



Asperger's Syndrome

What is Asperger's Syndrome?

Asperger's Syndrome was first described by an Austrian physician, Hans Asperger, in 1944. He discovered a group of children with symptoms similar to autism but with less delayed speech, "normal" intelligence, more motor problems, later onset, and similar problems in other family members, especially fathers. The symptoms and their impact on the lives of these children changed over time, but the syndrome remained throughout the child's life. Asperger's work, published in German, remained unknown in the English medical literature until Lorna Wing published a review and series of case studies in 1981.

Asperger's Syndrome is characterized by

- Failure to form meaningful relationships, particularly with children their own age with the feeling of social isolation
- Inability to understand typical social cues such as body language and facial expressions
- Lack of understanding other's social and emotional needs
- Restricted and all-encompassing interests that the child is totally preoccupied with – in play and conversation. Example: Dinosaurs, weather, transportation, maps = and/or fascination with parts of objects rather than the whole object. There is often a better understanding of "facts" than of overall concepts.
- Need for specific, non-functional routines or rituals
- Repetitive, stereotypic motor movements
- General clumsiness and lack of coordination
- Typical language development but odd or different patterns of speech. Example: monotonic or pediatric speech, more adult-type language, odd phrasing, or very literal interpretations of speech such as idioms or common sayings

The symptoms can cause significant social impairment.

How does Asperger's affect my child?

Tony Attwood, an Australian psychologist who has studied Asperger's Syndrome extensively, emphasizes that people with Asperger's have "a different, not defective way of thinking." This is important since your child may not see the world similarly to how you or others see the world and may respond differently to situations than you or others would.

Children with Asperger's tend to be very direct and honest in their conversation, even if it means hurting others' feelings. They often have a strong sense of social justice, which motivates their activities. Solving



a problem and knowing “the truth” is more important than the feelings or emotional needs of others. They may focus on little details overlooked by others, but also fail to see the big picture, which can make working in groups difficult.

Children with Asperger's may prefer solitary activities but can also be very loyal to a friend- expecting that same degree of loyalty back. Because they perceive situations differently, they may interpret others' conversations or actions in their own unique way and can be easily hurt. So if the “best” friend” plays or talks with another child who is not a friend, your child may feel betrayed or if the teacher calls on another classmate, they may think that the teacher doesn't like them anymore or always ignores them.

Because of their difficulties processing social and emotional cues, children with Asperger's may have difficulty controlling or managing their own emotions. They may have difficulty expressing love and affection. And because they tend to prefer routines – and know their schedules very well down to the last detail - they may become very obstinate and overly emotional when their schedule changes at school or at home.

Because children with Asperger's may be clumsy, they may do poorly in sports or even have trouble taking class notes because of messy handwriting. When stressed they may rock or display odd movements of their bodies or hands which are socially unacceptable.

What treatment is available for Asperger's Syndrome?

There is no medication to treat Asperger's. Remember, your child may not interpret a situation like you or others do. Be patient. Talk to your child when they feel betrayed by a friend, overlooked by a teacher, or just don't understand why something that was very obvious to you happened to them. Explain why someone did or did not do what your child wanted or expected but also support their uniqueness

Encourage your child to join school and social clubs that allow him or her to explore activities of interest. While the common team sports may not be avenues of success for your child, other athletic activities – such as cross country running, swimming, hiking – may be better suited to your child' abilities.

It is important for parents and teachers to take the time to prepare a child for changes outside of the routine and to understand that their excessive reaction is part of having Asperger's and not intentionally oppositional or self-serving. Again, behavioral support or intervention can help children with Asperger's learn to respond better to the demands of society.

Sometimes, however, your child may need professional intervention to treat and manage the consequences of living with Asperger's in our society. For example, some young children with Asperger's may appear hyperactive, impulsive, or inattentive and can be treated with psycho stimulants or other ADHD medications.

Children (and adults) with Asperger's may become anxious, sad, depressed, or angry because of their social difficulties, especially in the teenage years. If this happens it is important for them to see a counselor, therapist or their doctor to treat clinically significant anxiety and depression.



Will my child outgrow Asperger's Syndrome?

Asperger's is a lifelong condition. It can affect your child's choice of career and social involvement. That is why it is important for your child to receive support from family, school personnel, and professionally if needed.

Career counseling can be beneficial as many adults with Asperger's Syndrome have found jobs and careers in occupations and professions that suit their unique perspective – engineering, accounting, library science, commercial art, and laboratory work. Many successful, famous people have had or are believed to have had Asperger's in a variety of fields.

Resources

Websites:

- Tony Attwood's site: tonyattwood.com.au
- OASIS (Online Asperger's Syndrome Information and Support): aspergersyndrome.org

Books:

- **Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals;** Tony Attwood (he has written many other books that are worth reading – he has been involved with many of the other books below)
- **Pretending to Be Normal: Living With Asperger's Syndrome;** Liane Holliday Wiley
- **Freaks, Geeks & Asperger Syndrome: A User Guide to Adolescence;** Luke Jackson (an actual teenager)
- **Eating an Artichoke: A Mother's Perspective on Asperger Syndrome;** Echo R. fling

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