

What is Aspergers?

Aspergers Disorder (aka, Aspergers Syndrome) is a form of autism, but with a difference. The individual with Aspergers has normally developing language skills and is able to function more independently than a person with autism. However, the traits of this condition make it difficult for children to function well in school and for adults to find and keep employment.

Aspergers as an “official” diagnosis is relatively new, having been included as a category in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (American Psychiatric Association) under the general category of Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDDs) since 1994. Before that it was seen as a condition in need of “further study”. The condition was first written about in Vienna by Hans Asperger in the mid to late 1940s.

One needs to aware that it is a relatively uncommon condition. Current estimates place the rate at about 1 percent of the general population. The other issue is that children with Aspergers have a more complex presentation. They have areas of strength and thus are capable of major accomplishments. At the same time they have weaknesses that seem at odds with their other abilities. These children may be labelled as having attentional problems, learning disabilities, or other conditions. In fact, these diagnoses may be correct, as far as they go, for many individuals with Aspergers do have attentional and learning issues. But there is also more.

In particular, people with Aspergers have difficulty in initiating or maintaining close relationships, they have problems reading non-verbal or social cues or understanding/ using social rules with the result that they can be socially naive. Family members may report that the person with Aspergers has been bullied, rejected or taken advantage of in the past. Individuals with Aspergers have poor (or intense) eye contact, will use atypical gestures and present with flat or inappropriate facial expressions. They often struggle in social situations, lacking the ability to be aware of others’ feelings with the result they appear rude or inconsiderate. Furthermore they tend to interpret communications literally. In terms of their behaviour, they may respond poorly to changes, sensory stimuli, transitions, lack of structure and restrictions. As children, they may present with repetitive movements (e.g., jumping, rocking, pacing) and speech (i.e., talking

about favourite topics or interests). Even as adults, individuals with Aspergers are often rigid, inflexible and “rule-bound”. Their behaviour in social situations can be inappropriate (e.g., speaking too loud in place of worship). Their reactions to situations can be exaggerated (e.g., tantrums when asked to something that they don’t want to do). Needless to say these behaviours can lead to difficulties in the home, school and workplace.

The identification of Aspergers is not based on a “medical test” such as collecting blood or completing a brain scan. The identification of this condition is based on gathering a complete developmental history, the use of questionnaires, structured interviews and standardized tests, as well as observations of the child based on an understanding of normal child development and the pattern of behaviour that children with Aspergers exhibit. Thus, identification is best left to a professional with experience in the diagnosis of this condition.

Aspergers is a life long condition, there is no “cure”. These children will change and grow but always in a different fashion from other children. However, the Aspergers will never disappear. Treatments for people with Aspergers may include counselling, psycho-education, social skills training, medication, family intervention, occupational therapy, speech-language pathology and others. Without diagnosis, support and intervention, children, adults and their families struggle to understand their puzzling profile of strengths and deficits.

Parents need to accept that their child will have Aspergers for their entire life. Parents need to make plans for their child. This means learning about the condition, working with the school system, agencies and others to achieve your child's maximum potential in the present and for their future. If you think that your child, teen or an adult you know may have Aspergers contact a professional that is familiar with the condition in order to obtain a proper assessment.

Estes Moustacalis, Ph.D., C.Psych. (Dr. “M”)
www.oakvillepsychologist.com
info@oakvillepsychologist.com
905 617-8308

Providing psychoeducational assessments and consultation on behalf of children and adults with learning difficulties and counseling for adult issues.