

Asperger Syndrome

Asperger Syndrome (AS) is a form of Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC), a lifelong social-communication condition that affects how a person makes sense of the world around them and communicates and interacts with others. People with AS find it harder to read the social behaviour signals that most of us take for granted – this can lead to confusion and high levels of anxiety. Much of the behaviour observed in people with AS is aimed at trying to make their world more predictable and less confusing. It is often called a 'hidden disability' because you cannot tell that someone has the condition from their outward appearance.

People with Autism Spectrum Conditions, including Asperger Syndrome, have problems in three main areas often referred to as the Triad of Impairments: Social Communication, Social Interaction and Social Imagination. The characteristics of AS affect people in different ways and to varying degrees.

While there are similarities with other ASCs, people with Asperger Syndrome are often of average or above average intelligence, and do not have the learning disabilities that are usually present at the lower functioning end of the spectrum. However, it is not uncommon for people with AS to have specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, or other neurodevelopmental conditions, such as dyspraxia, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). It is also a common feature of autism spectrum conditions that there may be problems with sensory perception, such as sensitivity to noise or touch and integrating sensory information, which can cause anxiety.

Asperger Syndrome affects both males and females but currently it is diagnosed in boys in significantly higher numbers. This is often due to boys displaying more aggressive and disruptive behaviours than girls, and therefore coming to the attention of those caring for them more readily. Girls also seem to have a better ability to mask their difficulties by observing and copying the appropriate behaviours of others.

The term Asperger Syndrome came from an Austrian psychiatrist, Hans Asperger, who originally defined the condition in 1944, but it was not really recognised in the English speaking world until the early 1990's following the translation of his papers by Dr Lorna Wing in 1981. It is likely that in the future the term Asperger Syndrome will be replaced with Autism Spectrum Condition, which will cover the spectrum of autism from low to high functioning.

Social communication difficulties

Often, good verbal skills are not matched by the ability to use language in a social context. The comprehension of language is often overly literal, because of the difficulty in interpreting and understanding particular social nuances of language. For example there may be difficulties in understanding jokes, metaphor and sarcasm.

People with AS often have difficulty expressing themselves socially and emotionally and understanding the social and emotional behaviour of others.

For example, they may:

- Have difficulty using and understanding communicative gestures, facial expressions or tone of voice
- Have difficulty engaging in a 2-way conversation, preferring to talk about their own interests regardless of the other person's (lack of) interest, or knowing how and when to start and end conversations
- Use quite complex language without fully understanding what they mean
- Have issues with conversational skills such as greetings, joining a conversation, verbal turntaking, listening skills, talking about a particular topic, awareness of personal space, ending a conversation
- Not understand emotions: facial expressions, body language, voice quality – intonation, pitch, speed, awareness of own body language, expressing emotions verbally.

Social Interaction difficulties

People with AS generally make efforts to adapt socially, because of a genuine desire for social contact. Unfortunately, making and maintaining friendships and social interactions can be problematic. People with Asperger Syndrome may:

- Not understand the unwritten social rules around things such as, social timing, personal space, appropriate eye-contact, polite responses or comments
- Have an apparent lack of empathy for others

- Appear socially withdrawn, aloof or disinterested in others as a way of being or as a way of coping
- Have problems knowing what a friend is, being able to choose appropriate friends, recognising true friends from 'false' friends, the ability to share a friend, deal with peer pressure etc.
- Have problems with play such as observational skills, joining play, turn-taking, sharing, compromising, conflict resolution, coping with 'no', coping with losing, reciprocal play, ending play
- Not be able to deal appropriately with conflict through anger management and self-regulation skills, the ability to ask for help, being assertive but not aggressive, dealing with bullying, etc.

Social imagination difficulties

Social imagination refers to the ability to imagine what another person or persons may be thinking, feeling, or experiencing. Being able to guess reasonably accurately what another person is thinking or feeling given the present context or situation is an important part of social connectedness and the ability to relate to others.

