

Meeting the Needs of Pupils with Asperger Syndrome

About three in every hundred children may be affected by Asperger syndrome - a complex brain disorder related to autism. These children may appear to be 'odd but close to normal' in the ordinary classroom. Because they may function well academically, their particular needs may not be adequately addressed.

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'ODD BUT CLOSE TO NORMAL'

Every child is different to some extent from his/her peers. Some of us are more gregarious than others. However, for the person with Asperger syndrome there is a special type of communication failure and social ineptness. These children may be quite good academically and excel in some subjects. They may be quiet in class, although some can be disruptive. Their difficulties, which often become more obvious as they get older, are in relating and communicating with the people and the world around them. They have great difficulty in making friends or relating to their peers and rarely if ever wish to participate in team games. Teachers should be conscious of the fact that they may be dealing with a problem which is much more serious than it appears at first. A child presenting with some of these difficulties may have Asperger syndrome.

TYPICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ASPERGER SYNDROME

There are a number of characteristic features of the condition which teachers should look out for, such as:

- language development is often delayed and language is used in an inappropriate way e.g. speech lacking in spontaneity and is literal and pedantic. The child may talk incessantly about a particular interest.

- a tendency towards physical clumsiness
- anxiety / phobias usually present; changes in routine may upset them
- poor understanding of non-verbal communication; usually do not use gesture
- imagination is impaired
- a tendency to pursue particular interests to extremes; e.g. trains, computing, chess etc.
- may be gifted or excel in particular areas

Although there are many individual variations those affected by this condition relate very poorly to other people - they cannot empathise with others or make friends. The condition is much more common among males than females by a ratio of at least 6 to 1. A common mistaken assessment is that they are merely shy or withdrawn or even just bold. Parents frequently make the point that although their child may be good academically they lack common sense.

Generally these children experience difficulties in the following areas:-

- social interaction
- verbal and non-verbal communication
- general life skills

KANNER AND THE DIAGNOSIS OF AUTISM

Autism (from auto-self) was first described as a separate disorder by Leo Kanner over half a century ago (Kanner, 1943). Even at that stage, Kanner recognised that individuals with this disability could be high-functioning in terms of their language and intellectual skills.

Kanner believed that all people with autism were within the normal range of intelligence. The eleven children in his original sample had, in fact, above average intelligence. However, as the investigation and treatment of autism developed over the years the high-functioning group never received the same attention as those suffering from what has been perceived as classic autism (Mesibov and Schloper, 1992). The generic term 'pervasive, developmental disorder' is often used to describe the condition.

HANS ASPERGER AND THE AUTISTIC CONTINUUM

Hans Asperger (1906-1980), worked in Germany and Austria during the 1940s and 1950s and identified a group of children whom he described as suffering from 'autistic psychopathy'. His paper (Asperger, 1944) is now part of the classic literature of child psychiatry, although a translation of his original paper has been available only in recent years. His work was largely forgotten in this part of Europe until Lorna Wing published her seminal paper in 1981. Since then there has been growing interest in Asperger syndrome.

There is general agreement that individuals with Asperger syndrome belong to the autistic continuum due to their communication failure, social awkwardness and poor imagination. This group is distinct from other autistic people in that they are more articulate, and usually more adaptable than the classic example of a person with autism. The difference between those with autism who are high-functioning and those with Asperger syndrome is often debated.

A valuable contribution to the debate came from Ireland with the publication in 1988 of a paper by consultant psychiatrist Eimer Philbin Bowman. A study carried out in this country describes four boys and their father who presented with various characteristics on the autism/Asperger syndrome spectrum. The paper argued the case for a connection between Asperger syndrome and autism and this study is frequently quoted in international reviews of the subject.

According to Frith (1991) there is a great deal of overlap between Asperger's and Kanner's views of autism. Both recognised as prominent features in autism the poverty of social interaction and the failure of communication; both highlighted stereotypic behaviour, isolated special interests, outstanding skills and resistance to change. There was agreement on a clear separation from childhood schizophrenia which usually does not develop before early adolescence. On all the major features of autism, Kanner and Asperger are in agreement. Generally, diagnosis of Asperger syndrome can be difficult and there is need for more training of professionals in this area. A National Diagnostic Centre for Autism in Ireland has been recommended by various authorities in recent years.

PREVALENCE OF ASPERGER SYNDROME

The prevalence of this condition in Ireland is unknown but figures from the U.K. and Sweden would suggest that the occurrence of Asperger syndrome may be as high as 1 in 300 of the population. This is a much higher figure than that usually

quoted for classic autism which is generally about 5 in 10,000. Based on these figures it would mean that in the Republic of Ireland there could be as many as 12,000 suffering from Asperger syndrome. A survey of Irish schools is urgently required to identify and quantify the numbers involved. This is important as much could be done to help these children if they could be identified at an early age.

