

I CAN Factsheet 5

SUPPORT FOR PROFESSIONALS: Pupils with Asperger Syndrome



This factsheet leaflet is designed for people in mainstream schools working with children and young people who have Asperger Syndrome. It aims to help staff understand the needs of these pupils and to provide some ideas for simple strategies that might be incorporated into the routine of a mainstream school or classroom.

What is Asperger Syndrome?

Asperger Syndrome is an autistic spectrum disorder affecting all aspects of development. Everyone who has the Syndrome is affected by the triad of diagnostic criteria for autistic spectrum disorders. Please visit the NAS website for further information. This triad is made up of difficulties with social communication, social interaction and imagination or flexible thought. Additional clinical features of Asperger Syndrome include:

- Lack of empathy
- Naïve, inappropriate, one-sided interaction
- Poor ability to form and sustain friendships
- Pedantic or repetitive speech
- Poor non-verbal communication
- Intense absorption in certain subjects
- Clumsy and ill co-ordinated movements and odd postures.

Burgoine & Wing, 1983

However, it should be remembered that everyone with Asperger Syndrome is an INDIVIDUAL and has different needs.

Many people with Asperger Syndrome learn good coping strategies and live an ordinary life. BUT

These strategies need to be taught, people with Asperger Syndrome find it difficult to learn things incidentally or by copying others.

Problems faced by pupils with Asperger Syndrome in school:

- Poor ability to focus on relevant stimuli – making the children seem inattentive
- School staff not knowing about or understanding the difficulties
- Inability to cope with the academic and social demands of school
- Knowing they are different, wanting to change, but not knowing how to
- Inability to be tactful – truthfulness about others makes them unpopular
- Being vulnerable to peers who might take advantage of their literal understanding of language
- Difficulty in organising self and belongings.
- Frustration caused by being unable to explain the cause of their difficulty to others in some situations
- Narrow range of interests that may mean that the curriculum is a mystery
- Good skills in some areas may mask deficits in others.

Approaches to use with pupils with Asperger Syndrome

- **Never** confront the pupil with Asperger Syndrome head on. The youngster will always win because they have no in-built submission to authority or desire to please
- **Obtain co-operation** by working with the pupil's special interests and linking teaching to these interests
- **Never** use sarcasm or irony when dealing with such pupils. They do not understand it and they may misinterpret what you say.

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Strategies to support pupils with Asperger Syndrome

- The written word is not usually as ambiguous as spoken language. Writing down lists of instructions and messages can help
- Use visual props in lessons, e.g. pictures and actual objects, to help get the message across
- Concrete images help children who have difficulty with ambiguity. While many children can use their imagination to write a story, a child with Asperger may be helped by being asked to describe photos of real events
- Use small steps: instructions broken down into short, clear and concise chunks are easier to follow
- Allow more time for the pupil to think through and process what he has heard before responding
- Be flexible: remember the autistic way of thinking is different and you may need to structure things differently in order to help them succeed at tasks
- Routines and predictability are important. They always need to know what is coming next. Give pupils timetables and clearly signal changes in routine. If lesson times or staff are changed, explain in advance.

Use 'Social Stories' to help the pupil develop social skills, and to help other pupils/ staff understand him. Situations in the story are described in terms of social cues, anticipated actions and information about what is occurring and why. This technique is described fully in *Teaching Social Understanding with Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversation* by Carol Gray (see below).

Friendships and peer relationships are a special area of difficulty. Friendships can be developed through shared areas of interest. Most children with Asperger Syndrome want to have friends. This means they can be vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous peers. They may use clowning around as a way of interacting. It may help to teach children with Asperger safety strategies, e.g. how to ask for help, how to recognise difficult situations and how to understand 'playground language'. Use role play and teach sessions around social skills. Such as 'Talkabout', a social skills package. www.alexkelly.biz

Finding something a child with Aspergers is good at and praising them in front of others will help boost self esteem. Also giving them specific tasks to do in the classroom i.e. monitor, taking the register etc.

Staff working with this group of pupils may face difficulties because:

- They can be viewed as awkward or naughty
- The approaches used with pupils with Asperger Syndrome may be viewed as 'unfair' by other pupils or staff

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- The pupils may be inflexible in their approaches – driven by rules that make sense to them but not to anyone else
- Everyday language may be interpreted differently by pupils with Asperger Syndrome. The use of idioms may cause them particular difficulties
- They take up more staff time than others especially to explain things to them
- Staff may need to support them in unstructured situations (breaks/lunchtimes, etc.) by providing some structure, rules and opportunities for rehearsal and review.

It is important that staff working with pupils with Asperger Syndrome explain what they are doing and why to colleagues and, as far as appropriate, to the pupil's peer group.

Useful contacts:

National Autistic Society

393 City Road
London
EC1V 1NG
Tel no: 020 7833 2299
Fax no: 020 7833 9666
nas@nas.org.uk
www.nas.org.uk

Association for Teachers and Heads of Children with Autism

Contact through Mike Collins, National Autistic Society.
Tel: 0117 974 8400

Asperger Syndrome Foundation

The Kensington Charity Centre
4th Floor
Charles House
375 Kensington High St
W14 8QH

Further reading:

Autism: The facts

Simon Baron-Cohen
Oxford University Press, 1993
0192623273 £9.99

Asperger Syndrome: a guide for parents and professionals

Tony Attwood
Jessica Kingsley Publishers 1997
1853025771 £12.95

Teaching Social Understanding with Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversation

Carol Gray
See publisher for details of Carol Gray's work.
Future Horizons
721 W. Abram Street
Arlington
Texas
USA
76013
Tel: 001 800 489 0727
www.futurehorizons-autism.com
See also: www.thegraycenter.org

Talkabout

www.alexkelly.biz

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I CAN Factsheets:

You may also find these I CAN Factsheets helpful:

For professionals:

- **Factsheet 1**
Language Difficulties in the Early Years
- **Factsheet 2**
Classroom Strategies for Primary Schools
- **Factsheet 3**
Classroom Strategies for Secondary Schools

For parents:

- **Factsheet A**
Speech and Language Difficulties - help in the early years
- **Factsheet B**
Speech and Language Therapy - help in the early years

Further support:

- **Factsheet C**
Useful Contacts
- **Factsheet D**
Useful Reading

I CAN:

I CAN is the children's communication charity. Communication is the essential 21st century life skill – the foundation on which children learn, achieve and make friends. I CAN works to develop speech, language and communication skills for all children. I CAN's particular focus is children who find communication hard.

I CAN works to ensure all people who have a responsibility to children, either directly or indirectly, from parents and teachers to policy makers, understand the importance of good communication skills.

Visit www.ican.org.uk for further information on I CAN's work and to register for I CAN's monthly newsletter.

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