

Chapter 9: Students with Asperger's Syndrome

Students with Asperger's syndrome often display many of the characteristics associated with autism spectrum disorders. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) criteria stipulate that students must display a qualitative impairment in social interaction, and restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behaviour in order to be diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. In addition, the student must possess at least average cognitive abilities and adaptive functioning skills.

The main differences between people with autism spectrum disorders and those with Asperger's syndrome is that individuals with Asperger's syndrome do not have clinically significant delays in early language development or significant delays in cognitive development. They usually do not have the same degree of difficulty in the development of age-appropriate self-help skills, adaptive behaviour and curiosity about the environment in childhood. However, even though students with Asperger's syndrome may obtain scores in the average or above average range, they continue to demonstrate subtle but important differences in cognitive and social processing.

Individuals with Asperger's syndrome constitute a diverse group, so treatment and educational approaches must be individualized. It is important to know that individuals with Asperger's syndrome are at risk for developing other psychiatric conditions. Historically approximately 30–35 percent of students with Asperger's syndrome develop secondary psychiatric conditions, such as depression, anxiety disorders or obsessive-compulsive disorders. Pushing students too hard to “be normal” can exacerbate existing anxieties and social difficulties.

Learning and Behavioural Characteristics

Asperger's syndrome is characterized by a qualitative impairment in social interaction. People with Asperger's syndrome may be keen to relate to others but do not have the necessary skills and may approach others in peculiar ways.⁶⁹ They frequently lack understanding of social customs and may appear socially awkward, have difficulty with empathy and misinterpret social cues. They often have the same difficulties as individuals with

autism spectrum disorders in understanding that other people have their own perceptions, thoughts and feelings. People with Asperger's syndrome do not acquire social skills efficiently through incidental learning and frequently need explicit instruction in the area of socialization.

Although children with Asperger's syndrome usually speak fluently by the time they enter kindergarten, they often have problems with the complexities of language, including:

- pragmatics—the use of language in social contexts
- semantics—multiple meanings
- prosody—the pitch, stress and rhythm of speech.⁷⁰

One common characteristic of people with Asperger's syndrome is that they have difficulty carrying on social conversations. They may have an advanced vocabulary and talk incessantly about a favourite subject, however the topic may be somewhat narrowly defined and they may have difficulty switching to other topics.

People with Asperger's syndrome may have problems communicating with others because they do not naturally learn the rules of conversation. They may:

- interrupt or talk over the speech of others
- make irrelevant comments
- have difficulty initiating and terminating conversations
- use speech characterized by a lack of variation in pitch, stress and rhythm
- use overly pedantic or formal speech, particularly as they reach adolescence
- stand too close when talking to someone
- stare, use abnormal body posture or other strange body language
- fail to understand gestures and facial expressions of others.

Students with Asperger's syndrome are of average to above-average intelligence and may appear quite capable. Many students with Asperger's syndrome are relatively proficient in their knowledge of facts and may have extensive factual information about a subject that absorbs them. However, they demonstrate relative weaknesses in comprehension and abstract thought, as well as in social cognition. Consequently, they experience academic problems, particularly with:

- reading comprehension
- problem solving
- organizational skills
- concept development
- making inferences and judgements.

In addition, they often have difficulty with cognitive flexibility—their thinking tends to be rigid. Students with Asperger’s syndrome often have considerable difficulty adapting to change or accepting failure. They do not readily learn from their mistakes.⁷¹

An estimated 50–90 percent of people with Asperger’s syndrome have problems with motor coordination.⁷² The affected areas include locomotion, balance, manual dexterity, handwriting, rapid movements, rhythm and imitation of movements.

Students with Asperger’s syndrome may be hypersensitive or hyposensitive to specific stimuli and may engage in unusual or repetitive behaviours to obtain a specific sensory stimulation.

Many students diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome are inattentive, easily distracted and have received a diagnosis of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder at one point in their lives.⁷³ Anxiety is also a characteristic associated with this syndrome. They may experience some difficulty understanding and adapting to the social demands of school. Appropriate instruction and support can help alleviate stress.

