- How to explain what you should have done
- How to invite another person to play or visit
- How to participate in group activities (with and without explicit rules)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Teachers Can Do</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Use other children as cues to indicate what to do</td>
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<td>• Encourage cooperative games</td>
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<td>• Model how to relate to other children</td>
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<td>• Explain to the child alternative means of seeking help</td>
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<td>• Encourage potential friendships</td>
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<td>• Provide supervision at unstructured times</td>
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<td>• Teach relaxation</td>
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<td>• When the student is angry, encourage time away, relaxation or vigorous exercise</td>
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<td>• Use an aide to supervise and teach social skills</td>
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<td>• Develop a social skills group</td>
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<td>• Create projects and activities illustrating the qualities of a good friend</td>
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Social Stories
Carol Gray
Educational Consultant, Michigan Public Schools

A story of a social situation which describes relevant social cues, anticipated actions and information about what is occurring, and why. These stories include four types of sentences:

1. **Descriptive**: objectively define where a situation occurs, who is involved, what the people are doing and why.
2. **Perspective**: describe, and explain if necessary, the feelings of others in a given situation.
3. **Directive**: state what the child is expected to do or say.
4. **Control**: develop strategies to help the child remember what to do or how to understand the situation. These are often suggested and written by the children themselves and can incorporate their special interests.

Note: A ratio of 1 directive or control sentence to 2-5 descriptive or perspective sentences is recommended.
Social Story Example

My school has many rooms *(descriptive)*. One room is called the lunch room *(descriptive)*. Usually the children eat lunch in the lunch room *(descriptive)*. The children hear the lunch bell *(perspective)*. The children know the lunch bell tells them to line up at the door *(perspective)*. We have a line to be fair to those who have waited there longest *(perspective)*. As the kids come, they join the end of the line *(directive)*. The children are hungry. They want to eat *(perspective)*. I will try to stand quietly in the lunch line until it is my turn to buy my lunch *(directive)*. Lunch lines and turtles are both very slow *(control)*. Sometimes they stop; sometimes they go *(control)*. My teacher will be pleased that I have waited quietly *(perspective)*.
Understanding Emotions

- Self awareness
- Awareness of other’s feelings
- Awareness of how one’s actions affect the feelings of others
- Empathy for others’ feelings
- Gauging behavior based on emotional needs of others in a relationship
Techniques for Teaching Emotional Skills

- Explore one emotion at a time
- Teach how to read and respond to cues that indicate different levels of emotion
- Teach safety phrases to use when confused
- Use a visual gauge as a guide to describing emotions
- Use video recording and role play to provide more subtle or precise expression
- Use leading questions or a diary to encourage self-disclosure
Eye Contact

For people with Asperger’s, it may be easier to make eye contact when they do not have to listen. Eye contact breaks their concentration.

Looking at people’s faces, particularly into their eyes, is one of the hardest things for me to do. When I look at people I have nearly always had to make a conscious effort to do so and then I can usually only do it for a second. If I do look at people for longer periods of time, they usually claim that I seem to be just looking through them rather than actually at them, as if I am unaware that they are actually there.

Michael, age 15
Cognitive Interventions

- Help child to understand the perspective and thoughts of others by using role play and direct instruction
- Encourage the child to stop and think how another person will feel before the child’s acts or speaks
- Use quizzes and games to help the child recall factual information and make associations
- Encourage practice of thinking of alternative strategies for solving problems
- Teach the child when and how to ask for help
- Observe the strategies the child uses; if they work, even though they are unconventional, allow the child to solve problems his/her way
- Tolerate a child’s need for imaginary world, but limit the amount of time spent on fantasies
- Encourage visualization using diagrams, visual analogies and computer simulations
Language Intervention

- Encourage reciprocal speech
- Encourage whispering and “think it, don’t say it” when near other people
- Get help from a speech therapist if anxiety interferes with a child’s ability to speak clearly
Language Interventions

