

Asperger Syndrome

Definition:

Asperger syndrome (AS) is a neurological condition that falls under the larger category of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD).

Description:

AS is a developmental disorder that is characterized by impairment in social interactions, repetitive or restrictive patterns of thought and behavior, and uncoordinated motor movements with the preservation of linguistic and cognitive development.

Characteristics:

If a child has AS, parents often identify that there is something unusual about him or her by the time he or she is three years old. Sometimes the characteristics are present as early as infancy. Motor development delays such as crawling or walking late and/or clumsiness are often the first indicators of the disorder. Children with AS do, however, retain their early language skills.

The following is a list of typical characteristics of AS:

- Often have a history of developmental delays in motor skills (i.e. pedaling a bike, catching a ball) and often have poor coordination in general
- Intellectual capacity within normal range
- Prefer routine and consistency
- Obsessive interest in a single object or topic to the exclusion of any other (e.g. meteorology, trains, lights, door knobs and handles, coffee etc.)
- High level of vocabulary and formal speech patterns
- Talk incessantly about their favorite topic including a collection of facts and statistics
- Speech pattern is marked by a lack of rhythm, odd inflection or monotone pitch
- Isolation from social settings due to poor social skills and limited interests
- Impaired ability to use or understand non-verbal behavior such as eye gaze, facial expressions or body language
- Highly active in early childhood and develop anxiety or depression in young adulthood
- AS can co-exist with ADHD, tic disorders (such as Tourette syndrome), depression, anxiety disorders and OCD.

Causes:

While the exact cause of AS is unknown, most recent research indicates that there is a genetic component. Due to the genetic component, AS tends to run in families. Most recent research points to brain abnormalities as the cause of AS. Through advanced brain imaging techniques, researchers have found there are structural and functional differences in specific regions of the brains of typical children versus children with AS.

Implications for speech and language:

Since there is no known cure for AS, treatment consists of various rehabilitative services. One of these services is speech/language intervention. Speech/language intervention focuses on the following:

- Non-verbal forms of communication (gaze and gestures)
- The use of non-literal language (metaphor, irony, absurdities, and humor)
- Patterns of inflection
- Stress and volume modulation

- Pragmatics (turn-taking and sensitivity to verbal cues)
- Content, clarity and coherence of conversation (If applicable)

Diagnosing this disorder:

Speech-language pathologists do not diagnose AS. Currently there is not a standardized protocol for diagnosing AS, and the diagnostic process and team can depend on the setting (medical/educational). However, the diagnosis consists of a two-stage process. The first stage involves a developmental screening with a family doctor or pediatrician. The second stage involves an interdisciplinary team that could consist of a psychologist, neurologist, psychiatrist, speech therapist and/or additional professionals who have expertise in diagnosing children with AS. The second stage consists of neurologic and genetic assessments, cognitive and language testing to establish IQ and evaluate psychomotor function, evaluation of verbal and non-verbal strengths and weaknesses, identification of style of learning and independent living skills.

Treatment:

There is no cure for AS. Instead, treatment is more rehabilitative in nature. Treatment often targets the core symptoms of AS: poor communication skills, obsessive or repetitive routines, and physical clumsiness. More specifically, treatment addresses:

- Social skills
- Cognitive behavioral therapy
- Medication, for depression and anxiety if present
- Occupational or physical therapy
- Speech/language therapy
- Parent training and support

Resources:

Books for kids:

- *All Cats Have Asperger Syndrome* by Kathy Hoopman
- *This is Asperger Syndrome* by Elisa Ganon
- *Take Control of Asperger's Syndrome: The Official Strategy Guide for Teens with Asperger's Syndrome and Nonverbal Learning Disorders* by Janet Price

Books for Parents:

- *Can I Tell you about Asperger Syndrome? A Guide for Friends and Family* by Jude Welton
- *Asperger Syndrom: A guide for Parents and Professionals* by Tony Attwood

Websites:

Information in English

- <http://www.webmd.com/brain/autism/mental-health-aspergers-syndrome>
- <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/aspergers-syndrome/DS00551>

Información en español

- Síndrome de Asperger: http://espanol.ninds.nih.gov/trastornos/sindrome_de_Aasperger.htm

Support for Parents:

Asperger Syndrome Meetup group: <http://www.meetup.com/aspergers-230/>

Autism Society support group: http://support.autism-society.org/site/Clubs?club_id=1040&pg=main

References:

Asperger Syndrome Fact Sheet (2012). Retrieved from http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/asperger/detail_asperger.htm

Attwood, T. (2005). What is Asperger Syndrome. Retrieved from <http://www.aspergersyndrome.org/Articles/What-is-Asperger-Syndrome-.aspx>

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