

Factsheet 118

Autistic Spectrum Disorders

“Children with Asperger minds can progress positively if we pay attention to who they are, how they think and how they communicate”

Paula Jacobsen, a US-based psychotherapist

Many of the traits and characteristics of Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) mimic and/or overlap with giftedness and high ability. Be careful not to misdiagnose children and young people who may display some of the following characteristics; it is important to have any individual assessed by a chartered/registered professional in either field of expertise (High ability and/or ASD) in order to avoid misdiagnosis or mislabelling. A referral via your GP to the relevant professional or a private IQ assessment by an Educational Psychologist (EP) is the best procedure. You can find an EP at the British Psychological Society www.bps.org.uk or read my Factsheet No 96 – How to Choose an Educational Psychologist for my Gifted Child.

Recommended reading:

- **Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnosis of Gifted Children and Adults** by James T. Webb
- **The Mislabeled Child** by Brock & Fernette Eide

	Autistic Spectrum Disorders	High Ability
1	Expect that your child will be unable to develop normal social skills, if he or she is autistic. Your child will have difficulty expressing emotions or forming attachments, may avoid eye contact, be apathetic and may not want to be cuddled or to play with other children.	Many high ability children and young people will display traits similar to these but unlike ASD it will be intermittent and during certain situations. High ability children are able to pick and chose when they do certain things, ASD children do not have this luxury. High ability children can be stubborn and manipulative and enjoy their own company. Some high ability children will even isolate themselves on purpose.
2	Evaluate your child’s language skills. Approximately 40 percent of autistic children never speak. Others have “echolalia”, the parrot like repeating of what he or she has just heard.	Some high ability children are fascinated with speech and words and love rhyming. They often speak early and with no baby language although some take longer to talk. Many teach them selves to read at a very early age.
3	Is your child’s voice monotone? Can he or she not control its pitch and/or volume? These are signs your child may be autistic.	This is one area of overlap that is not so common in high ability children. Usually high ability children speak well and early and have good fluent language skills often appearing precocious and way ahead of their peers. They often have a comprehensive memory bank of vocabulary.

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4	Determine whether your child has an abnormal relationship to objects. Does he or she constantly spin toys? Does your child repeatedly drop toys hard onto the floor in a purposeful manner? Does he always arrange Lego's in exactly the same pattern?	Many high ability children can be obsessive about a subject area, e.g. God, religion, space, dinosaurs and trains. They have to know everything there is to know about the subject and only move on when they have exhausted the topic. High ability children's obsession with topics is very different to ASD obsessions.
5	Ask yourself whether your child has abnormal responses to sensory stimulation. Is he or she enthralled with background noises, and does he or she stare at flashing lights?	Some high ability children have hypersensitivities to clothing and tags, noise and sound, taste, textures and light. Some are very sensitive to world issues; others have heightened emotions and empathy. See NAGC Factsheet No H113–Hypersensitivity. Again these sensitivities are very different to the ASD interest in background noise etc.
6	Evaluate your child for differences or delays in his or her ability to learn. Some autistic children can read complex words and phrases but are unable to understand consonants and vowels.	Many high ability children teach themselves to read at a very early age and can read and recognise complex words without understanding the meaning of them. Many high ability children are fascinated and obsessed with reading, rhyming and language. There is another condition Hyperlexia which is where the child has the ability to read but has a below average understanding of the spoken word and socialising.
7	See whether your child obsessively performs rituals (known as stereotypes) over and over. Does he or she insist on eating in the same chair with the same type of food at the same time everyday? Does your child have a temper tantrum if his or her routine is altered in any way? These may be signs of autism.	Many high ability children have a range of obsessive traits and perform little rituals and like things in place. They do not like change and can be extreme perfectionists in every way. They can put extreme pressure on themselves to achieve and some have a huge fear of failure. If things do not go their way they can throw a tantrum and often display controlling and manipulative personalities and behaviours. Their behaviour can be very challenging to manage.

The primary features of Aspergers Syndrome according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR) are:

- Criterion A: severe and sustained impairment in social interaction
- Criterion B: the development of restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests and activities

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Criterion C: the disturbance must cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning

(American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p.80)

Gifted children with and without Aspergers Syndrome have similarities. Both have excellent memory and verbal fluency; they may talk or ask questions incessantly. Both speak in ways that are overly intellectualised and they may do so at an unusually early age. Both groups can be absorbed in one or more special interest, although the person with Aspergers Syndrome may never transfer the facts into anything meaningful beyond those facts. Both groups are typically concerned with fairness and justice, although for the person with Aspergers it is less emotional and more extension of logic.

