

# Supporting Students with Asperger's Syndrome in General Education

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In Honors classes, Gary's academic achievement is strong. He is not a bully. In fact, he doesn't have a mean bone in his body. He has been selling candy and helping at car washes for the past 2 years earning money for the traditional eighth-grade trip to Washington, DC, but as the trip approaches, an obstacle appears. None of the other boys wants to room with him. The outcome: He can't go.

This scenario, heartbreaking to families and teachers who care, is a familiar one for people with Asperger's syndrome. Identified by Austrian Hans Asperger in 1944, but only recently gaining prominence in

the educational community (Safran, S. P., 2001; Wing, 1981), this neurologically based, autism-spectrum disorder significantly affects social perception, interactions, language, and nonverbal communication. With average to superior intellectual capacity, the child with Asperger's looks typical but lacks the social awareness and skills needed to connect with his or her world.

This article provides educators with strategies that will help children practice and learn the classroom and life rules that many students naturally acquire; moreover, these strategies represent good teaching practices that benefit *all* children.

## What Is Asperger's Syndrome?

The most "official" definition of Asperger's in the United States comes from the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual IV of Mental Disorders* (DSM IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) and the DSM IV Text Revision (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). A diagnosis requires that four of five listed criteria be present, including at least two indicators of a qualitative disability in social interaction (e.g., serious impairments in peer relationships, social reciprocity, nonverbal behav-

iors, empathy) and at least one in the category of restricted interest and stereotyped behaviors or rituals (e.g., rigid adherence to rules or routine, preoccupation with a narrow interest, parts or objects, repetitive motor movements; also see diagnostic checklists: Ehlers, Gillberg, & Wing, 1999; Myles, Bock, & Simpson, 2001).

The child with Asperger's may move into the personal space of others, failing to recognize body language and even verbal cues that he or she has transgressed. Friends and new acquaintances alike may be acknowledged with tight and enthusiastic hugs. Bypassing typical greetings like "Hi, how are you?" the student may launch into a diatribe on the latest topic of concern. This narrow special interest (e.g., Civil War maritime strategies, accuracy of train schedules) may be age-inappropriate (e.g., "Power Rangers" cartoons at age 16) or boring, but the child continues to elucidate, oblivious to disinterest, "looks," or snickers from the group.

Tony Attwood (1999), a noted expert on Asperger's syndrome, remarked that while the child with Asperger's is talking, "I could leave, go make a cup of tea and come back and he would never know I had

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gone.” Although there is no clinically significant delay in language development or cognitive abilities, there may be speech and language peculiarities. The child’s language may be stilted and formal; his or her voice may be monotone or much too loud. It has been said that while the autistic child lives in a world of his own, the child with Asperger’s lives in his world but within ours. Lacking both the skills to blend in and the visible disability that might signal a need for understanding, this child is truly alone.

Although relatively few students with Asperger’s have been formally recognized, growing awareness and attention in the educational community will likely lead to significantly increased identification. The emerging literature on interventions primarily addresses the structure and potential of a variety of individual and group social-skills therapies. But given their intellectual ability and range of social impairment from mild to profound, most students remain in general classes, some with full-time one-to-one aides or other “official” in-class supports; others

without any formal special education recognition.

Academic performance usually ranges from adequate to exceptional, but children and youth with Asperger’s are likely to flounder and fail in possibly more important ways. With increasing emphasis on teaching methods that favor social interaction (e.g., cooperative learning, other groupwork), the child with poor interpersonal skills and inability to read social cues will continuously test the patience of teachers and peers and be admitted to groups last, if at all. Undesirable at classmates’ parties or extracurricular events, this lack of social experiences both in and out of school serves only to widen the gap. It is therefore crucial that inclusion teachers model and advocate acceptance and understanding of the child.

#### **What Teachers Need to Know**

All school personnel need to learn about the characteristics of Asperger’s syndrome, with practical examples of individual manifestations and ways to access print and Internet resources (Safran, J. S., 2001; Safran, J. S., & Safran, S. P., in press; see box, “World Wide Web Resources”). Individual differences and degrees of severity among students with Asperger’s abound—certainly all students will not demonstrate every characteristic—but it is the *combination* of interpersonal, motor, and language characteristics, which obscures diagnosis and separates these students from peers with other disabilities, that distinguishes Asperger’s (Safran, S. P., 2001).

