

## Asperger's Disorder<sup>1</sup>

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In the mid-1940s, Hans Asperger, a pediatrician at a clinic in Vienna, treated several patients who displayed an unusual set of characteristics. His work was conducted during World War II, but it was not until the 1980s that his work was noticed by the English-speaking community. In 1991, it was translated into English by Uta Frith. This translation spurred interest and research on this topic, and the group of characteristics first described by Hans Asperger is now known as Asperger's Disorder.

### What Is Asperger's Disorder?

Asperger's Disorder begins in childhood, and is a disorder that affects social interaction and behavior. It is part of the autism spectrum of disorders, so it is similar to other disorders that also cause developmental disabilities.

Before Asperger's Disorder can be diagnosed, there need to be problems in the following areas:

#### ***Social interaction***

Children with Asperger's Disorder have trouble relating to others. For some children, this means that they don't seem to enjoy the company of others and don't seem to want to share or interact with others, or

that when they do interact with others, they do not use nonverbal skills (eye contact, touching, facial expression, etc.) in the expected way. Often it is difficult for children with Asperger's Disorder to have two-way conversations. They may take speech very literally, and have difficulty understanding figures of speech, subtle suggestions, and sarcasm.

There is often insensitivity to others' verbal and nonverbal cues. Children with the disorder may be unaware of the impact of their own behavior, or they may have difficulty relating to other children at their developmental level. They may have few or no friends, may be teased or rejected by peers, or their friendships may seem unusual (e.g., the friends are significantly younger, there is little interaction, etc.).

#### ***Behavior and interests***

Another sign of Asperger's Disorder is the display of unusual behaviors or interests. For some children, this may mean obsession with certain objects or ideas, often to the exclusion of everything else. For example, a child may have a special interest in snakes, trains, or weather, and want to talk about that subject constantly. For other children, unusual behaviors may exist, such as an inability to handle

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simple changes to familiar routines or distress during transitions from one activity to another.

Although all children with Asperger's Disorder have impairment in these two areas, the exact symptoms are different for each child. However, in order for the disorder to be diagnosed, the symptoms need to be severe enough that they cause some sort of life impairment (in school functioning, family function, or social life).

### **How Is It Different From Autistic Disorder?**

Asperger's Disorder is different from Autistic Disorder in that there are no significant delays in language or cognitive development. In fact, some children with Asperger's speak earlier than expected, and may have an exceptionally well-developed vocabulary. However, nonverbal skills may be slightly weaker for some children with Asperger's, meaning they might appear clumsy or awkward, or have difficulty with hand-eye coordination.

### **Are Children With Asperger's Disorder at Risk for Other Problems?**

Many children with Asperger's Disorder are also diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. Children with Asperger's Disorder are also at higher risk for a diagnosis of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Finally, children struggling with Asperger's Disorder who are left undiagnosed and untreated often deal with social isolation and depression, especially as they enter their adolescent years, when peer relations become even more important.

### **When Is It Diagnosed?**

Because children with the disorder generally appear to be developing normally in the early years, it often takes longer to notice that a child has Asperger's Disorder than it does to notice other disorders on the autistic spectrum. Symptoms can be subtle, and in many cases children are not diagnosed before the age of five. Problems may not be noticed until the child starts school and begins interacting more with children and adults outside the family.

Some people with Asperger's Disorder reach adulthood without ever being diagnosed.

### **How Common Is It?**

Research on Asperger's Disorder has begun only recently, so there is much that is not known about this disorder. Using the standard criteria, studies suggest that anywhere from 1 in 33,000 to 1 in 1200 children have the disorder. However, many surveys tend to lump Asperger's Disorder in with the other autistic spectrum disorders, making accurate estimates difficult. Boys are much more likely to have Asperger's Disorder than girls. In fact, Asperger's is around four times more common in boys than in girls.

