



An OAASIS information Sheet

Office for Advice Assistance Support and Information on Special needs

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Asperger Syndrome is a disorder on the autistic spectrum that causes restrictions to normal functioning in the areas of communication, socialisation and imagination and often in physical co-ordination and sensory perception. It affects both boys and girls, but currently affects boys in significantly higher numbers due to their displaying more aggressive and disruptive behaviours and girls seemingly having a better ability to mask their problems. An Austrian psychiatrist, Hans Asperger, originally described it in 1944.

Children with Asperger syndrome exhibit, to a greater or lesser degree, a **Triad of Impairment**, which is the defining characteristic of autism, as identified by Dr. Lorna Wing:

- **Communication:** Language impairment across all modes of communication: speech, intonation, gesture, facial expression and other body language.
- **Inflexibility of thought:** Rigidity and inflexibility of thought process: resistance to change, obsessional and ritualistic behaviour, may parallel play as opposed to playing and interacting with peers
- **Socialisation:** Difficulties with social relationships, poor social timing, lack of social empathy, rejection of normal body contact, inappropriate eye contact.

Alongside the triad there may be sensory issues often referred to as the fourth strand (see our separate Sensory sheet).

Asperger syndrome, like many autistic spectrum disorders, is a very individual syndrome. There will be wide variations in the physical and mental symptoms presented, in the resulting degree of difficulties for the individual and in any early signs noted by parents. The presence of other disorders (see below) may confuse the issue.

Some people believe that HFA and Asperger syndrome are one and the same thing. The differences between AS and HFA are subtle but generally, children with a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome do not exhibit early cognitive, language or developmental delay.

Some people with a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome may be highly intelligent. Sometimes they can lead a perfectly normal life with little difficulty, but sometimes, the degree of impairment can make life just as much of a challenge as for those with autism.

Verbal skills

People with AS generally have good verbal skills, but when speaking there may be little facial expression, gestures may be limited, and intonation can be monotonous. The content of speech may be abnormal, with lengthy discussions on a favourite subject. Words may be invented and words repeated over and over again.

The good verbal skills may mask a tendency to rely on literal meaning (e.g. 'hop off the bus') and an inability to read body language and facial expressions. Subtle verbal jokes and sarcasm may not be understood. Poor auditory processing skills mean that sentences can often be repeated word for word but the person with AS is unable to comprehend what it actually means. Visual input is often helpful – written or with picture diagrams.

Inflexibility of thought

A person with AS will often have a narrow range of interests and become very knowledgeable and obsessive about a particular subject, sometimes to the exclusion of all else.

Routine is extremely important to people with AS. They may feel the need to adhere to specific rituals and

will become unduly upset by changes in their known timetable. Their pronounced lack of flexibility in both daily life and thought means that they must be carefully prepared for any change. Lateral thinking and using imagination to cope with different circumstances are not skills that come naturally to them!

Social skills

People with AS make better efforts to adapt socially than do those with autism. They have a genuine desire to make social contact but there are problems with two-way interaction and the inability to understand social conventions and these can carry on into adolescent and adult relationships too without the right programmes and training opportunities. Social skills often overlap with communication and inflexibility of thought.

It can affect:

- **Conversational skills:** greetings, joining a conversation, verbal turn-taking, listening skills, talking about a particular topic, awareness of personal space, ending a conversation.
- **Play skills:** observational skills, joining play, turn-taking, sharing, compromising, conflict resolution, coping with 'no', coping with losing, reciprocal play, ending play.
- **Understanding emotions:** reading facial expressions, reading body language, voice quality - intonation, pitch, speed, awareness of own body language, having a large emotional vocabulary e.g. not just happy/sad.
- **Dealing with conflict:** anger management and self-regulation skills, the ability to ask for help, ability to walk away from a stressful situation, being assertive but not aggressive, dealing with bullying, etc.
- **Friendship skills:** as above but also things like 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.

