



The WCPA News

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Volume 3, Number 2

January, 2002

UNDERSTANDING ASPERGER'S DISORDER

By Carrie Wickersham, B.A., Clinical Intern

Recently, there has been a surge in the diagnosis of Asperger's Disorder. Today, more and more students are being diagnosed with the condition, and the majority of these students are placed in regular education classrooms. However, many teachers and school professionals are not familiar with this disorder.

Asperger's Disorder is biologically-caused, and is categorized as a pervasive developmental disorder. Asperger's is very similar to high-functioning Autism, in many ways, and there is still some debate as to whether Asperger's and high-functioning Autism are indeed the same disorder. Until recently, individuals with Asperger's Disorder were often misdiagnosed as having Autism, ADHD, schizophrenia, learning disabilities, etc., or went undiagnosed.

The primary characteristic of persons with Asperger's Disorder is a profound poverty of social skills, which influences their relationships, communication skills, academic skills, and career abilities. They are usually described as self-centered and eccentric. Often, students with Asperger's exhibit many of the behaviors listed below:

- Social Skills**
 - Occasional outbursts that seem to come out of the blue
 - Socially stiff and awkward with peers, great difficulty making friends, may relate better to adults
 - Flat facial expression, except with strong emotion (such as anger or misery)
 - Inflexible adherence to schedules and routine - extremely uncomfortable with any deviations
 - Single-minded pursuits of unusual topics (e.g. train schedules, bathroom fixtures, specific peers)
- Communication**
 - Clear pronunciation and correct syntax; however, poor social communication abilities
 - Speaks concretely; poor understanding of inflection, examples, jokes, & facial expressions
 - Preferring to talk about narrow, unusual interests
 - Extreme difficulty with abstract concepts, metaphors, parables
- Academic Skills**
 - I.Q.'s fall along the full spectrum, but many are in the above-average range in verbal ability and in the below-average range in performance abilities
 - Longer information processing time; overload when processing both visual and auditory information
 - May have dyslexia, writing problems, and/or difficulty with mathematics
 - Difficulty generalizing learned academic material to new settings
 - Great difficulty with reading for information, highlighting and taking notes
 - Poor motor coordination, often seem clumsy (can contribute to handwriting difficulties)
 - Many have either the neatest or messiest desk in class

Because these children often have normal IQ's, and can easily memorize facts and concrete information, it is often easy

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Asperger's Disorder (Continued)

Our Philosophy

We believe that individuals and systems:

- Are capable of permanent change
- Function best with clearly defined authority that stems from a family systems hierarchy
- Are accountable for both positive and negative aspects of behavior
- Achieve success by conscious choices that lead to strength and development of personal responsibility
- Control their environment by establishing boundaries that are consistent with their values

WCPA promotes change and growth by:

- Helping to establish order within the environment
- Meeting consistently in a collaborative relationship to achieve identified goals
- Helping to identify and process significant issues
- Aiding in resolving issues as they arise

The result for the system or individual is the development of a strong sense of identity and boundaries that allows for the achievement of goals.

to overlook their weaknesses, particularly in the early grades. However, once we attach abstract meaning or social significance to a concept, their limitations show.

Some of the behaviors of a child with Asperger's Disorder may be misinterpreted as "spoiled," "manipulative," or "selfish." Children with Asperger's are often considered classroom troublemakers. However, it is important for teachers to recognize that inappropriate behaviors are usually a function of poor coping strategies, low frustration tolerance, and difficulty reading social cues. Most teaching strategies that are effective for students with Autism (structure, consistency, etc.) also work for students with Asperger's. However, because these children are often aware that they are different, and can be self-conscious about it, teachers may need to be subtler in their intervention methods.

Strategies to try in school for academic success:

- Remember that Asperger's Disorder is a serious, biological condition, not willfulness. Accommodations must be made.
- Present information visually (allows for a longer processing time than does auditory information and is more concrete).
- Relate assignments to topics in which the student is already very interested.
- Provide outlines/class notes for the student, while they are learning those skills.
- Help the student to budget time on large assignments or projects.
- Let them engage in an enjoyed activity (e.g. building blocks or drawing) only after completing another, less enjoyed activity (e.g. academic work).
- Remember that the child may do quite well in the lower grades and only begin struggling academically once the middle grades are reached.