The intelligence and vocabulary that many of these “little professors” display may mask the disability, buying the child grudging tolerance but no support as an “annoying nerd,” or leading to misdiagnoses within learning, behavioral, or attention-deficit categories. As classroom teachers learn more about the characteristics associated with this condition, their role in screening and diagnosis, as well as in-class intervention, will hold acute significance.

Students with Asperger’s present a dilemma with regard to establishing appropriate placement and services. One-to-one aides serving as “social interpreters” in classrooms have been assigned to some students to help them follow the “rules of conduct,” manage their emotions, and cue their social responses. Although this strategy may be of great use to some students, (a) there is no evidence proving its effectiveness; (b) this support may not be appropriate for students with mild to moderate degrees of impairment; and (c) it should be a temporary arrangement at best, to avoid fostering dependency. Unlike students with physical or sensory disabilities, the absence of some visible marker leaves peers and adults without explanation for their constant social faux pas and transgressions. Because we anticipate a match between cognitive and social acuity, they may even be perceived as *deliberately* aggravating: “He is smart enough to know better!”

The academic competencies of many students with Asperger’s preclude placement in learning or developmental disability classrooms,

#### **World Wide Web Resources for Asperger’s Syndrome**

**Asperger Syndrome Coalition of the United States, Inc. (ASC-U.S.). (2000). [On-line]. Available: <http://www.asperger.org/>**

**Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support (O.A.S.I.S.). (2000). [On-line]. Available: <http://www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/>**

**Tony Attwood. (2000). [On-line]. Available: [www.tonyattwood.com](http://www.tonyattwood.com)**

and their vulnerability to bullies makes traditional programs for students with emotional and behavioral disorders a potentially dangerous choice. Although special educators and therapists continue to directly teach social skills to students with Asperger's (e.g., Marks et al., 1999; Marriage, Gordon, & Brand, 1995) inclusion teachers should be well-informed about social-skills strategies and supports that they can implement and that will promote generalization across education settings. The following suggestions reflect a logical attention to the primary characteristics of Asperger's; teachers have recently used these strategies in classrooms and with related populations.

### **Carefully Structure Seating Arrangements and Groupwork**

Be thoughtful in your classroom seating assignments. Any student with Asperger's is a made-to-order victim and should not be seated in close proximity to known bullies or aggressive students. Instead, seat the student next to an understanding "peer buddy," who may potentially serve as a social translator for this child. Proximity matters: The student may work most effectively seated near the teacher or near an open, quiet area. Change seats if necessary, unobtrusively or in the context of changing seats for the class.

One student with Asperger's perceived groupwork to be his greatest challenge in high school and has begged future teachers to pay careful attention to the makeup, structure,

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### **Excerpts from a Speech by a High School Junior with Asperger's to Future Educators**

The invisible problem is the person with poor social skills, who maybe doesn't stand out, but doesn't fit in or is noticed only because he gets people annoyed.

This kid may be so afraid of rejection he doesn't even recognize when people are trying to be nice and drives them away.

Kids' social status is arrived at early, and there is little movement from that status throughout their school career. Kids' reputations are arrived at early and once arrived at, almost never go away. . . . Without teachers' help, these kids are lost.

Don't let kids pick their own groups for groupwork. One of the important things groupwork is supposed to teach is how we can work with diverse people, who we don't get along well with. Allowing kids to pick their own groups defeats the purpose of this. Certain kids are always left out and isolated. It's really embarrassing when no one wants you and you either have to work alone or the teacher has to find you a group.

Try to encourage the more socially adept in your class to spend time with the less, maybe by giving them jobs to do together or pointing out interests they share. Or maybe the kid with Asperger's could help a popular kid with his math.

Many kids are demeaned daily in class. Teachers give out multiple verbal warnings to the kids who are making fun of someone and then do nothing. A policy of zero tolerance for putdowns, verbal harassment, or

and process of groups (see box, "Excerpts from a Speech"). Avoid self-selection, and carefully consider the nature and maturity of the students at the table or in a group that includes the student. Teach students *how* to function as a team and use definite cues to promote successful group process (e.g., "Before deciding on any one plan, have a 'go-round' to make sure that everyone's idea is heard").

You might suggest an appropriate task for each student (or teaching the group a good process to decide job assignments) to ensure that the student with Asperger's is not left out—and may even have a chance to shine (e.g., "Tom's computer skills are so strong that he might be your chief Internet investigator. Because Mary has such neat writing, I suggest that she serve as group secretary," or "You should start by brainstorming all the tasks that are

involved in the activity and then divide them up fairly. This chart outlines the steps to take once your brainstorming is complete").