People with Asperger syndrome may:

- Have difficulty with 'Theory of Mind' which is understanding that others have different thoughts, feelings, intentions and points of view from their own. This means that others can be perceived as unpredictable and confusing

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- Have difficulty with imagining alternative outcomes to different situations or predicting what will happen next, based on social rules, rather than the rules of logic
- Have difficulty understanding or interpreting others thoughts, feelings or behaviour. Social messages that are communicated through the use of subtle gesture or facial expression are often missed
- Show a limited range of imaginative activity in their play, for example lining toys up, or collecting, organising and ordering things, rather than engaging in functional or symbolic play.

It is likely that the social difficulties described above give rise to other characteristics present in people with Asperger syndrome. A rigid adherence to particular routines, sometimes to a ritualistic extent, and resistance to change is often a feature and likely to be related to making their world less confusing and more ordered. A rigid and inflexible thinking style is often associated with Asperger Syndrome, and this can make trying to adopt different perspective and interpretations difficult.

Sensory difficulties

Difficulties with sensory information is commonly associated with Asperger syndrome, but not always present. This can occur in one or all of the senses and can either present as being over sensitive or under sensitive. Lights, sounds, smells, touch, or the feel of certain material can cause pain and anxiety. It can also be manifest in difficulties processing internal sensory information such as pain or hunger.

Sensory difficulties can also be evident in terms of spatial and physical awareness, negotiating obstructions safely.

Other difficulties

People with AS can appear to be egocentric. They may create impossibly high standards for themselves in all that they do, leading to anxiety when perfection cannot be achieved. Asperger Syndrome and mental health In general, anxiety features significantly in the lives of those with Asperger Syndrome. Living in a continually confusing and unpredictable social world is stressful. Routine-based and ritualistic behaviour is often used as a way of coping and alleviating anxiety. Awareness of not 'fitting in', being socially vulnerable, and negative social experiences can affect self-esteem and increase anxiety. Low mood can also be a consequence of knowingly living with a socially disabling condition, and people with Asperger Syndrome can be more at risk of mental health problems.

Problems associated with school.

Typically, children with AS may appear to be coping in primary school, but are likely to be experiencing difficulties in social domains. They are likely to be exhibiting some disruptive or atypical behaviour, related to their condition or anxiety, either at home, or at school, or both.

Sometimes the transfer to secondary school is the time when the child's difficulties become more apparent. The difficulties may not be academic (children with AS are frequently top of the class). There are more likely to be problems because there is a lack of understanding of the behaviour and intentions of others; changing from classroom to classroom; different teachers; noise levels; the level of personal organisation needed; unstructured and unsupported break and lunch times; following instructions, lessons and completing tasks; the reliance on verbal information and an inability to interpret the wide variety of verbal and non-verbal language used by teachers and peers; lack of whole school awareness of their individual issues. They can be prone to being bullied due to their lack of social skills and for their reactions. They may also start to become more aware of the differences between them selves and their peers. (See our separate information sheet Educational Issues in Asperger Syndrome for more advice).

Intervention and Treatment

No curative treatment exists, however, there are many approaches, interventions, and therapies which can improve quality of life. Communicationbased interventions, adapting the environment to make it more 'user-friendly' for the person with Asperger Syndrome, social skills training, and therapeutic interventions for managing mood or anxiety are some of the many approaches that have been found to be effective for people with Asperger Syndrome. With the right support, people with Asperger Syndrome can lead full and independent lives. However, depending on the severity of the condition, sometimes the difficulties are profound and people may require lifelong involvement from supportive services.

USEFUL CONTACTS

The National Autistic Society

The largest autism charity in the UK can help with local support groups; information on Asperger Syndrome for individuals, parents, professionals; befriending; training; links and much more.

Website: www.autism.org.uk

Helpline: 0808 800 4104

(M to F 10am-4pm)

Parent to Parent line: 0808 800 4106

Education Rights Service: 0808 800 4102

BIBIC (British Institute for Brain Injured Children) help children with conditions affecting their social, communication and learning abilities. There is a National Assessment Centre in Somerset, a team of Lottery-funded Outreach Therapists working closely with families in their own homes across the UK.

