

Understanding Asperger's Syndrome



In 1944, an Austrian pediatrician named Hans Asperger observed four children in his practice who had difficulty integrating socially. Although their intelligence appeared normal, the children lacked nonverbal communication skills, failed to demonstrate empathy with their peers, and were physically awkward. Their manner of speaking was either disjointed or overly formal, and they were each intensely absorbed in a single topic of interest that dominated their thoughts and conversations. Dr. Asperger called the condition "autistic psychopathy" and described it as a personality disorder primarily marked by social isolation.

In 1981, English physician Lorna Wing published a series of case studies of children showing similar symptoms, which she called "Asperger's" Syndrome (AS). However, it wasn't until 1994 that AS was added to the DSM IV and only in the past few years has AS been recognized by professionals and parents. It is considered to be an autism spectrum disorder, and is sometimes diagnosed as "high functioning autism," making it difficult to know just how many people have Asperger's Syndrome. It is believed that many individuals with AS have received incorrect diagnoses, and because of their high intelligence and functioning, many more remain undiagnosed.

Individuals with AS can exhibit a variety of characteristics and the disorder can range from mild to severe. Symptoms include:

- Marked deficiencies or differences in social skills
- Difficulties with transitions or changes and prefer sameness
- Obsessive routines and/or preoccupation with a particular subject of interest
- Difficulty reading nonverbal cues (body language) and determining proper body space
- Sensitivity to sounds, tastes, smells, and sights

Because they are often intelligent and capable in many ways, those with AS are often viewed as eccentric or odd and can easily become victims of teasing and bullying. Their language may be extraordinarily rich and some children sound like "little professors." However, persons with AS can be extremely literal and have difficulty using language in a social context.

Individuals with AS perceive the world in unique ways. Many behaviors that seem odd or unusual are in fact due to neurological differences rather than choices. And like all of us, people with Asperger's Syndrome deserve acceptance, understanding and the opportunity to be productive members of families and communities.

This document is created by Northwest Autism Center as a service to families affected by autism spectrum disorders and their providers. We are a non-profit organization serving the Inland Northwest.

This information is excerpted from www.wrongplanet.net and www.aspergersyndrome.org