Guide for Working with Students experiencing Asperger's Syndrome

Asperger's Syndrome is a developmental disorder disability that is characterized by social interaction deficits, impaired communication skills, and unusual behaviors. It is sometimes referred to as "high functioning autism." Tony Attwood, one of the foremost authorities in the field of Asperger's Syndrome, describes it as: "A neurological disorder that affects one's ability to understand and respond to other's thoughts and feelings."

The following characteristics may be present in an individual experiencing Asperger's Syndrome. Due to the diversity and complexity of this disability, many of the characteristics or problems discussed may not be evident in a particular individual. An understanding of these characteristics is important, because the behavior of these individuals is frequently misinterpreted. Many behaviors that seem odd or unusual are due to the disability and not the result of intentional rudeness.

General Characteristics

- Frequent errors in the interpretation of body language, intentions or facial expressions of others
- Difficulty understanding the motives and perceptions of others
- Problems/inability to ask for help
- May show motor clumsiness, unusual body movements and/or repetitive behavior
- Often have difficulty with the big picture, perseverate on the details (can't see the forest for the trees)
- Difficulties with transitions and changes in schedule
- Wants things "just so"
- Problems with organization (including initiating, planning, carrying out and finishing tasks)
- Deficits in abstract thinking (concrete, misses the "big picture", focuses on irrelevant details, difficulty generalizing)
- Unusual sensitivity to touch, sounds, and visual details, may experience sensory overload
- May need to finish train of thought before able to switch to another topic or aspect of the topic under discussion.
- May not seem to 'hear' or respond to conversational conventions.
Functional Impact Upon:

Communication and Social Skills

- Difficulty in initiating and sustaining connected relationships with people
- Poor quality eye contact
- Problems understanding social rules (such as personal space)
- Impairment of two-way interaction (May seem to talk "at you" rather than "with you")
- Conversation and questions may be tangential or repetitive
- Restricted interests that may be unusual and sometime become a rigid topic for social conversation
- Unusual speech intonation, volume (too loud or too soft), rhythm and/or rate
- Literal understanding of language (difficulty interpreting words with double meaning, confused by metaphors and sarcasm)
- Don't use absolute words in your such as always or never unless that is exactly what you mean

Writing

- Papers may be redundant, as they return to the same topic repeatedly
- Difficulty in starting and in ending paper or research
- May have difficulty choosing a topic when presented with a choice of more than one writing topic
- Able to state facts and details, but may be greatly challenged by papers requiring:
  - taking another's point of view
  - synthesizing information to arrive at a larger concept
  - comparing and contrasting to arrive at the "big picture"
  - arriving at the "big picture"
  - the use of analogies, similes or metaphors

Some considerations:

These students may have impressive vocabularies and an excellent rote memory, but may have difficulty with high-level thinking and comprehension skills. They can give the false impression that they understand, when in reality they may be repeating what they have heard or read. Many individuals with Asperger's Syndrome are visual learners. Techniques suggested for students with learning disabilities who are visual learners are often helpful.
Instructional Strategies

- Where topic choices are involved direction may assist the student instarting and completion objectives/criteria should be very clearly articulated.
- Clearly define course requirements, the dates of exams and when assignments are due. Provide advance notice of any changes and on-going reminders.
- Teach to generalize and to consolidate information.
- Go for gist, meaning and patterns. Don't get bogged down in details.
- Use scripts and teach strategies selectively.
- All expectations need to be direct and explicit. Don't require these students to "read between the lines" to glean your intentions. Don't expect the student to automatically generalize instructions. Provide direct feedback to the student when you observe areas of academic difficulty.
- Encourage use of resources designed to help students with study skills, particularly organizational skills.
- Avoid idioms, double meaning and sarcasm, unless you plan to explain your usage.
- Don't use absolute words in your such as 'always' or 'never' unless that is exactly what you mean
- If the student has poor handwriting, use of a computer may be easier for them.
- Use the preoccupying interest to help focus/motivate the student. Suggest ways to integrate this interest into the course, such as related paper topics.
- The setting for tests should account for any sensitivity to sound, light, touch etc.

Clear directives should be used when...
- a student invades your space or imposes excessively on your time
- giving assignments or specifying revisions to submitted work
- the student's classroom comments or conversational volume become inappropriate
- Assist and monitor group work as the difficulties in social interaction may result in such students having problems in such settings. They may be left out of discussions and planning. Individual work should be considered when it is a viable alternative to the group setting.
- Allow opportunity for student to leave classroom if necessary for student to do so to deal with anxiety and stress of the classroom situation
- Provision of class notes or note taking service may be of assistance to these students
- Give early and clear feedback around difficulties that you perceive in academic/skill attainment with specific suggestions regarding tutorial assistance required to assist the student
- Directives/instructions/information for student should be delivered in a multimodal format, verbal and written
• Clear, detailed directives should be used when referring to revisions that need to be made to a piece of writing.
  • Have the student make a "to do list" of what needs to be changed
  • Number the changes on their writing so they have an order to follow
  • If modeling writing rules, write them on a separate sheet for future reference
  • Keep directions simple and direct
  • Ask students to repeat directions in their own words to check comprehension

Example: (Student arrives at your office at 1:40). "We have only 20 minutes to work together. At 2:00, I'm going to ask you to take my suggestions home and start making changes to your paper. Come to my office tomorrow afternoon at 3:00 and show me what you've done."