

Asperger syndrome

Asperger syndrome is a developmental disorder that affects how the brain processes information. It shapes a person's social, emotional and communication skills, and behaviours. Asperger syndrome usually becomes obvious during childhood and remains throughout life, with varying degrees of disability.

There is no cure. However, the skills of a person with Asperger syndrome may be aided by a combination of support, regular routine, and therapeutic intervention.

Asperger syndrome is an autism spectrum disorder

Asperger syndrome is one of the autism spectrum disorders. This means that people with Asperger syndrome can display a wide range of behaviours and social skills, and no two individuals will have the same set of characteristics.

Some people will demonstrate skills that are largely in line with their peers, while others may present with 'odd' behaviours. Other individuals will appear to be significantly different from their peers.

History of Asperger syndrome

Asperger syndrome became a recognised developmental disorder in 1994. Prior to that, a person with Asperger syndrome was considered to be socially awkward or unsociable. Some people were misdiagnosed as having a psychiatric disorder, labelled obsessive compulsive or simply thought of as 'odd'.

Children with Asperger syndrome

Many of the behaviours of children with Asperger syndrome are 'normal' for young children if they happen some of the time. However, if they happen frequently or most of the time, these behaviours may indicate the presence of Asperger syndrome. The pattern of difficulties can be quite different for each child.

Children with Asperger syndrome will have many behaviours that are similar to those seen in children with autism. However, individuals with Asperger syndrome will have no history of language delay, have better fundamental language skills and will generally be of average to above-average intelligence.

Some characteristics of Asperger syndrome

People with Asperger syndrome may display some of the following characteristics:

- Difficulty in forming friendships.
- A preference for playing alone or with older children and adults.
- Apparently good language skills, but difficulty with communication. Language may be considered to be very advanced or 'precocious' when compared to their peers. The person may be able to talk extensively on a topic of interest, but have difficulty with more practical tasks such as recounting the day's events, telling a story, or understanding jokes and sarcasm.
- A lack of appreciation that communication involves listening as well as talking. For instance, they may not allow their communication partner an opportunity to engage in the conversation.

- A very literal understanding of what has been said. For example, when asked to 'get lost' (go away) a person with Asperger syndrome will likely become confused and may literally try to 'get lost'.
- Inability to understand the rules of social behaviour, the feelings of others and difficulty 'reading' body language. For example, a person with Asperger syndrome may not understand that someone is showing that they are unhappy by frowning.
- Behaviour varies from mildly unusual, eccentric or 'odd' to quite aggressive and difficult.
- Having rules and rituals that they insist all family members follow.
- Anger and aggression when things do not happen as they want.
- Sensitivity to criticism.
- A narrow field of interests. For example a person with Asperger syndrome may focus on learning all there is to know about cars, trains or computers.

Gender bias in Asperger syndrome

The World Health Organization's ICD-10 classification gives the male to female ratio as 8 to 1. This means that approximately eight times more males than females are diagnosed with Asperger syndrome. However, this apparent 'gender bias' may be due to the fact that girls with Asperger syndrome are better at learning and copying social skills and are therefore more able to 'disguise' their lack of skill.

Some people can be very talented

Some people with Asperger syndrome are very talented in their chosen field of interest and may enjoy quite significant academic and vocational success. While strengths and abilities differ from one individual to the next, a person with Asperger syndrome may have:

- Average or above-average intelligence.
- Extensive vocabulary – but many people have difficulty with the practical use of language.
- Expertise in their chosen topic of interest -- although this can become difficult in social situations as they may only talk about one topic.
- Excellent factual memory for their chosen topic of interest.
- Dedication and commitment to their job if they work in a supportive environment and their job is suited to their interests.
- The drive to perform well at school or work, if given a supportive and inclusive environment.

Asperger syndrome is not a disease

Asperger syndrome is not a disease or illness. A person does not catch it or recover from it, however, the effects often lessen as the individual gets older and acquires compensatory or coping skills. Asperger syndrome is present from birth but it can often go unnoticed (or undiagnosed) until the early school years. In some cases (particularly females with Asperger syndrome), a diagnosis may not be made until adolescence or even adulthood.

Causes of Asperger syndrome

It is not clear what causes Asperger syndrome but we know for sure that certain things do **not** cause it. Television, parenting styles or choices, junk food, tantrums and family situations do not cause Asperger syndrome.

Current research indicates that there is likely to be both a neurological and genetic cause. This means that in some families there is more than one child, or family member, with an autism spectrum disorder. In many families with affected children, there are other family members who have some similar difficulties but do not have a diagnosis.

Diagnosing Asperger syndrome

Parents may be aware for some time that their child's behaviour is different, but it may be years before the pattern of behaviour is linked to Asperger syndrome. A diagnosis of Asperger syndrome is typically made by a paediatrician who works in collaboration with a multidisciplinary team including, for example, a psychologist and speech pathologist. This team of specialists will conduct an in-depth assessment of the child's skills and abilities.

There are several types of assessments, sets of criteria or rating scales that can be used to diagnose Asperger syndrome. The assessment will usually include questions about social and emotional abilities, communication skills, learning abilities, movement skills and special interests.

This assessment may be conducted over several days, in the home, at a clinic, or at kindergarten or school. While the diagnostic process is often a lengthy one, it is crucial to providing the person with the best possible care.

Treating Asperger syndrome

There is no cure or specific treatment for Asperger syndrome. However, social skills training can be helpful. Obtaining a diagnosis of the condition may mean that individuals with Asperger syndrome and their families can access disability services, funding or support – such as the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development’s program for students with disabilities.

Diagnosis can also allow the family and others to understand the behaviours and feelings of a person with Asperger syndrome. This can assist in developing more realistic expectations and lead to a planned approach to routines and incremental changes, and in managing stress.

Where to get help

- Asperger Syndrome Support Network Tel. (03) 9845 2766
- Autism Victoria trading as amaze Tel. (03) 9657 1600 or 1300 308 699
- Your doctor

Things to remember

- Asperger syndrome is an autism spectrum disorder.
- People with Asperger syndrome view the world differently and have difficulty with social, emotional and communication skills. They are often seen as eccentric.
- There is no cure but support, understanding, routine and training can assist.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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