Both groups, those with Aspergers and those gifted children without frequently have attention problems because they only want to focus on what they want to focus on. Because they do customarily think ahead, both groups do not adapt well to change and will often resist attempts to redirect their thinking and attention. Both groups often have an unusual and quirky sense of humour and both groups often show hypersensitivities to stimuli such as noise, lights, smells, textures and flavours. Children with AS will almost always be seen by teachers, adults and their peers as quirky and different; gifted children without AS may also be perceived by the same groups as quirky and different. This can be due to their Asynchronous development, poor educational fit, or because of marked introversion and social discomfort. In the case of gifted children with AS, Asynchronous development can be extreme, resulting in behaviours that seem even more bizarre strange and puzzling.

It can be very difficult to differentiate between some gifted children and children with Aspergers Syndrome. In addition some children with AS also suffer from ADHD, ADD and/or OCD thereby making the picture even murkier. It is so important to make a correct diagnosis.

WHAT IS ASPERGERS SYNDROME?

Asperger's Syndrome was named after Dr Hans Asperger, a Viennese paediatrician who described it in a 1944 paper. It remained mostly unknown to the English speaking world, until it was picked up by Lorna Wing in an influential review and a series of case reports in 1981. "Asperger's Syndrome" was made "official" in 1994 when it was included in the DSM manual used by psychologists to classify mental conditions.

Current thinking places Asperger's Syndrome on the "autistic spectrum". It is believed that individuals with Asperger's Syndrome tend to have an IQ ranging from average to genius, and there is much speculation that the likes of Albert Einstein and many other philosophers, scientists and genius musicians may have had Asperger's Syndrome.

The main characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome are often (but not always) a deep focus on a specialist subject or area, a difficulty in understanding human interactions and human social codes (almost like being an alien trying to understand a strange species) and a difficulty with changing environments which need to be learned and adjusted to.

People with Asperger's Syndrome tend to have a normal to high intelligence, often coupled with a special skill or ability (e.g. extraordinary mathematical or linguistic abilities). In addition, people with Asperger's Syndrome are sometimes hypersensitive to stimuli such as light, noise and pain, and their motor skills may be less developed than the norm, e.g. they tend to be less sporty, may have hand writing difficulties.

Many of them can be partially face-blind (have a problem remembering faces). They have to invest a lot of energy in understanding interactions and would often need to consciously plan their social behaviour in advance, including when they walk down a busy pedestrian road, and have to avoid running into people. That intuition – the innate ability to translate human body-language and non-verbal cues is simply not there for them. People with Asperger Syndrome often describe their experience as that of "being on the wrong planet". They have to learn how humans interact and simulate it. It isn't a natural trait for them as it is for everyone else.

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Asperger's Syndrome is characterised by a neuro-biological difference from the norm, which means Aspergians process information differently. This is an important point to understand. Asperger's Syndrome is not a mental illness or a disorder; it is simply a neurological variation from the norm. It is inherited genetically and very often will run in families.

NB - There are a variety of symptoms associated with Autism and Autistic Spectrum Disorders as well as other developmental disorders; many traits can mimic/overlap with high ability and/or giftedness. If you suspect your child have symptoms of Autism or any other disorder you should seek immediate assistance and evaluation. The sooner you receive a definitive diagnosis the sooner your child can begin learning in ways that are most appropriate and beneficial for their needs.

Aspergers Syndrome in some cases is now used to describe what used to be called "high functioning autism."

Information in this factsheet is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice or treatment.

Reference: Misdiagnosis & Dual Diagnosis of Gifted Children and Adults, James T Webb et al, 2005

Resources

Sande Education Consultants	Elaine Hook – all areas of educational advice including specialists in Gifted & Talented Education elainehook@hotmail.com
http://oddsandfriends.typepad.com/askanaspie	
www.aspergeradults.ca/aspergrrrlz.html	Site for girls and women with Aspergers Syndrome
www.autism24.com	Proven effective Autism treatments on how to manage and get results
www.good-child-guide.com	Strategies to improve your child's behaviours from toddlers to teens
www.lukejackson.info	
www.mindsandhearts.net	Clinic for children and adults with Aspergers Syndrome in Australia
www.nas.org.uk	National Autistic Society, United Kingdom
www.oaasis.co.uk	Information and help with Autism and Autistic Spectrum Disorders
www.theabcclinic.com	Behavioural consultants for children with behavioural problems and Autism
www.thegraycenter.org	Information, ideas and strategies by Carol Gray
www.tonyattwood.com.au	Expert in Aspergers Syndrome
www.valeold.com	Residential & Domiciliary Services Challenging Behaviour Specialists in Autism and complex needs

Books

The Complete Guide to Aspergers Syndrome by Tony Attwood

Aspergers Syndrome: A Guide for Parents & Professionals by Tony Attwood

www.futurehorizons-autism.com	Publisher of books on Aspergers Syndrome and organiser of conferences and workshops
www.giftedbooks.com	Wide range of books linked to giftedness
www.jkp.com	Jessica Kingsley Publishers – primary publisher of books on Aspergers Syndrome