Other difficulties

They can be very egotistical and chauvinistic, and create impossibly high standards for themselves in all that they do, leading to anxiety when perfection cannot be achieved.

In general, anxiety features significantly in the lives of those affected, apart from fear of failure. Often the anxiety is related to low self-esteem, a fear of being misunderstood and of not understanding others. There is also the anxiety associated with an awareness of being different and not fitting in.

Poor physical and visual motor skills, clumsiness and poor co-ordination can be seen as characteristics of AS but are not always present.

Strengths

Some but not all people with AS have excellent rote memories. They can be completely focused on the work in hand. Average or above-average intelligence.

Extensive vocabulary – but many people have difficulty with the practical use of language. Expertise in their chosen topic of interest – although this can become difficult in social situations as they may only talk about one topic. Excellent factual memory for their chosen topic of interest. Dedication and commitment to their job if they work in a supportive environment and their job is suited to their interests. The drive to perform well at school or work, if given a supportive and inclusive environment.

Problems associated with school

Typically, children with AS may appear to be coping academically in primary school but have a high level of anxiety and lack of friends. They are likely to be exhibiting some disruptive behaviour, either at home, or at school, or both. This behaviour may have been deemed odd and noticed at home from an earlier age, but may have been discounted by professionals as not being significant. Keeping a diary of these behaviours can help build up a better idea of a child's difficulties.

Sometimes the transfer to secondary school takes place before real problems surface. The difficulties may not be academic (children with AS are frequently top of the class). They are more likely to be because there is lack of understanding of the behaviour and intentions of others, the meanings of the instructions and lessons, or an inability to interpret the wide variety of verbal and non-verbal language used by teachers and peers. They can be prone to being bullied due to their lack of social skills and for their reactions.

Asperger Syndrome is known to coexist with other syndromes, such as:

- **Attention Deficit / Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD):** A condition giving rise to inattention and impulsivity, often combined with extreme levels of motor activity.
- **Dyspraxia:** A problem with gross and/or fine motor skills.
- **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder:** When ritualistic actions such as constant hand washing etc. have to be performed, sometimes many hundreds of times a day, before the sufferer can move on.
- **Speech and Language problems:** (e.g. SPD – Semantic Pragmatic Disorder) - Lack of understanding idioms, inability to use appropriate speech in appropriate places and a tendency to take everything literally.

Plus possibly -

- **Anxieties and phobias:** People with AS are often nervous and anxious of any change in their lives; they can also be unnaturally afraid of quite ordinary things.
- **Depression:** People with AS can become depressed about their lack of a social life, their inability to function independently at school or college, if they feel rejected by potential friends or employers.



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.

Web: www.autism.org.uk

Helpline: 0845 070 4004 (10am-4pm)

Parent to Parent line: 0800 9520 520

Advocacy or Educational Service /

Tribunal Support Scheme: 0845 070 4002

Social Programmes: 0115 8473 540

They also have an assessment and diagnostic centre in Kent (The NAS Lorna Wing Centre for Autism).

Tel: 020 8466 0098

Resources for Autism

Aims to fill the gaps in practical services for those on the spectrum by providing music and art therapy, adult art and social groups, play, youth and holiday scheme provision and home based family support. Currently provide services in London, home counties and Birmingham.

Web: www.resourcesforautism.org.uk

Email: admin@resourcesforautism.org.uk

Tel: 020 8458 3259

Autism Independent UK

Offers information on their Web, a diagnostic & assessment resource centre, helpline, training (mostly for professionals but also for parents), library of books and videos and are developing group homes.

Web: www.autismuk.com

Email: autism@autismuk.com

Tel: 01536 523274

Autism London

Provides support for those affected by autism & Aspergers syndrome, living in London.

Tel: 0845 603 7954

Web: www.autismlondon.org.uk

Email: info@autismlondon.org.uk

Autism Research Centre

Based at Cambridge University, ARC does research to understand the causes of autism and develop new methods for assessment and intervention. You can download from their Web various tests for autism and Asperger Syndrome.