One high school teacher reported that her student's status was greatly enhanced by his excellent performance in a group play. Classmates learned that despite his odd mannerisms, he could contribute significantly to the group. Students with Asperger's rarely respond to others' reactions or cues, so tangible indicators of speaking time (e.g., egg timer, group secretary with stop watch) can prevent the child from stigmatizing himself by dominating the group.

### **Provide a Safe Haven**

Many students with Asperger's can become overwhelmed by noise, crowds, perceived chaos, or just the effort and stress of engaging in social interaction throughout the school day. An assembly, pep rally, or

unstructured recess time can lead to destabilizing anxiety and stress. For some students, it will be worthwhile to offer an alternative to attending certain of these events. You may explore the effectiveness of ear plugs or headphones to assist in screening out troubling noise. Further, a designated support person and quiet alternative place can furnish the respite the student might need to fulfill the obligations of the day.

Because some students with Asperger's react differently or more intensely to a disturbance or unexpected event, a trusted contact person (special education teacher, school psychologist, guidance counselor, or principal) should be available to help prevent or defuse a crisis. With younger students, teachers can learn to detect physical or verbal behaviors (e.g., pacing, singing) that indicate that the student is approaching meltdown; older students can often recognize these signals in themselves. A contract agreed to by all parties can delineate the process for instituting this therapeutic timeout, sparing students the fear of being "trapped" in a situation they cannot cope with or believe is escalating out of control (see box, "Plans for Escape").

Interpersonal interactions do not "flow" for students with Asperger's. In the company of others, they may perceive themselves as "on stage" or "on alert," preparing to substitute intellectual analysis for natural empathy and insight. Varied research (reported by Ozonoff, 1998) provides evidence that executive-type functions in the frontal cortex are altered in people with autistic-spectrum disorders, and there is research in progress that suggests that social cues that typically spark an *intuitive* response are actually processed *cognitively*.

One student reflected:

You know how you "get it" if I'm upset and know right away what to do to help me out? Well, I can't do that. If you were upset, I would have to input all the data, like you

### Plans for Escape

**The Situation.** Ben feels himself getting agitated. His breathing is getting heavier and his temper shorter; his foot tapping louder and faster. The teacher, Mrs. M., keeps insisting that the software was installed correctly when he knows there is no chance that it was—she just won't listen and keeps telling him to get back to work. What to do? What to do? Need to get out of here before I explode! "Mrs. M., can I go to the bathroom?"

"No, Ben, I told you to get back to work."

"But it's urgent. . . . Then can I go see my guidance counselor?"

"NO! You can take care of that on your own time!"

"Mrs. M., I really need to go."

"How many times do I have to tell you?"

He hits his limit. Gets out of his seat and starts pacing around the classroom, muttering to himself and clapping his hands. The voice of the teacher and laughter of the other kids is deafening. Got to block it out. Starts banging his head against the wall. Teacher sends someone to go get the principal, QUICK.

**Possible Solutions.** We agree that there are times when Ben may need to be excused from class. Here are some suggestions for what to do:

- If a teacher notices Ben becoming overly frustrated, raising his voice, shaking his shoulders, or any other stress-related behavior, the teacher will first remind him to calm down and breathe deeply, and then suggest he go into the hall, right outside the classroom door, for 5 minutes. If that doesn't help, Ben will be told to go directly to Mrs. Smith's tutoring room. He agrees not to argue with the teacher and to proceed immediately.
- If Ben believes that he is heading for a meltdown, he will first take deep breaths and remind himself to calm down. If necessary, he will let the teacher know that he needs to take 5 minutes of hall time. If he continues to feel upset, he will signal to the teacher that he is going to Mrs. Smith's room. Teachers agree not to argue with Ben and to let him go immediately.
- Ben will proceed directly to Mrs. Smith's room. He will knock on the door once, and wait in the chair in the hall until Mrs. Smith can see him. Mrs. Smith agrees to see him within \_\_ minutes, or to direct him to the Assistant Principal's office. When he is finished speaking with Mrs. Smith, he will quietly return to class.
- It is Ben's responsibility to see the teacher during lunch or study hall to arrange to make up classwork. Ben will also write a letter to the

were crying or something, and then figure out in my brain what it means. Then I would have to figure out what I was supposed to do.

