

ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

Asperger's syndrome is a developmental disorder with the following characteristics in children:

1. delayed social maturity and social reasoning
2. immature empathy
3. difficulty making friends and often teased by other children
4. difficulty with the communication and control of emotions
5. unusual language abilities that include advanced vocabulary and syntax but delayed conversation skills, unusual prosody and a tendency to be pedantic
6. A fascination with a topic that is unusual in intensity or focus
7. difficulty maintaining attention in class
8. An unusual profile of learning abilities
9. A need for assistance with some self-help and organizational skills
10. clumsiness in terms of gait and coordination
11. Sensitivity to specific sounds, aromas, textures or touch.

In adults additional criteria include the following:

1. Difficulties in understanding social situations and other people's thoughts and feelings.
2. Tendency to think of issues as being black and white (e.g. in politics or morality), rather than considering multiple perspectives in a flexible way.
3. Tendency to turn any conversation back to self or own topic of interest.
4. Marked impairment in the ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others. Cannot see the point of superficial social contact, niceties, or passing time with others, unless there is a clear discussion point/debate or activity.
5. Pedantic style of speaking or inclusion of too much detail.
6. Inability to recognize when the listener is interested or bored. Even if the person has been told not to talk about their particular obsessive topic for too long, this difficulty may be evident if other topics arise.
7. Frequent tendency to say things without considering the emotional impact on the listener (faux pas).
8. Lack of varied, spontaneous make believe play appropriate to developmental level.
9. Inability to tell, write or generate spontaneous, unscripted or un plagiarised fiction.
10. Either lack of interest in fiction (written or drama) appropriate to developmental level or interest in fiction is restricted to its possible basis in fact (e.g. science fiction, history, technical aspects of film).

There are a number of strategies that can be helpful in addressing the challenges the syndrome presents including the following:

SOCIAL SKILLS

1. Teach the child to take turns and ask for help.
2. Play pretend games with the child.
3. Give encouragement to the child for being friendly.
4. Use role-play activities to provide practice in aspects of cooperative play.
5. Seek shared interests with like-minded children
6. Help the child to develop a sense of humour.
7. Teach the child what not to say.
8. Encourage a peer to become a mentor or buddy to the child.
9. Help the child to find and join an alternative group of friends who have similar interests and values.
10. Encourage the person to view animals as potential friends.
11. Encourage the person to use the Internet as a source of friendship.
12. Provide guidance on how to maintain a friendship.

LANGUAGE

When speaking 'Aspergerese', the typical person needs to make his or her intentions clear, avoiding ambiguity or unnecessary subtlety. It is also important to allow the person with Asperger's syndrome some time to consider his or her thoughts before anticipating a response to a question, and not to feel uncomfortable with momentary silences and a lack of eye contact.

CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

1. Greatest advances in academics are in a quiet, well-structured classroom.
2. The teacher needs to create an "Asperger friendly" environment based on the social, linguistic and cognitive abilities of the child. The teacher should have access to information and expertise on Asperger's syndrome and attend relevant training courses.
3. The greatest progress has been achieved by teachers who show an empathic understanding of the child. They are flexible in their teaching strategies, assessments and expectations. They invariably like and admire the child, respect his or her abilities and know the child's motivators and learning profile.

HOMEWORK

1. The area where the child works at home must be conducive to concentration and learning.
2. Parents should create a daily homework timetable and exchange a diary or log book between home and school.
3. The teacher can highlight key aspects of the homework sheet, provide written explanations and ask questions to ensure the child knows which aspects of the homework material are relevant to his or her preparation of the assignment.

FACTORS OF SUCCESS FOR ADULTS WITH ASPERGER'S

1. The diagnosis occurs in early childhood to reduce the secondary psychological problems such as depression and denial.
2. The person and his or her family accept the diagnosis.
3. The person has a mentor who understands Asperger's syndrome and provides guidance and inspiration.
4. The person acquires knowledge about Asperger's syndrome through reading autobiographies and self-help books written for children or adults with Asperger's syndrome.
5. A significant other is there to provide emotional and practical support, camouflage any difficulties and provide a life-long commitment to the person.
6. The person achieves success at work or in the special interest which offsets the challenges in his or her social life.
7. The person is eventually able to accept his or her strengths and deficits and no longer has a desire to become someone that he or she cannot be: there is a realization that he or she has qualities others admire.
8. There may be a natural recovery.

The following self affirming pledge is also often helpful:

1. I am not defective. I am different.
2. I will not sacrifice my self-worth for peer acceptance.
3. I am a good and interesting person.
4. I will take pride in myself.
5. I am capable of getting along with society.
6. I will ask for help when I need it.
7. I am a person who is worthy of others' respect and acceptance.
8. I will find a career interest that is well suited to my abilities and interests.
9. I will be patient with those who need time to understand me.
10. I am never going to give up on myself.
11. I will accept myself for who I am.

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