Website: www.bibic.org.uk

Email: info@bibic.org.uk

Tel: 01278 684060

Cerebra

For parents of children with brain injuries and neurological problems, including Asperger Syndrome and autism. Has a helpline, regional Parent Support workers, telephone counselling service, sleep service, DLA Guides, grants scheme, speech and language therapy voucher scheme, holiday home and more.

Website: www.cerebra.org.uk

Email: info@cerebra.org.uk

Parent Support Helpline: 0800 328 1159

Contact a Family

UK wide advice on all aspects of caring for a child with any special need, disability or rare disorder; national SEN help line; downloadable fact sheets and publications; Connected magazine; local support groups and parent reps; campaigns and research etc.

Website: www.cafamily.org.uk

Tel: 0808 808 3555

Email: info@cafamily.org.uk

They also run a separate site Making Contact where you can share your experiences, get advice or local support from other parents with children with the same condition:

www.makingcontact.org.uk

Autism NI (PAPA)

The main Northern Ireland Autism Charity it has Autism Resource Officers and Parent Liaison Officers (who work both full and part time in many regional areas), who are committed to supporting all families with the many issues and challenges they may face; training for carers, parents and professionals; lobbying.

Website: www.autismni.org

Email: info@autismni.org

Helpline: 028 9040 1729

(M & F 10am-1pm, T W T 10-4)

Autism Network N.I.

Based in Northern Ireland, they have a helpline, parent support groups, social groups, adult groups, advocacy and Teens and Twenties social outing groups.

Website: www.autismnetworkni.org.uk

Helpline: 028 92 611851

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Irish Autism Action

Awareness raising, early detection diagnosis, education support, advocacy, counselling, helpline, home based support, transition planning, social housing, research information and advice for families upon receiving diagnosis.
Website: www.autismireland.ie
Email: info@autismireland.ie
Tel: +353 44 933 1609

Scottish Autism

The main autism charity in Scotland with support and training for parents, a helpline, children's services, adult services, diagnostic centre and more.
Website: www.scottishautism.org
Email: autism@scottishautism.org
Tel: 01259 720044

USEFUL READING

Cambian free Information Sheets

Includes for ASC: Behaviour Support; Inappropriate Sexual Behaviour; Motivation; Sensory Issues and Coexisting Conditions; Social Skills; Stress and Anxiety; Educational Issues; various coexisting conditions such as ADHD, dyslexia, OCD, Tourette's, EN advice. Please download them free from the website.

See the Cambian information sheet 'Books – where to find them' for a list of specialist publishers with a huge range of books, especially: www.autism.org.uk and www.jkp.com (500+ books on ASC)

The National Autistic Society

has separate information for parents and carers, professionals, adults with autism. It covers all aspects from diagnosis onwards. Website: www.autism.org.uk

Every Child Matters: Change for Children – Autism a booklet from the Department of Education: www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Autism-Exemplar.pdf

USEFUL INTERNET SITES

www.aspergerfoundation.org.uk is a practical Web with info sheets, training details, etc.

www.asperger-syndrome.me.uk set up to help and inform parents carers by parents who have a son with AS.

www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk AET is dedicated to coordinating and improving education support for all children on the autism spectrum in England. Downloadable resources and toolkits for education staff.

www.aspergersyndrome.org a very informative US site run by OASIS (On-Line AS Information & Support) and MAAP Services for Autism and AS.

www.daysout.com

a one stop directory for great family days out – attractions which have good facilities and access for visitors with disabilities and special needs have a specific identifying symbol.

www.tonyattwood.com.au

Dr Tony Attwood's Web has a mine of information and articles for parents and people with AS.

www.users.dircon.co.uk/~cns/

for University Students with Autism and AS.

This sheet has been checked for the content relating to Asperger Syndrome by a member of staff from one of the Cambian schools.

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All the information sheets are checked and amended annually. Please ensure you have the current version.



Cambian is the largest provider of specialist residential education and care for young people with Autism, Asperger Syndrome and other associated complex needs in the United Kingdom. Cambian is trusted by hundreds of parents and over 70 Local Education Authorities. www.cambiangroup.com

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