

ASPERGER SYNDROME: Thoughts for Management in the School

By Stephen Bauer, M.D., M.P.H.

Used with Permission by OASIS (Online Aspergers Syndrome Information and Support)

The most important starting point in helping a student with Aspergers syndrome function effectively in school is for the staff (all who will come into contact with the child) to realize that the child has an inherent developmental disorder which causes him or her to behave and respond in a different way from other students. Too often, behaviors in these children are interpreted as "emotional", or "manipulative", or some other term that misses the point that they respond differently to the world and its stimuli. It follows from that realization that school staff must carefully individualize their approach for each of these children; it will not work out to treat them just the same as other students. Asperger himself realized the central importance of teacher attitude from his own work with these children. In 1944 he wrote, "These children often show a surprising sensitivity to the personality of the teacher...They can be taught, but only by those who give them true understanding and affection, people who show kindness towards them and, yes, humor...The teacher's underlying emotional attitude influences, involuntarily and unconsciously, the mood and behavior of the child."

Although it is likely that many children with AS can be managed primarily in the regular classroom setting, they often need some educational support services. If learning problems are present, resource room or tutoring can be helpful, to provide individualized explanation and review. Direct speech services may not be needed, but the speech and language clinician at school can be useful as a consultant to the other staff regarding ways to address problems in areas such as pragmatic language. If motor clumsiness is significant, as it sometimes is, the school Occupational Therapist can provide helpful input. The school counselor or social worker can provide direct social skills training, as well as general emotional support. Finally, a few children with very high management needs may benefit from assistance from a classroom aide assigned to them. On the other hand, some of the higher functioning children and those with milder AS, are able to adapt and function with little in the way of formal support services at school, if staff are understanding, supportive and flexible.

There are a number of general principles of managing most children with PDD of any degree in school, and they apply to AS, as well:

- ◆ The classroom routines should be kept as consistent, structured and predictable as possible. Children with AS often don't like surprises. They should be prepared in advance, when possible, for changes and transitions, including things such as schedule breaks, vacation days, etc.
- ◆ Rules should be applied carefully. Many of these children can be fairly rigid about following "rules" quite literally. While clearly expressed rules and guidelines, preferably written down for the student, are helpful, they should be applied with some flexibility. The rules do not automatically have to be exactly the same for the child with AS as for the rest of the students--their needs and abilities are different.
- ◆ Staff should take full advantage of a child's areas of special interest when teaching. The child will learn best when an area of high personal interest is on the agenda.

Teachers can creatively connect the child's interests to the teaching process. One can also use access to the special interests as a reward to the child for successful completion of other tasks or adherence to rules or behavioral expectations.

- ◆ Most students with AS respond well to the use of visuals: schedules, charts, lists, pictures, etc. In this way they are much like other children with PDD and autism.
- ◆ In general, try to keep teaching fairly concrete. Avoid language that may be misunderstood by the child with AS, such as sarcasm, confusing figurative speech, idioms, etc. Work to break down and simplify more abstract language and concepts.
- ◆ Explicit, didactic teaching of strategies can be very helpful, to assist the child in gaining proficiency in "executive function" areas such as organization and study skills.
- ◆ Insure that school staff outside of the classroom, such as physical education teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria monitors, librarians, etc., are familiar with the child's style and needs and have been given adequate training in management approaches. Those less structured settings where the routines and expectations are less clear tend to be difficult for the child with AS.
- ◆ Try to avoid escalating power struggles. These children often do not understand rigid displays of authority or anger and will become more rigid and stubborn if forcefully confronted. Their behavior can then get rapidly out of control, and at that point it is often better for the staff person to back off and let things cool down. It is always preferable, when possible, to anticipate such situations and take preventative action to avoid the confrontation through calmness, negotiation, presentation of choices or diversion of attention elsewhere.