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THE ESSENTIAL MANUAL FOR  
**ASPERGER  
SYNDROME**  
(ASD) IN THE  
**CLASSROOM**

**What Every Teacher Needs to Know**

Foreword by Tony Attwood

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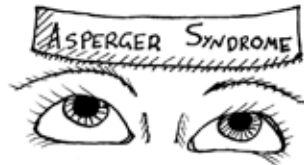
# Preparing for Your Student with Asperger Syndrome

## How to use this book

This book is designed to assist the classroom teacher in teaching and supporting a student with Asperger Syndrome. Although it is aimed at primary teachers, many of the suggestions will be valid for students of all ages. Each chapter is a guide to understanding common issues faced by the child and teacher and gives an insight into what the child is thinking and why she behaves the way she does. It provides suggestions for how various situations and issues can be dealt with within a classroom setting and gives activities to enlighten others about what the child with Asperger's is experiencing. Hints for parents and carers highlight ways in which the school and home can work together to provide the best possible outcome for the child.

Ultimately this book is designed so that the student can be understood and supported and the teacher can understand and support. It is not designed to be read from cover to cover but rather is structured so the teacher need only refer to the section relevant at a given time. For this reason, some of the suggestions and hints are repeated in different areas.

Please note that, as Asperger Syndrome is not gender specific, this book alternates the use of male and female pronouns throughout.



### *What this book is NOT*

- It is not designed to cover every issue a teacher may face.
- It is not an individual educational programme.
- It is not written for specialist teachers to deal with complex issues arising from Asperger Syndrome.

It may be necessary for the teacher to seek specialist advice with specific issues that arise in the classroom.

## What are Asperger Syndrome and Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)?

Asperger Syndrome is named after Hans Asperger (1906–1980), an Austrian paediatrician who identified a group of adults and children who had problems in the areas of social interaction and communication, and had sensory and adaptation issues.

Today, the criteria that doctors and psychologists and psychiatrists use when diagnosing a patient with Asperger Syndrome comes from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, commonly known as the *DSM*. This manual undergoes updating from time to time. The most recent update was in 2013 and is known as the *DSM-5*.

The previous version, the *DSM-IV*, separated autistic disorders into four areas:

- Autistic Disorder
- Asperger Syndrome
- Childhood Disintegrative Disorder
- Pervasive Development Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD–NOS).

In the *DSM-5*, all of these four disorders are now grouped under the term:

- Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

and those people who have significant problems only in social communication are considered to have:

- Social (Pragmatic) Communication Disorder (SCD).

However, as the term Asperger Syndrome is still so widely used, for the sake of convenience, and for continuity with previous publications, the term Asperger Syndrome will be used throughout this book.

In general, a person with Asperger Syndrome is identified as someone who may have:

- difficulties relating to others in social situations
- difficulties understanding verbal and non-verbal communication
- a literal interpretation of language, and problems understanding sarcasm and colloquialisms
- speech and language difficulties
- heightened sensitivity to touch, sight, hearing, taste and smell
- difficulties with body awareness (proprioception) and balance (vestibular system)
- difficulties expressing emotions and understanding emotions in others
- set routines and a strong preference for order
- an intense ability to focus on specific interest areas
- difficulties with coordination and can be clumsy
- a predisposition for visual learning
- great loyalty towards others
- an inability to tell lies convincingly
- a unique mind which is able to see life from a new perspective.

But as you read, remember that not every person with Asperger Syndrome must have all the traits mentioned in this book, and they may



have some that are not mentioned. Two students with Asperger's can be extreme opposites in personality and behaviour and still both have Asperger's. By your understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and through your encouragement and support, your student with Asperger's can flourish and reach her full and wonderful potential.

## Who is your student with Asperger Syndrome?

With up to one in eighty children now being diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome or ASD, there is a very high chance that eventually you will one day teach a child with Asperger's. Remember, the child does not have a disease and does not need 'fixing'. The most important thing you can do is push aside any preconceived ideas you have. Without any doubt, this child will be different from any other student or person you know with Asperger's, just as each student is different from any other. And teaching a child with Asperger Syndrome is just like teaching any child. The child has strengths and weaknesses. She wants to be valued and accepted and supported and will respond to kindness and anger in much the same way as anyone else does.

However, there are a few things that a child with Asperger's needs or benefits from, over and above your other students. One of the most important things to keep in mind is how hard a child with Asperger's has to concentrate at school. She has to: survive the complex web of social interaction and expectations; try to interpret verbal and non-verbal communications; deal with a multitude of sensory issues; and, on top of all that, still learn the day's lessons. Give the child a bit of slack. If she suddenly displays unusual behaviours, consider what may have changed in the classroom or environment or consider the child's relationship with her peers. Take the time to provide a few extra words of explanation about the task at hand. If you see the child fidgeting and irritable, allow her to get up and walk around or work standing or lying on the floor. Send the child on an errand to stretch her legs and to have a break from classroom pressures. Provide safe places in the classroom where the child can go for time out and make sure she has a place to go at lunch-times where she will not be alone, such as the library or in a club. If you take the time to prepare yourself

and your classroom for your new addition, then both you and your student can look forward to a rewarding and successful year.