MIND SET AND MEMORY

Individuals with Asperger syndrome usually have good memory skills and their memory for events in their lives can be extraordinarily detailed and persistent. Paradoxically, it is this apparent 'strength' that is a clue to some of their difficulties. They have very good 'episodic' memories; they can remember in minute detail things they have seen and heard. However, they find it difficult to remember the 'gist' of events or the important features of something they have seen or heard. It would appear that they can memorise facts but not within a meaningful framework; they are unable to place these or their experiences in context. They usually have no difficulty in subjects where there is a high memory content such as geography or history.

In subjects where a strictly logical approach is required, such as mathematics, they may also shine. Generally, they are poor at essay type tasks and projects where a range of details from a number of different areas have to be brought together, unless the topic coincides with their special interest. With these 'strengths' it is possible to see how they can progress a certain distance in the educational system before getting into difficulties. It is when the social aspects of their disability become more apparent, particularly in their teenage years, that their disability becomes more obvious.

PERCEPTIONS AND ASPERGER SYNDROME

Some individuals with Asperger syndrome give first-hand accounts (Grandin, 1992) of sharply uncomfortable sensory and strong emotional experiences often including panic attacks. From autobiographical accounts we learn that the individual's interpretation of perceptions by ear, eye or touch tends to be either extremely faint or overwhelmingly strong. There can be hypersensitivity - as well as hyposensitivity to sound, light or touch. Certain types of clothing made of coarse material may be agonising for the person to wear. Sounds which we regard as a nuisance may be a source of enormous distress to these individuals. Many have sleeping difficulties and the slightest sound may awaken them so that in addition to their disability they may be unable to get sufficient sleep.

DIFFICULTIES WITH SOCIAL INTERACTION

Children with Asperger syndrome appear to have prolonged developmental difficulties in making sense of the world. Life skills which most of us pick up instinctively, such as interpreting the tone of voice, body language and general nuances of particular situations, seem to pass them by.

Their conversation is one-sided and only concerned with their own topic of interest. It is their inflexibility of thought and the inability to 'think other people's thoughts' which appears to be at the core of their difficulties.

Being 'loners' and different from their peers, children with Asperger syndrome are frequently targets for bullying in mainstream schools and teachers need to be vigilant regarding this problem. Sometimes their academic abilities in particular areas can be a source of jealousy for their classmates. They are rarely aggressive unless provoked.

PRESENT SITUATION IN IRELAND

At present many children with Asperger syndrome are struggling through primary schools or are placed with children who are emotionally disturbed or are placed in unsuitable special schools. This situation is unsatisfactory because:-

- these children have normal or near normal intelligence**
- many have special talents which could be developed**
- they require specialist teachers who understand the nature of their disability**
- they are not normally emotionally disturbed**

GENERAL GUIDELINES

The person with Asperger syndrome is going to present special challenges to a teacher in a mainstream school. General guidelines in helping the child with Asperger syndrome were issued by the Hesley Group of Schools at a Conference in Southampton in 1994:

GUIDELINES

- 1. Never confront the individual with Asperger Syndrome. Such a child has no inbuilt submission to authority or desire to please.**
- 2. Obtain the child's co-operation by working with his/her special interests and linking teaching with these interests.**
- 3. Never use sarcasm or irony when dealing with such children. They do not understand such language and they misinterpret.**
- 4. Never become angry or emotional with such a child.**
- 5. Never pick out the child to scold or ridicule in front of the class.**
- 6. Find ways to use the child's positive skills in learning. Do not concentrate on things he/she cannot do.**
- 7. Protect the child from bullying and teasing during free time.**
- 8. Take every opportunity of involving the child in activities that raise his/her self esteem. These children are generally good at activities such as quizzes where rote memory is required.**

There are no special schools or special classes in Ireland for these children and there is an urgent need for specially trained teachers in this area. Many of these children could cope with mainstream school but would require support and special classes on life and social skills, others may need to remain for a number of years before returning to mainstream classes.

SPECIAL CURRICULUM

Ellis (1990) makes the point that in addition to a remedial curriculum which would help children with autism develop the social skills they lack there is also need for a compensatory curriculum that enables children to learn alternative strategies and to develop other cognitive skills. Computers can provide consistent stimulation and seem to have a special appeal to most children with Asperger syndrome possibly because they are non-threatening; they allow children to use their logical skills and there is no social interaction involved.

SUMMARY

Asperger syndrome is a complex brain disorder related to autism. About 3 in every 1,000 people are affected by the condition so that in any large school there is likely to be a number of pupils suffering from the condition. Although the individuals affected by the syndrome usually have normal intelligence they have extremely poor social and communication skills. Above all they need understanding, tolerance and continuous support which comes from an awareness of their condition.

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