

The facts about **ASPERGER SYNDROME**

What is Asperger Syndrome (AS)?

Asperger syndrome (AS) is a developmental disorder that falls within the range known as autism spectrum disorders (ASD). The first definition of Asperger Syndrome was published over 50 years ago by Hans Asperger. He identified a consistent pattern of abilities and behavior that predominantly occurred in boys. The pattern included a lack of empathy, little ability to form friendships, one-sided conversations, intense absorption in a special interest and clumsy movements.⁽¹⁾ Although similar to autism in a number of ways, the symptoms of AS manifest at a lesser degree than in typical autism.

According to the Center for Disease Control, ASD occurs in about 1 and 150 births. The exact cause of the disorder is still unknown. As with typical autism, studies have shown that both genetic and environmental factors contribute to the occurrence of Asperger syndrome. Studies indicate that an individual is genetically predisposed to the disorder, but factors in the physical environment can contribute to the onset of symptoms. Although a cure for AS has not been identified, the symptoms can greatly improve with appropriate intervention and therapeutic support.

Symptoms

Every person with Asperger syndrome displays a unique combination of symptoms. Therefore, children can exhibit the behaviors and symptoms associated with the disorder at varying levels. These include:

- Difficulty adapting to changes in routine
- Socially or emotionally inappropriate behavior
- Inability to interact with peers
- Poor eye contact
- Lack of awareness in their social environment
- Speech with atypical tone and/or articulation
- Uncoordinated motor movements or clumsiness
- Fascination with moving objects or patterns
- Intense interest in particular objects or topics

Treatment Options

If your child has been diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, early intervention is critical to your child's success at home, school and in the community. Research shows that intervention therapy during the early years of life can result in significant communication and social improvements for many young individuals with the disorder.⁽²⁾ To provide the most effective treatment options, family members and professionals must work together to understand the child's behaviors and decide which intervention treatment is best.

Behavior strategies and educational interventions for children with Asperger syndrome focus on improving communication and social skills while reducing obsessive behavior and repetitive habits. Children will benefit from programs that build upon their personal interests and incorporate highly structured embedded routines.⁽³⁾ Activities that promote interactions with peers are also important to the intervention process. Socializing with typically developing children helps improve social skills when the child is given the opportunity to observe and then emulate targeted

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model behavior.⁽²⁾ Developing friendships with peers is critical to self esteem, school success, and overall quality of life.

Because children with Asperger syndrome tend to be very concrete and visual in their thought processes, they often respond well when pictures and environmental cues are provided along with the verbal directions. Picture schedules, visual timers, first-then cards and other visual supports can help children appropriately express their wants and needs, smoothly transition from one activity to the next, and improve communication skills.

Some parents looking to relieve symptoms of autism spectrum disorders have chosen to use treatments outside those typically recommended by pediatricians and therapists. These types of treatments are known as complementary or alternative treatments. Some of these treatments options can be dangerous and their effectiveness has not been confirmed through evidence-based research. Before starting such a treatment, speak to your child's pediatrician.

Next Steps

Children with Asperger syndrome look like their typically developing peers, having no physically recognizable feature of their disorder. Yet their behaviors can hinder their ability to succeed in school and the community. The intervention strategies designed by your child's therapists and educators may take some time to reduce symptoms. Remember to be patient, calm and persistent when trying new teaching methods.

A family therapist may help parents, siblings, and relatives address the potential disagreements and stress that could arise when determining the best treatment plan and implementing intervention strategies. As they get older, child psychologists may be beneficial for the children as well to help them cope with their diagnoses.

The period after a diagnosis should be a time of learning. Parents can access the many resources available on AS and its treatment options. Parents can acquire information on behavior management, either through consultation with a professional or through their own self-study, to learn parenting techniques that best support the child's unique needs.

Once the child and the family have coped with the diagnosis, it is helpful to talk with other important people in the child's life, such as extended family, teachers, and coaches. These individuals should have information that will help them support the child's needs and contribute to the success of the treatment plan. From an educational standpoint, parents will work with school administrators, teachers, and therapists to develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that supports the child both academically and socially.

Asperger Syndrome is one of the qualifying disabilities for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). For children birth through two years of age the child's state early intervention agency should be contacted for more information on eligibility and special services. For children three years and older, the local educational system will provide assistance with the special education process.

Looking to the Future

Siskin Children's Institute is here to serve as a resource to families as they learn about their child's diagnosis. Please contact our Outreach and Resource Center to learn more about Asperger syndrome and take advantage of the resources, referrals, and training programs that we can provide to your family.

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Lending Library Resources on Asperger Syndrome

- Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals (Attwood); also on DVD
- Asperger's ...What Does It Mean to Me? : A Workbook Explaining Self Awareness and Life Lessons to the Child or Youth with High-Functioning Autism or Aspergers (Faherty)
- Asperger Syndrome and Difficult Moments: Practical Solutions for Tantrums, Rage, and Meltdowns (Myles); a similar title available on DVD
- The Oasis Guide to Asperger Syndrome: Advice, Support, Insights, and Inspiration (Bashe, Kirby)
- A Parent's Guide to Asperger Syndrome and High-Functioning Autism: How to Meet the Challenges and Help Your Child Thrive (Ozonoff)
- Parenting a Child with Asperger Syndrome: 200 Tips and Strategies (Boyd)
- Parenting Your Asperger Child: Individualized Solutions for Teaching Your Child Practical Skills (Sohn, Grayson)
- Pretending to Be Normal: Living with Asperger's Syndrome (Willey)
- Children's Book: To Be Me (Etlinger)

Helpful Websites

- Autism Society of America (www.autism-society.org)
- Autism Society of North Carolina (www.autismsociety-nc.org)
- Autism Speaks (www.autismspeaks.org)
- Center for Disease Control (www.cdc.gov)
- National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (www.nichcy.org)
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (www.nichd.nih.gov)
- National Institute of Mental Health (www.nimh.nih.gov)
- Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support (www.aspergersyndrome.org)
- Kids Health (www.kidshealth.org)

1. Attwood, T. (2008)
2. National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (2009)
3. Autism Speaks (2009)
4. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2009)