

Talking Matters

www.talkingmatters.com.au Ph: 8255 7137
Helping your child to reach their potential



What is Asperger’s Syndrome?

More children and even some adults are being diagnosed Asperger’s syndrome but what exactly is this? Asperger’s syndrome is considered a “pervasive developmental disorder”. “Pervasive” meaning it affects all areas of a person’s life and “developmental” meaning it begins in childhood, though it may not be diagnosed until much later. It is also considered part of the “autism spectrum”. “Spectrum” meaning it can include a wide range of characteristics, abilities and challenges.



Adults and children on the autism spectrum vary widely in their learning ability, behaviour and other characteristics; yet all share some common challenges. All people on the “autism spectrum” have difficulties with social interaction, communication and restricted or repetitive interests or activities. Unlike some people on other parts of the autism spectrum people with Asperger’s syndrome do not have an intellectual disability or delayed language development. They have a normal or above IQ and their early communication development is not delayed. It is this that makes Asperger’s syndrome different from “classic autism”. They do however share, with others with autism, difficulties in social interaction, communication and restricted or repetitive interests or activities. Because of their intelligence and more developed language skills the way these difficulties are shown may be different to others with more significant language and learning issues.

Difficulties with social impairment can include:

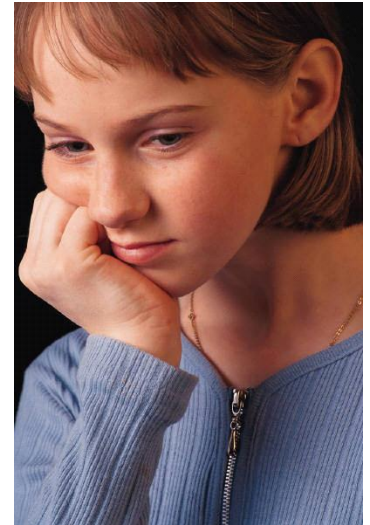
- being withdrawn and avoiding social contact
- trying to interact with others but appear odd or inappropriate at times
- having difficulty understanding the thoughts and feelings of others, lacking sympathy or empathy
- difficulty understanding how to behave in social situations
- not understanding the unwritten rules of social interaction or in the case of children, social play
- difficulty using eye contact and facial expressions in a social way and understanding the expressions of others difficulty joining in with others and sharing toys and games
- preferring to play alone, doing things their own way and difficulty taking into the interests of others.



Though language skills are not delayed people with Asperger's do have communication difficulties.

They may speak very well but may have difficulty with the social aspects of communicating such as:

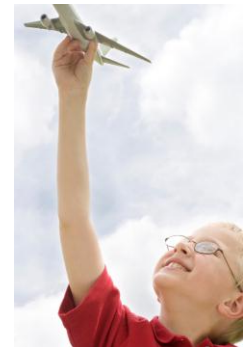
- difficulty taking turns, dominating a conversation, getting stuck on a favourite topic
- being very literal and not understanding more abstract meanings
- asking excessive questions or repeating things that they have heard on TV or in a movie
- not understand that some things are not appropriate to talk about at certain times or places
- may appear blunt or inappropriate
- difficulty with non-verbals such as eye contact, facial expressions, tone of voice
- may use a flat or unusual tone or even sound as though they have an accent



Restricted and repetitive interests and activities can vary from person to person. What people with Asperger's have in common is a strong focus they have on one, or a limited range of activities. This may range from topics such as dinosaurs, transport timetables, space or ancient Egypt, to a certain movie, TV show or character. The level of their interest is intense and they spend long periods of time with their favourite activity. Often this means that they have little interest in other activities not related to their topic of choice and spend most of their free time doing, talking about or thinking about their interest.

Some other characteristics which some people with Asperger's may show:

- unusual or repetitive movements such as: flapping, rocking, toe walking
- hand or finger movements,
- repetitive movements with objects such as spinning, lining up, sorting, flicking, repeatedly turning things on and off or opening and shutting things.



Many people with Asperger's also show sensory issues such as sensitivity to noises, smells, textures, certain clothes or foods.

All people with Asperger's share these areas of difficulty, but have their own personality, and vary according to their intelligence level, family and cultural background. Some may have other diagnosis such as ADHD, learning difficulties such as dyslexia while others do not. While people with Asperger's have challenges they also have strengths. Tony Attwood speaks of people with Asperger's being "different not disabled". He states that they often have "a strong desire to seek knowledge, truth and perfection" show "considerable attention to detail" are "renowned for being direct, speaking their mind and being honest and determined and having a strong sense of social justice".

Each person with Asperger's requires support and understanding tailored to their own unique needs. People with Asperger's often need support to manage their emotions and understand the emotions of others and may need support with relationships.

Common questions

If I think my child has Asperger's what do I do? The process for getting a diagnosis and follow up support varies depending on where you live. The Talking Matters website has details about the process in South Australia. In other areas ask your doctor to be referred to a paediatrician that specialises in autism spectrum disorders.

Will my child grow out of it? Asperger's is a lifelong condition so people do not grow out of it. They do however learn and develop. Needs and abilities change over time and with support people with Asperger's lead full and happy lives. Support in adulthood may be needed to help with personal and workplace relationships. The more support children receive when they are younger the better they will do when they are older.

What kind of support does my child need? Support needs vary from child to child so each should be individually assessed to determine what is most important for them. Many children benefit from speech pathology for communication skills, occupational therapy for fine motor and sensory issues and psychology for behavioural issues. Children benefit from support to understand and manage emotions and to learn social skills.

If my child is bright and doing well at school, do they need a diagnosis? Parents often worry about "labelling" their child. A label will not change a child. They will still be the same person with the same mix of skills, challenges and personality. A label can however help others to understand the child better and can sometimes help the child to access more appropriate support. Sometimes when children do not have a diagnosis they are incorrectly labelled "rude" or "naughty" because of their social challenges. If a child has a label parents do not need to share this with everyone. A child's diagnosis need only be shared when there is an advantage for the child to do so, such as to help school understand and support a child.

For older children understanding their diagnosis can help with self - understanding and acceptance. If parents are unsure psychologists or autism associations can help parents talk to children about their diagnosis in a positive way. A diagnosis can also help adults with Asperger's understand themselves better.

Useful websites:

TonyAttwood.com

AutismSA.org.au

