

Families and Schools Working Together to Supporting Children with Asperger Syndrome

by Robin Lurie-Meyerkopf, Educational Consultant



The role of the classroom teacher is of utmost importance in ensuring the success of the child with an Asperger Syndrome. The classroom teacher sets the tone of the class and is responsible for making sure all the needs of the children are being met. Like an orchestra conductor, the teacher is the one person that keeps things together and “in tune.” (Cumin, Dunlop, & Stevenson 1998) The teacher creates an environment that values all learners, and helps

children succeed in their own individual ways.

With appropriate supports and accommodations, students with AS can excel and be very rewarding to teach. Here in a nutshell are some of the best educational practices culled from my twenty years in education. In order to help students with AS succeed—even flourish—in your classroom, try these strategies:

- Create a calm, orderly classroom with clear rules, routines, and expectations, reviewed regularly. consistency and structure help our socially challenged children be successful.
- Watch and protect children with AS, to make sure they are not excluded, teased, or bullied. No child should have to live in fear—and fear makes it very hard to learn and grow.
 - Create a class environment where all children feel comfortable. In all your words and actions, model respect and acceptance for all the children. You will make a lasting impression on your students.
 - Be aware of the social structure of the classroom: Who are “popular” kids in the class? How much do others listen and follow their lead? How can you intervene to change attitudes, and prevent bullying and teasing of vulnerable students with AS?
 - Foster positive interactions among peers in the classroom, and in less structured environments such as the playground, cafeteria, and hallways. You may wish to ask a speech therapist how to do “social coaching” for your student with AS.
 - Classroom disclosure—teaching all students about AS—can be a powerful antidote to intolerance. AANE can suggest strategies, books, DVDs, and articles.
 - Encourage your school administration to institute school-wide or district-wide bullying-prevention curricula.
- Respect each child’s unique learning style.
 - Modify assignments to fit learning styles.
 - Use both whole class and individual instruction, as

appropriate.

- Encourage children to develop an understanding about how they learn best.
- To help students with AS keep up with academic work:
 - Set clear expectations, providing detailed written instructions as well as oral instructions.
 - Check regularly to make sure students are doing assignments correctly.
- Build a positive relationship between home and school.
 - Parents know their children better than anyone—but teachers also have important information to share.
 - The child has the best chance of success in school when parents can share information about the child with the classroom teacher, in a non-confrontational manner, and teachers welcome parents’ input.
 - Ideally, parents and teachers function as a mutually supportive team, working together to understand the child, solve problems, and help the child succeed.
 - Monthly face to face team meetings, and weekly communication by phone, e-mail, or notebook, promote excellent, essential communication among key adults in the child’s life.
- Work closely with others whose services are part of a child’s educational plan: classroom aide, speech therapist, guidance counselor, school social worker or psychologist.
 - Gym, art, and music teachers may also play an important role. Any adult who will encounter the student needs to learn something about Asperger Syndrome.
 - It’s fine to seek additional help. Since AS is such a new diagnosis, and children may be quite complex, many schools bring in an educational consultant with expertise in AS to observe the student and meet with the team of educators and parents.
- Children with AS are often extremely sensitive to sights, sounds, smells, or textures. An hour in a noisy, visually stimulating classroom can overwhelm their ability to cope, leading them to shut down or melt down.
 - Check in regularly to make sure sensory issues are not overwhelming your student with AS. They may need regularly scheduled sensory breaks, or a quiet spot they can go to, in order to restore their equilibrium and prevent meltdowns.
 - Most children with AS prefer not to be touched at all.
 - Strategies that prevent meltdowns are best, but may occasionally fail. If a child is in meltdown, don’t try to talk about it; give the child a safe time and space in which to ride out their inner tempest and pull him or herself back together. Avoid physical contact or restraint unless absolutely essential, as it is likely to escalate the meltdown.
- Behavior and discipline
 - The behavior of children with AS is not usually

motivated by the what motivates acting out by neurotypical children.

- Punishing the child is often inappropriate and counter-productive; therefore, school-wide discipline policies usually need to be adapted for children with AS, not applied in a rigid manner.
- Be a detective! Figure out what causes a behavior, and how better to lessen its recurrence.
- Teach and coach preferred behaviors—not just compliance, but self-awareness, self-advocacy, and negotiation skills.
- Seek opportunities to learn about new issues affecting children. (AS is still a pretty new diagnosis, and children with AS may differ greatly from one another; there is always more to learn.)