Access to a quiet, private place—school library, corner of a special education or tutoring room, empty classroom, or office—where the student can choose to spend lunchtime, study hall, or other free time alone, can rest and refresh the child and

alleviate the stress that accompanies the constant effort to fit in.

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*Separate the child from the syndrome, and try to experience the world through his eyes.*

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### Tips for Inclusion Teachers

1. Carefully structure seating arrangements and groupwork.
2. Provide a safe haven.
3. Save the student from himself or herself.
4. Prepare for changes in routine.
5. Use available resources/ make needed accommodations.
6. Connect with each other, parents, Internet support groups, and other groups.
7. Promote positive peer interactions.
8. Capitalize on special interests.
9. Don't take it personally.
10. Help your classroom become a caring communi-

### Save the Student from Himself or Herself

Because most students with Asperger's do not internalize social rules, their behavior is often noticed as irritating, rude, and immature. Seeking eye contact during a conversation, Attwood (1998) asked a young man to open his closed eyes. The response? "Why would I want to open my eyes when I already know where you are?" A 12-year-old asks, in a booming voice, "Why is she so fat?" Metaphorical comments, benign teasing, or sarcasm may be taken literally and misunderstood; accidents may be misperceived as deliberate intents to harm.

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*Whatever you do to create and maintain your classroom as a safe, supportive, and accepting community for everyone will strengthen the social development of students with Asperger's.*

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Observant teachers can matter-of-factly label the experience or comment (e.g., "That was a joke"; "This metaphor shows how. . ."; "La Tisha didn't mean to bump into you—she just lost her balance") and help the student avoid distress. Even better: A peer "social translator" can both teach and comfort the student with Asperger's (see Hughes et al., 1999).

Fixation on particular topics or ideas, obsession with one train of thought long after the class has moved on, and unwillingness to save questions for a later time are also characteristic of Asperger's. Comments may be out of place or unintelligible to peers. Teachers need to vigorously but respectfully find ways to prevent students from scapegoating themselves; when well-meaning teachers ignore or accommodate unacceptable remarks, classmates are likely to react with scorn. Clearly state and display class rules (e.g., "Five minutes for questions; then others should be written down and submitted to me." "No one will be recognized a second time until everyone has had a chance to speak.") and do not expect the student to always understand the obvious. Private conversation explaining issues of participation, noting that you appreciate his or her contributions but must give others a turn, may be necessary. Hand signals or a quiet touch can also be useful reminders about loud or inappropriate speech. A simple "stop" hand motion has been used with students, both in the classroom and at home, as a reminder that it is time to speak quietly or stop talking about "Star Wars."

Teachers can also serve as a bridge between the student and the rest of the class. One effective teacher of a student with Asperger's noted, "Since I can usually see the point he's making, my job is to interpret and connect for the other kids—to help them see the value in what he has said."

### Prepare for Changes in Routine

Most students with Asperger's thrive on clear expectations and routine. Class schedules and time frames, written on the blackboard or displayed pictorially for younger students; clearly designated classroom jobs; space; and time on the computer and reduce the anxiety that can overwhelm these students. "To do" lists or assignment books are indispensable.

Whenever possible, explain changes in routine well in advance ("On Friday, we will have an assembly. That means you will go straight from your second-period class to the auditorium.") Because many students with autistic-spectrum disorders tend to be more visual (Hodgdon, 1995), provide a reminder note and suggest that the students refer to it whenever they repeat the question. Particularly with older students, frank discussion, early in the year, that advance notice is not always possible, can also help avert distress. Because these students often have excellent rote memory, you may find it helpful to cue back to earlier conversations ("Remember, this is one of those times we talked about when we couldn't anticipate the change").

### Use Available Resources/Make Needed Accommodations

Students with Asperger's often respond well to visuals, graphics (see Savner & Myles, 2000, for visual support strategies), models, and technology. They often have impaired motor skills—gross or fine. Encourage use of word processing for written assignments and exams; allow for extra time or arrange for quiet, private space, if needed. When significant amounts of note-taking are required, ask a buddy student to take notes on carbon or to copy. When questioned, try to *show* or demonstrate what you mean.

The Internet can be attractive to many students with Asperger's. The effort and anxiety associated with interpersonal connections is greatly reduced; students can get to the mes-

sage unconstrained by their social limitations, and deal only with the written word. Based on her conversations with others, one woman with Asperger's noted that access to the Web offers people with Asperger's "the communication they desire . . . [without] the overwhelming sensory overload of human presence" (Singer, 1999, p. 65). Though technology can be a powerful tool, you should limit students' time on the computer to avoid (a) encouraging a potential obsession and (b) allowing the computer to become a substitute for human contact.

