

What is Asperger syndrome?

1. Introduction

As soon as we meet a person we make judgments about them. Just by looking we can guess their age or status, and by the expression on their face or the tone of their voice we can tell immediately if they are happy, angry or sad and respond accordingly.

Not everyone has this natural ability. People with Asperger syndrome find it more difficult to read the signals which most of us take for granted. As a result they find it more difficult to communicate and interact with others. This leaflet explains the characteristics of Asperger syndrome and what can be done to help those affected.

Asperger syndrome is a form of autism, a condition that affects the way a person communicates and relates to others. A number of traits of autism are common to Asperger syndrome including:

- **difficulty in communicating**
- **difficulty in social relationships**
- **a lack of imagination and creative play**

However, people with Asperger syndrome usually have fewer problems with language than those with autism, often speaking fluently, though their words can sometimes sound formal or stilted. People with Asperger syndrome do not usually have the accompanying learning disabilities associated with autism; in fact, people with Asperger syndrome are often of average or above average intelligence

Because of this many children with Asperger syndrome enter mainstream school and, with the right support and encouragement, can make good progress and go on to further education and employment.

2. Key characteristics

Asperger syndrome shares many of the same characteristics as autism. The key characteristics are:

Difficulty with social relationships

Unlike the person with 'classic' autism, who often appears withdrawn and uninterested in the world around them, many people with Asperger syndrome want to be sociable and enjoy human contact. They do still find it hard to understand non-verbal signals, including facial expressions, which makes it more difficult for them to form and maintain social relationships with people unaware of their needs.

Difficulty with communication

People with Asperger syndrome may speak fluently but they may not take much notice of the reaction of the people listening to them; they may talk on and on regardless of the listener's interest or they may appear insensitive to their feelings.

Despite having good language skills, people with Asperger syndrome may sound over-precise or over-literal - jokes can cause problems as can exaggerated language, turns of phrase and metaphors. A person with Asperger syndrome may be confused or frightened by a statement like 'she bit my head off'. In order to help a person with Asperger syndrome to understand you, keep your sentences short - be clear and concise.

Lack of imagination

While they often excel at learning facts and figures, people with Asperger syndrome find it hard to think in abstract ways. This can cause problems for children in school where they may have difficulty with certain subjects such as literature or religious studies.

Special interests

People with Asperger syndrome often develop an almost obsessive interest in a hobby or collecting. Usually their interest involves arranging or memorizing facts about a special subject, such as train timetables, Derby winners or the dimensions of cathedrals.

I remember Samuel reciting the distances of all the planets from the sun to a baffled classmate in the playground when he was five. Since then he has had many obsessions, which he loves to talk about at length! Some of his more recent interests, such as the Top 40 chart and collecting trading cards, have helped him develop social skills, as he has been able to share them with others.

Sue Robinson, a parent

With encouragement interests can be developed so that people with Asperger syndrome go on to study or work in their favorite subjects.

Love of routines

People with Asperger syndrome often find change upsetting. Young children may impose their routines, such as insisting on always walking the same route to school. At school, they may get upset by sudden changes, such as an alteration to the timetable. People with Asperger syndrome often prefer to order their day according to a set pattern. If they work set hours then any unexpected delay, such as a traffic hold-up, or a late train, can make them anxious or upset.

Simon's employers used to send him out on errands, delivering urgent letters to City firms. Simon enjoyed these duties and performed them punctually but he got extremely upset if delays on the bus or Underground interfered with his schedule.

Anton Barber, a parent

These are the main features of the condition, but because every person is an individual, these characteristics will vary greatly and some may be demonstrated more strongly than others.

3. What causes Asperger syndrome?

The causes of autism and Asperger syndrome are still being investigated. Many experts believe that the pattern of behavior from which Asperger syndrome is diagnosed may not result from a single cause. There is strong evidence to suggest that Asperger syndrome can be caused by a variety of physical factors, all of which affect brain development - it is not due to emotional deprivation or the way a person has been brought up.

4. Is there a cure?

Asperger syndrome is a developmental condition affecting the way the brain processes information and there is no 'cure'; children with Asperger syndrome become adults with Asperger syndrome. Much can be achieved to make life less challenging with appropriate education and support.

With time and patience people with Asperger syndrome can be taught to develop the basic skills needed for everyday life, such as how to communicate appropriately with people.

5. The importance of early diagnosis

Because the condition of people with Asperger syndrome is not as marked as those with autism, they may not be diagnosed for a long time. This can mean that their particular needs may go unrecognised and parents may blame themselves, or worse still blame their child for their unusual behaviour.

We were lucky to have a relatively early diagnosis for Samuel. As a result, he has had the necessary support and understanding to be able to attend mainstream primary and secondary school. The staff at his secondary school were given a training session on Asperger syndrome before he started. Of course, there are sometimes problems but he is never just treated as a 'difficult' child, which could easily be the case if his condition were not understood.

Sue Robinson, a parent

6. What does the future hold?

At present, there are few facilities specifically for children with Asperger syndrome. Some children are in mainstream schools where their progress depends on the support and encouragement of parents, carers and teachers. Some children with Asperger syndrome go to specialist schools for children with autism or learning disabilities.

Because their disability is often less obvious than that of someone with autism, a person with Asperger syndrome is, in a sense, more vulnerable. They can, sadly, be an easy target for teasing or bullying at school.

As they get older, they may realise that they are different from other people and feel isolated and depressed. People with Asperger syndrome often want to be sociable and are upset by the fact that they find it hard to make friends.

But the future for people with Asperger syndrome does not have to be bleak. Adults with Asperger syndrome can and do go on to live fulfilling lives, to further education and employment and to develop friendships.

In the workplace, people with Asperger syndrome can offer a great deal - punctuality, reliability and dedication - though informed and understanding employers and colleagues are essential.

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