Needless to say, meeting this goal is quite a challenge, especially in a traditional class of 15–25 children! Teachers need and deserve substantial support from their administrators and specialists. You should expect to invest substantial amounts of time and energy into learning about educational interventions that are effective for students with AS, and making these new practices a part of your teaching repertoire. However, the rewards and satisfaction gained by accommodating all learners are also substantial—and parents will remember you with gratitude forever.

This kind of success cannot be measured in our traditional ways. The traditional equation for success is:

Success = assignments completed, high test scores, and good grades

I suggest we re-define success, and propose this new model:

Success = happy, well-adjusted, cooperative students

This new model requires an environment that better understands the needs of ALL students and, through the talents and skills of the teacher, provides an environment for everyone to succeed.

Robin Lurie-Meyerkopf works with families and schools supporting children with Asperger's, NLD, ASD, & ADHD. She has worked for the past twenty years as a teacher, environmental educator and consultant. She is also on the Leadership Board for AANE NH Chapter. She holds an Antioch University Graduate School Autism Spectrum Disorders Certificate, with specialized training in pragmatic group skills. She runs a monthly parent support group. **Contact AANE if you would like Robin to present a**

THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF ASPERGER SYNDROME

by Gode Davis

Until December 2006 when Dr. Miles Tarter evaluated me, I never knew for sure that I had Asperger Syndrome—but now a lot of things make more sense to me. Many neurotypicals, when discussing Asperger Syndrome, tend to dwell on the negative. As a developmental disability, a form of high functioning autism, AS *does* have a downside. However, I realize that everything I've achieved in my life has largely been *because* of, not *despite*, Asperger Syndrome. This is not merely "positive thinking;" it is my reality.

Nobody knew about Asperger's when I was growing up as an American boy—least of all, my poor troubled mother. Nevertheless, she took a strange pride in my early accomplishments. She never helped me with my homework—but then, she didn't have to. All through eight years of Catholic grade school, I was the "smartest boy in my class" without much special effort. From the age of five or six, reading books and any printed materials I could lay my hands on became my fondest pastime. The Asperger's anomaly had nourished my fledgling brain with the ability to assimilate and process enormous amounts of information accessed through the medium of language—culminating in a rare and perhaps enviable talent. My conversational verbal acumen was prodigious too, abnormal in a young child. My cherished games, most often solitary, fed these strange abilities. Repeating alliterative word combinations, endlessly and to the annoyance of any neurotypicals who overheard me, was a method used in my autonomous autistic mind to cement associations that to me, and only to me, had achieved a magical significance. Mundane phrases like "Mexican cowboy" and "bumbees" were transformed into magical phrases that fostered my memory of an imagined fantasy world of facts and trivia populating the most distant recesses of my Asperger-colored existence.

The problems I've had as a child and as an adult came most often when I tried to share what I'd discovered within myself, or when demonstrating my individuality, if it differed from the norm. I've found that Americans, although they supposedly admire someone dancing to the beat of a different drummer, are a rather conforming lot. Some grudging admiration may sometimes be summoned for the odd duck who has honed his/her eccentricities into consistent financial windfall producers (but even there, only to a point). In any case, not every Aspie can be a Temple Grandin. Admittedly, it's difficult to resonate with universal qualities when most people find you at least vaguely different. Asperger's also dictates certain non-conforming behaviors by its very nature—even if a person exerts Herculean efforts to "fit in."

Despite its pitfalls and built-in tribulations, being endowed with Asperger's Syndrome can be replete with simple joys. I personally enjoy the tactile comfort of twiddling a writing instrument between my thumb and index fingers as a focusing technique, or when I feel a special happiness or excitement. The alliteration and plays on words—a propensity for word associations and chronic punning—can provide a pleasure even when engaged in while "talking to myself." Such guilty pleasures used to drive my mother crazy and cause other neurotypicals to express their annoyance in a multitude of ways—but for most of my life I've counted on these idiosyncrasies to nourish my entire practice of interacting.

Occasionally, my Asperger's traits fascinate people and allow me to invite them in to my world. I live for those occasions!

*Gode Davis has written feature stories for magazines like **Omni** and **Popular Science**. He has also worked as a script-writer and documentary filmmaker. He is often on the prowl for writing assignments and is reached at godedavis@surfbest.net. Check out his portfolio website at www.godedavis.net. The site includes a link to information about the documentary feature **American Lynching**, by Gode Davis and James M. Fortier.*