Strategies

Some strategies for teaching students with autism spectrum disorders may be applicable to students with Asperger’s syndrome, however it is important to consider the unique learning characteristics of individual students, provide support when needed and build on students’ strengths. The following chart identifies specific learning difficulties and offers a number of possible classroom strategies.⁷⁴

Learning Difficulty

Classroom Strategies

Difficulties with language

- has tendency to make irrelevant comments
- has tendency to interrupt
- has tendency to talk on one topic and talk over the speech of others
- has difficulty understanding complex language, following directions and understanding intent of words with multiple meanings

Insistence on sameness

Impairment in social interaction

- has difficulty understanding the rules of social interaction
- is naive
- interprets literally what is said
- has difficulty reading the emotions of others
- lacks tact
- has difficulty understanding unwritten rules and once learned, may apply them rigidly

- has problems with social distance
- lacks awareness of personal space

Restricted range of interests

- use *Comic Strip Conversations* (Gray, 1994) to teach conversation skills related to specific problems
- teach appropriate opening comments
- teach conversational skills in small group settings
- teach rules and cues regarding turn-taking in conversation and when to reply, interrupt or change the topic
- use audiotaped and videotaped conversations
- teach student to seek assistance when confused
- explain metaphors and words with double meanings
- encourage student to ask for an instruction to be repeated, simplified or written down when necessary
- pause between instructions and check for understanding
- limit oral questions to a number student can manage
- watch videos to identify nonverbal expressions and their meanings
- prepare student for potential change wherever possible
- use pictures, schedules and social stories to indicate impending changes
- provide clear expectations and rules for behaviour
- explicitly teach the rules of social conduct
- teach student how to interact through social stories, modelling and role-playing
- educate peers about how to respond to the student in social interactions
- use other children as cues to indicate what to do
- encourage cooperative games
- provide supervision and support for the student at breaks and recess, as required
- use a buddy system to assist the student during nonstructured times
- teach the student how to start, maintain and end play
- teach flexibility, cooperation and sharing
- teach the student how to monitor his or her own behaviour
- structure social skills groups to provide opportunities for direct instruction on specific skills and to practise actual events
- teach relaxation techniques and designate a quiet place for relaxing
- model and practise appropriate personal space
- limit perseverative discussions and questions
- set firm expectations for the classroom but provide opportunities for student to pursue own interests
- incorporate and expand on personal interests in activities

Learning Difficulty

Poor concentration

- is often off task
- is distractible
- is disorganized
- has difficulty sustaining attention

Poor organizational skills

Poor motor coordination

Academic difficulties

- has difficulty with comprehension
- has difficulty with problem solving
- has difficulty with abstract concepts

Emotional vulnerability

- has difficulty coping with the social and emotional demands of school
- is easily stressed because of inflexibility
- is prone to anxiety
- has low self-esteem
- has difficulty tolerating mistakes
- is prone to depression
- has rage reactions and temper outbursts

Classroom Strategies

- provide frequent teacher feedback and redirection
- break down assignments
- use visual organizers, semantic mapping and outlining
- provide timed work sessions
- reduce homework assignments
- seat student at the front of the classroom
- use nonverbal cues to get attention
- use personal schedules and calendars
- maintain lists of assignments
- help student use to-do lists and checklists
- place pictures on containers and lockers
- use picture cues in lockers
- involve student in fitness activities
- take slower writing speed into account when giving assignments
- provide extra time for tests
- consider the use of computers for written assignments
- do not assume that student has understood simply because he or she can re-state the information
- provide direct instruction as well as modelling
- show examples of what is required
- do not assume student has understood what is read—check for comprehension, supplement instruction and use visual supports
- break tasks down into smaller steps or present in another way
- be as concrete as possible in presenting new concepts and abstract material
- use activity-based learning where possible
- use graphic organizers, such as semantic maps, webs
- use outlines to help student take notes, organize and categorize information
- avoid verbal overload
- capitalize on strengths, e.g., memory
- provide positive praise
- teach student to ask for help
- teach techniques for coping with difficult situations and dealing with stress
- use rehearsal strategies
- provide experiences in which student can make choices
- help student to understand own behaviours and reactions of others
- educate other students
- use peer supports, such as buddy systems and peer support networks

Learning Difficulty

Sensory sensitivities

- is sensitive to sound, touch, taste, light intensity, colours or aromas
- reacts to:
 - sudden unexpected noises, such as a telephone ringing or fire alarm
 - high-pitched continuous noises
 - confusing, complex or multiple sounds, such as shopping centre noise

Classroom Strategies

- be aware that normal levels of auditory and visual input can be perceived by student as too much or too little
- keep the level of stimulation within student's ability to cope
- avoid sounds that are distressing, when possible
- use music to camouflage certain sounds
- minimize background noise
- use ear plugs if noise or reaction is extreme
- teach and model relaxation strategies and use of diversions to reduce anxiety
- provide opportunities and space for quiet time
- arrange for independent work space free of sensory stimuli that bother student