### **What Causes It?**

Given the relatively recent recognition of Asperger's Disorder, it is not surprising that scientists still aren't sure what causes Asperger's, although it is likely that there may be multiple causes (genetics, trauma during pregnancy, etc.). What is known is that Asperger's is related to brain development and functioning. Recent research suggests that specific parts of the brain may be different or function differently in children with Asperger's Disorder.

### **What Do I Do if I Think My Child Has Asperger's Disorder?**

If you suspect that your child has Asperger's Disorder, contact your physician, school guidance office, or a licensed psychologist to discuss your concerns and to initiate an evaluation, if needed. This professional will take thorough medical, developmental, and family histories, talk to the child and parent, and conduct diagnostic interviews. There may also be a need to spend time interacting with and observing the child in order to determine whether the behavior in question comes from Asperger's Disorder.

### **What Interventions are Available?**

Treatment generally focuses on teaching social and communication skills and working on developing appropriate behaviors. Depending on their symptoms, some children may also benefit from medication,

occupational therapy (learning life skills), speech therapy (learning awareness of tone, inflection, and other speech skills), and/or sensory integration therapy (for those children who have sensory integration problems, teaching gradual tolerance of sensory stimulation). Although many children with Asperger's Disorder do well in their schoolwork, they may need help with behavioral or social issues at school. To find out which interventions are most appropriate for your child, consult with the professional who completed your child's evaluation. If your child is diagnosed with Asperger's Disorder, early intervention is very important for the best outcomes.

Children with Asperger's Disorder may face social and behavioral challenges that can be hard on them and on their families. Parents and siblings of children with Asperger's may also benefit from supportive therapy to help them cope with stress related to the disorder and to help them better understand the nature of the disorder. Many communities offer parent support groups, as well as workshops for siblings that can help them understand the disorder, and allow them to talk to other siblings of children with Asperger's.

### What is the Prognosis?

Although there are challenges associated with having Asperger's Disorder, and there is no known "cure," most children with Asperger's Disorder respond to intervention, and generally are able to function well in society. The ultimate goal is for children with Asperger's and their families to have the highest quality of life possible. By adulthood, many people with Asperger's Disorder have found tools and strategies to help them deal more effectively with the world around them, and many graduate from college, have careers, marry, and have children.

### Resources for Families Dealing with Asperger's Syndrome

#### Books:

Aston, Maxine. (2002). *The Other Half of Asperger Syndrome: A Guide to an Intimate*

*Relationship with a Partner who has Asperger Syndrome*. Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

Attwood, Tony. (2006). *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Attwood, Tony. (1998). *Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Bashe, Patricia Romanowski, Kirby, Barbara, Baron-Cohen, Simon, and Attwood, Tony. (2005). *The OASIS Guide to Asperger Syndrome: Advice, Support, Insight and Inspiration*. Crown.

Grandin, Temple, and Barron, Sean. (2005). *The Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships: Decoding Social Mysteries Through the Unique Perspectives of Autism*. Future Horizons.

Grandin, Temple, Duffy, Kate, and Attwood, Tony. (2004). *Developing Talents: Careers for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism*. Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

Jackson, Luke, and Attwood, Tony. (2002). *Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Smith Myles, Brenda, and Southwick, Jack. (2005). *Asperger Syndrome and Difficult Moments: Practical Solutions for Tantrums, Rages and Meltdowns*. Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

Welton, Jude. (2003). *Can I Tell You About Asperger Syndrome?: A Guide for Friends and Family*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

#### Web Sites:

Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support (OASIS):  
<http://www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/>

Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD): <http://card.ufl.edu/card.htm>

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Ozonoff, S., Dawson, G., & McPartland, J. (2002). *A parent's guide to Asperger's syndrome & high functioning autism: How to meet the challenges and help your child thrive*. New York: Guilford Press.

Ritvo, E. R. (2006). *Understanding the nature of autism and Asperger's disorder: Forty years of clinical practice and pioneering research*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Strock, M. (2004). *Autism Spectrum Disorders (Pervasive Developmental Disorders)* (NIH Publication No. NIH-04-5511). Bethesda, MD: National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.