Strategies to try in school for behavioral success:

- Use the buddy system, with a high-functioning peer.
- Make a visual schedule of the entire school day and refer to it often, preparing the student in advance for any change in schedule, such as an assembly or fire drill, and for transition times.
- Directions should include what to do (instead of what not to do).
- Be non-emotional when redirecting the student.
- Include social interaction with other children within their curriculum or IEP.
- Implement one-on-one social skill training as part of their daily curriculum.
- Offer reinforcers that are highly desired and enjoyed by the child. A good way to accomplish this is to ask the student what he wants to work for.
- Pick your battles – only place the student in highly anxiety provoking situations when it is important for their academic and/or behavioral objectives.

Having a student with Asperger's Disorder in your classroom is challenging, and no recommendation or technique changes that. However, the more that the classroom teacher is able to educate him/herself about this disorder and seek help when it's needed, the better the chances are for the student's success. If your school is coping with the challenge of having a student with Asperger's, WCPA is able to provide observation of the student in the classroom, consultation with the teacher and principal, and recommendations for classroom success. In addition, therapy is available in the office for these students and their families, to assist the family in understanding their child's diagnosis and making appropriate behavioral interventions and to assist the child in learning necessary coping skills.

Carrie Wickersham is a clinical intern at West County Psychological Associates, and will receive her Master of Social Work degree after the conclusion of this internship. She has extensive experience working with children affected by pervasive developmental disorders, such as Asperger's Disorder, and provides on-site consultation and behavioral modification coaching services for schools.

From the Director

Dear Friends,

I hope you are in the midst of a great school year!

One of the ways that we at WCPA learn what the "issues of the day" are is through the topics that we're asked to present to teacher, parent and student groups. As most of you would guess, bullying and violence are the most often-requested topics. The other request that is becoming more frequent is social skills for students. I believe that these topics are interrelated. Who does the bully pick on? Oftentimes, it's the child who's most vulnerable, who lacks strong social skills. While schools may be able to stop the bully, how do you address the vulnerability of the victimized child? The most effective way of working with these children is to empower them, to teach them how to accept themselves. Oftentimes, the group setting can be extremely effective in helping students develop these skills. In attempting to meet this need, WCPA is initiating social skills groups for students, in our office. Or, if your needs are such, we will always be happy to provide social skills groups in your school.

Mary Fitzgibbons, Ph.D., Director

I Don't Care What It's Called, What Do I Do With It?

Brett Newcomb, L.P.C., Assistant Director

Today's classroom teachers are often overloaded with expectations concerning their classroom performance. They are expected to teach a curriculum, follow the school calendar, attend open house, communicate with parents, protect their students' safety, and encourage self esteem. They have to identify learning and behavioral problems, refer for testing and interventions, individualize instructions to maximize student achievement, and provide a good example of living a happy and moral life, (not to mention participating in the food drive, the PTA and the Fred Bird Assembly.)

In addition, many regular classroom teachers are concerned about their students who have been diagnosed with problems like Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Asperger's Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Conduct Disorder. It is not the responsibility of the teacher to diagnose or treat these clinical diagnoses; the teacher is not the therapist, nor is (s)he meant to be. The jobs and responsibilities are different. This article aims to answer teachers' common question: "Whatever it is, what do I do with it in my classroom?"

As Harry Wong says, "Good classroom management begins with disciplined teachers." Teachers, who have to juggle the responsibilities cited above and accomplish their job with a typical class of students, (who range in abilities as well as diagnostic labels,) must indeed be self-disciplined. Teachers need to be disciplined in their approach to classroom organization, student management, and self care. Children who suffer from the disorders listed above present with cluster symptoms. Their classroom behaviors and the impact of those behaviors on the class and the teacher will often be similar, irrespective of the diagnostic label. Teachers must be disciplined, so that they can bring order out of chaos. You cannot teach, and children cannot learn, when there is chaos.

Research data dealing with ADHD, Asperger's, ODD, CD, etc., supports the following statements:

1. Organize and structure the classroom with clear rules, a predictable schedule, and separate desks.
2. Monitoring student behaviors and providing feedback should be a continuous process.
3. Ignore minor behaviors that do not bother others.
4. Closely supervise transition times, as well as recesses and assemblies.
5. Temperament does not change; it is enduring. You need flexible, adaptive, & consistent classroom responses.
6. Reduce emphasis on competition.
7. Give students choices, in order to avoid power struggles.
8. Be consistent, non-emotional and respectful of the student when giving consequences.
9. Have someone or someplace to go to, so you can regroup and let off steam when you need to.
10. Don't take students' misbehaviors personally. It is not about you, but you can help them learn to manage it.

Teacher burnout is increasing. The pressures teachers put upon themselves are considerable and real, especially when added to the expectations of schools, parents, communities and the government. Success requires perspective, planning, self-discipline, and humor. And sometimes, it helps just to remember why you went into teaching: to help kids, have fun, and be a skilled professional.