Web: www.autismresearchcentre.com

Tel: 01223 746057

Contact a Family

Provides support, information and advice to families with disabled children or those with a medical condition.

Web: www.cafamily.org.uk

Helpline: 0808 808 3555

Cerebra

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

Web: www.cerebra.org.uk

Parent Support Helpline: 0800 32 81 159

Autism NI (PAPA)

The Northern Ireland Autism Charity.

Web: www.autismni.org

Tel: 028 9040 1729

Aspergers Network

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

Web: www.aspergersnetwork.org.uk

Helpline: 028 92 611851

Irish Autism Action

Web: www.autismireland.ie

Tel: 044 933 1609

The Scottish Society for Autism

Web: www.autism-in-scotland.org.uk

Tel: 01259 720044

Spectrum Girls

For AS girls of all ages who want to meet new friends. A social group meets in Herts for those from London and Home Counties, others can be pen pals or cyber mates.

Email: spectrumgirls@sky.com

Tel: Lesley Zorlakkki 0771 448 3485

Girls Connect

A support group in Twickenham for families with teenage girls with AS/HFA.

Email: Louise at girlsconnect@metooandco.org.uk

Web: www.metooandco.org.uk/girlsconnect.html

USEFUL READING

See also OASIS information sheet, 'Books – where to find them'

OASIS publishes A First Guide to Asperger

Syndrome (2nd edition) in its First Guide series (Price £6.00 plus p&p or you can download it free from our Web). Publications list/order form available on our Web, or email/telephone for one to be sent to you.

OASIS free Information Sheets: including others on aspects of AS, please contact OASIS for the full list or download them from the web.

Web: www.oasis.co.uk

Information for parents - autistic spectrum disorders a free booklet with lots of advice and contacts available from DfES Publications.

Tel: 0845 602 2260

or download from

Web: www.earlysupport.org.uk

(go to 'Materials for download' and then 'Information for Parents booklets').

Check these publishers for new books on Asperger Syndrome/autistic spectrum disorders, which come out regularly:

Routledge Education

(member of the Taylor Francis Group)

Tel: 020 7017 6563 (Marketing)

Web: www.routledgeeducation.com

(academic and research based) or

Web: www.routledgeteachers.com

Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Web: www.jkp.com

Email: post@jkp.com

Tel: 020 7833 2307

The NAS

The NAS books are supplied by Central Books. You can order online.

Web: www.autism.org.uk

Tel: 0845 458 9911

SEN Marketing

Books and software for special educational needs.

Web: www.senbooks.co.uk

Tel: 01924 871697

The internet book shop

Web: www.amazon.co.uk

USEFUL INTERNET SITES

If you have Internet access try the following for a wide range of articles:

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

www.autism-help.org a site set up by an Australian social worker/parent of an autistic child. It has a huge amount of information.

www.faaas.org is a site for families of adults with AS.

www.maapservices.org a US site for more advanced individuals with Autism, AS and Pervasive Developmental Disorder.

www.tonyathwood.com.au Dr Tony Athwood's Web has a mine of information and articles for parents and people with AS.

www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/ a very informative and full American site, run by OASIS (On-Line AS Information & Support).

www.users.dircon.co.uk/~cns/ for University Students with Autism and AS.

For more organisations look at our separate OASIS Information Sheet on Useful Contacts and Websites.

The Cambian Group run seven residential special schools and colleges for young people with autistic spectrum disorders, Asperger Syndrome/HFA, severe learning difficulties. Please contact OASIS for the prospectuses of our schools and colleges specifically for autism.

OASIS produces 8 chargeable publications entitled 'First Guide to...'; wallet sized cards explaining 9 learning disabilities and a wide range of free information sheets.

Please contact OASIS (see front of sheet for contact details) for the full list, or view them on the website www.oasis.co.uk.

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