Pragmatics

- Learn appropriate opening comments
- Learn how to seek clarification or assistance when confused
- Encourage willingness to admit “I don’t know”
- Teach the cues for when to reply, interrupt or change the topic
- Model sympathetic comments
- Whisper in the child’s ear what to say to the other person
- Use speech and drama activities to develop conversational skills
- Use Social Stories, Circle of Friends, and Comic Strips to illustrate social behavior
Language Interventions

**Literal Interpretation**

- Encourage the child to think how his/her comment could be misinterpreted
- Explain metaphors and figures of speech
Language Intervention

Prosody

• Teach how to modify rhythm and pitch in oral speech
• Model how to stress key words
• Model how to express emotion through tone of voice and stress on particular words
Language Interventions

Auditory Processing
Encourage child to ask to have instructions…

• repeated
• simplified (e.g., one part at a time)
• put into other words (“say it another way”)
• written down
Interventions Involving Interests

- Facilitate conversation (as opposed to monologues)
- Encourage pursuit of interests as a means of enjoyment and relaxation
- Set limits on indulgence in interests
- Provide order and consistency (when to engage in interests, when not to do so)
- Use interests as a way of encouraging social contacts with others who have the same interests
Interventions Involving Routines

• Understand that routines are critical to the sense of well-being of children with AS
• Teach concepts of time, especially how long it normally takes to complete tasks
• Develop written (or pictorial) schedules
• Warn of changes
• Rehearse ways to handle unexpected occurrences
• Expect trouble when change catches the child unawares
• Insist on compromises when the child refuses to adjust to change
Interventions for Motor Clumsiness

- Provide direct instruction in how to run, skip, jump, catch a ball
- Use typical playground equipment to practice maintaining balance
- Try hand over hand prompts
- Bypass handwriting difficulties; encourage use of word processing
- Encourage a slower pace in performing motor activities
- If child displays tics, blinking, involuntary movements, odd posture, freezing, refer for a medical evaluation
Interventions for Sensory Sensitivities

Auditory Sensitivity

• Avoid some sounds (the ones that are really annoying to the child)
• Camouflage annoying sounds by encouraging the child to use earphones to listen to music
• Minimize background noise, especially several people talking at the same time
• Consider having the child use ear plugs
Sensory Sensitivity Interventions

Tactile Sensitivity

• Allow the child to wear duplicates of clothes that are tolerable (e.g., same type of t-shirt, same style of jeans)

• Try sensory integration therapy, especially exposure to massage, vibration, deep pressure, and vestibular stimulation
Interventions for Sensory Sensitivities

Sensitivity to Taste and Texture of Food

- Avoid force feeding or punishment for not eating
- Encourage the child to lick or taste a new food rather than actually eat it
- Have the child try new foods only when he/she is feeling relaxed
Interventions for Sensory Sensitivity

**Visual Sensitivity**
Avoid intense levels of light (e.g. glare from sun)
Encourage the child to use a visor or sunglasses when outdoors
Interventions for Sensory Sensitivities

Lack of Sensitivity to Pain

• Watch for behavioral indicators of pain
• Encourage the child to report pain
• Explain to the child why reporting pain to an adult is important
• Keep in mind that when the child complains of minor discomfort, it may mean significant illness
Factors Leading to Success

• **Mentor**—a teacher, relative or professional who understands the child and provides guidance and inspiration

• **Support**—family and friends who provide love and support can compensate for the individual’s peculiarities and camouflage difficulties.

• **Success in areas of interest**—if the child pursues interests that lead to success, these successes can help to offset the challenges in the child’s personal life

• **Coming to terms with AS**—if a child comes to understand the disorder and can accept himself/herself, then the child can begin to recognize his/her good qualities

• **Natural “recovery”**—people with AS can gradually learn to cope with social demands, especially if those around them are tolerant and allow the individual to develop slowly over time
Web Sources

• Asperger Syndrome Coalition of the United States
  http://www.asperger.org

• Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support (OASIS)
  http://www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/

• Yale Child Study Center Developmental Disabilities Clinic
  http://www.med.yale.edu/chldstdy/autism/asperger.html