### **Connect with Each Other, Parents, Internet Support Groups, and Other Groups**

Although it has been hypothesized that as many as 7 in 1,000 students may have Asperger's (Safran, S. P., 2001), it is at present only minimally recognized and diagnosed. Teachers and families often feel isolated in their attempts to support these students. Regular communication (through meeting, telephone, or e-mail) among inclusion and special education teachers and parents, and use of published materials or Internet sites (Safran, J. S., 2001) can allay these feelings and provide a venue for sharing ideas to enhance the education of students with Asperger's and their peers.

### **Promote Positive Peer Interactions**

Consider creative ways to connect the student with the kindest and most empathic peers to promote social acceptance and friendships. Knowing that students with Asperger's lack interpersonal intuition and incidental social learning, be ready to help the student engage in successful conversations and reflection. Marks et al. (1999) offered suggestions for teaching conversation skills; Gray (1994) explained comic strip conversation and social story strategies that can be incorporated into both school and home settings. The pictures, words, and symbols of comic strip conversations "systematically identify what

people say and do and emphasize *what people may be thinking*" (p. 1) while social stories describe typical social situations, explaining the meanings of various comments and identifying appropriate responses. Both can be used effectively in preparation for or deconstruction of a social event.

Direct the child towards participation in *well-structured* activities or clubs where their abilities might neutralize their social deficiencies (e.g., competitive mathematics groups). Anticipate consequences and avoid unstructured events or those frequented by known bullies or "anti-geeks." Consider creating an official peer buddy system that emphasizes friendship, respect for difference, and social interaction. Hughes et al. (1999) have developed and implemented a 7-step buddy program that includes extensive peer training; the program has been effectively implemented in a metropolitan high school.

Identify the student's special gifts and teach him or her how to share those gifts through tutoring, class presentations, or community service.

### **Capitalize on Special Interests**

Though it can be valuable to take advantage of the student's special interests as a bridge to classroom-specific content, teachers must not inadvertently encourage self-defeating, obsessive behavior. For example, you could ask the student with a passion for the Internet to serve as the group research specialist, with the stipulation that he or she work with others and *only* search for designated topics. You could direct the student to teach a classmate particular search skills, to prepare for a future switch in group roles. In a physics class, you could ask a student who is fascinated with science fiction to write about, explain, or do a project focusing on the relevant real science.

### **Don't Take It Personally**

The student who interrupts, speaks too loudly, misses your jokes, and

tells peculiar ones of his own, may be challenging to like. Separate the child from the syndrome, and try to experience the world through his eyes. I overheard one exasperated educator exclaim, "It's so hard to be Brian's teacher!" A colleague quietly replied, "Think how hard it is to be Brian."

If you model warmth and acceptance, peers will, too. The same holds for irritation, impatience, or disdain. This child, desperately in need of positive interactions with classmates and adults, will flourish in a supportive environment and repay even small acts of kindness tenfold.

### **Help Your Classroom Become a Caring Community**

Whatever you do to create and maintain your classroom as a safe, supportive, and accepting community for *everyone* will strengthen the social development of students with Asperger's. Expecting and ensuring that students respect, support, and take responsibility for each other is at the center of any commitment to embrace diversity in all its forms. Isolation contributes to depression and suicide: Conversely, a strong deterrent is a sense of *belonging* to family, community, group (Range, 1993). If we really believe that no child should be left behind, then we have no choice but to persevere in our efforts to ensure that all the students who pass through our doors believe that they belong with each other and with us.

### **Final Thoughts**

People with Asperger's syndrome, often creative, highly intelligent, and technologically, mathematically, or scientifically astute, have the potential for momentous contributions to our society—the cure for the common cold may be down their narrowly focused paths. Speculation that Thomas Jefferson had Asperger's persists (Ledgin, 1998). It is important to note that as these people age, it is the *depression* (see Wing, 1981) that is often associated with isolation that interferes in their

functioning and contributes to a higher incidence of suicide (Hardan & Sahl, 1999; Wolff, 1995). An effective deterrent to this isolation is a classroom environment that promotes acceptance of even the most vexing child. In saving this child, we may in fact, be saving ourselves.

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