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## Understanding the Student With Asperger's Syndrome:

# Understanding the Student With Asperger's Syndrome: Guidelines for Teachers

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Children diagnosed with Asperger syndrome present a special challenge in the educational milieu. This article provides descriptions of seven defining characteristics of Asperger syndrome, in addition to suggestions and strategies for addressing symptoms in the classroom. Behavioral and academic interventions based on the author's teaching experiences with children with Asperger syndrome are offered.

Children diagnosed with Asperger syndrome (AS; see Note) present a special challenge in the educational milieu. Typically viewed as eccentric and peculiar by classmates, their inept social skills often cause them to be made victims of scapegoating. Clumsiness, obsessive interest in obscure subjects add to their "odd" presentation. Children with AS lack understanding of human relationship rules of social convention; they are naive and conspicuously lacking in common sense. Their inflexibility and inability to cope causes these individuals to be easily stressed and emotionally vulnerable. At the same time, children with AS (the majority are boys) are often of average to above-average intelligence and have superior rote memories. Their single-minded pursuit of their interests can lead to great achievements later in life.

Asperger syndrome is considered a disorder at the higher end of the autistic continuum. Comparing individuals within this continuum, Klevaveln (cited in Wing, 1991) noted that the low-functioning child with autism "lives in a world of his own," whereas the high-functioning child with autism "lives in our world but in his own way" (p.99).

Naturally, not all children with AS are alike. Just as each child with AS has his or her own unique personality, "typical" AS is manifested in ways specific to each individual. As a result, there is no exact recipe for classroom approaches that can be prescribed for a youngster with AS, just as no one educational method fits the needs of all children not afflicted with AS.

Following are descriptions of seven defining characteristics of Asperger syndrome, followed by suggestions and classroom strategies for addressing these symptoms. (Classroom interventions are illustrated with examples from my own teaching experiences at the Michigan Medical Center Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Hospital School.) These suggestions are offered only in the broadest sense and should be tailored to the unique needs of the individual student with AS.

### Insistence on Sameness

Children with AS are easily overwhelmed by minimal change, are highly sensitive to environmental stressors, and sometimes have rigid rituals. They are anxious and tend to worry obsessively when they do not know what to expect; stress, fatigue and sensory overload throw them off balance.

### Programming Suggestions

- Provide a predictable and safe environment;
- Minimize transitions;
- Offer consistent daily routine: The child with AS must understand each day's routine and know what to expect in order to concentrate on the task at hand;
- Avoid surprises: Prepare the child thoroughly and in advance for special activities, altered schedules, or any other change in routine, regardless of how minimal;
- Allay fears of the unknown by exposing the child to the new activity, teacher, class, school, camp and so forth before soon as possible after he or she is informed of the change, to prevent obsessive worrying. (For instance, when the child must change schools, he or she should meet the new teacher, tour the new school and be apprised of his or her routine of actual attendance. School assignments from the old school might be provided the first few days so that the routine is maintained.)