## Are you the right teacher?

If you are open-minded, fair, consistent, flexible and are willing to seek the best in every student, then you can teach a child with Asperger Syndrome. Having a good sense of humour is also a plus. Some parents will ask for a specific teacher for their child. While it can be unrealistic for every parent to expect to get the teacher they want, the wishes of a parent of a child with Asperger Syndrome should be considered carefully as the child is less able to adapt and thrive under a teacher she dislikes or feels dislikes her.


## Think positively



There are a lot of things you can look forward to in your new student. Children with Asperger's come with a bucket-load of positive attributes too. If you are fair, understanding and consistent, then you will have a model student on your hands who will name you the best teacher ever, for the rest of her life. If you stick to routines and are clear in your instructions then the child will be willing, obedient and helpful. If you permit your students to have a voice and to express opinions, the child will amaze you with unique perspectives and interesting facts. If you give the child a set job, you can be sure it is always done on time and done exactly the way you want it to be done. This child will be kind to younger kids and have a heart of gold when it comes to others in need, especially those being bullied. Her honesty can be refreshing and utterly to be relied on. If you tap into the child's abilities in games such as chess, and individual sports such as running and archery, you can have a school champion in your class. If your student is inclined towards computers then all your IT problems will vanish overnight.

And if you have a sense of humour, this child will make you laugh and bring joy to your day.

## Preparing yourself and the classroom

- Talk to other staff who may have dealt with the child in the past. Be very careful not to form preconceived views of the child from the opinions of others. Use this time to seek out positive ways to help the child, and ignore negative overtones.
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- Take the time to consider what your physical classroom is like for your student with Asperger's. It is very likely the child will have sensory issues. Is the room cluttered with things that will draw her attention away from you? Consider the irritation to your child from fluorescent lights, direct sunlight, a/c, fans, strong scents, hard floors, and so on.
  - Do you have a place in the classroom to which the child can retreat if overloaded with input and expectations?
  - Your student may not like being surrounded on all sides by other people. Can you place her at the end of a row, or the front or back, or even at a side table? When your student arrives, ask where she prefers to sit. Provide a space in class where the child can stand to work or lie on the floor.
  - Stock up on items that may help your student relax and participate to the fullest. Have cushions that the child can sit on, both on the floor and at her seat. Provide earphones the child can use if noise levels get too high. Gather a box of fidget toys, such as squeeze balls, bubble wrap, paper clips, pieces of velvet or silk, that the child can fiddle with to relieve stress. Be prepared to allow the child to wear a hat in class or even listen to her own music when working on activities. Have a weighted vest or blanket ready in order to settle the child with body awareness or tactile issues.

## Before the start of the school year

- Invite the student and her parents or carers to come to the school.
- Learn the child's name and check that you are saying it correctly. Sometimes a child with Asperger's will not recognize a nickname or a name said with an accent. For example, Robert may not respond to Rob or may only respond to ROBERT and not RobERT.
- Show the child where she will sit and where to put belongings.
- If the child has a locker allocated, make sure it is at the end of the row so that she can get to it without being jostled from both sides.
- Explain where the child can go or to whom she can speak if she is feeling stressed or unsafe, for example the library, the nurse's room, the school counsellor.
- Provide the child with a map of the school and walk around the school grounds pointing out play areas, eating areas, toilets, positions of other classrooms the child may attend (music, science, art). Show areas that are out of bounds. Do this even if the child attended the school the year before, as orientating herself from a new home-room may be difficult.
- Introduce the child to other teachers and adults who may deal with the child, such as the sports teacher, music teacher, classroom assistant and reception staff.
- Swap contact details with the parents so you can contact each other whenever necessary.
- Encourage the child or parent to take photos on this visit so the child can look at the photos when at home to help remember places to go and people's faces.





- Explain that a class diary will go with the child to and from school each day. Show the parents where they can write notes to you and where to look for your notes to them.
- Provide a schedule for at least the first week so the child knows what to bring each day and what to expect when she arrives.
- Particularly explain what will happen on the first day. Let the child know how long her parents will be allowed to stay to help get her settled.

## Hints for parents to prepare the child for the new school year

- Take the child to school before the beginning of term to meet the teacher.
- Get the child into the same bedtime routine that she will have during term at least a few days before school starts.
- Make sure the uniform or new school clothes are prewashed and are as comfortable as possible. Remove tags if necessary. Allow the child to wear-in new shoes slowly over the holidays.
- Arrange a play-date with another student from the class before term starts.
- Allow the child to be an active participant in buying books and pens equipment for class.
- Go over the first week's schedule as provided by the teacher.
- Remind the child of the morning daily routine. If necessary, make up picture charts of what the child must do to get ready (e.g. make bed, brush teeth).
- Look at the school map to remind the child where she has to go and where she can/can't go.
- Remind the child how to greet friends and adults.

- Go through photos of last year's activities, or look at the year book to remind the child of people's names.
- Discuss with the child the type of things people say to each other after a long break. Help her to know how to answer things like 'How were your holidays?', 'What did you do during the break?' Explain that it is nice to notice things about her friends, like a new hair-cut or new stationery, and this can help her make new friends. Remind the child not to talk about her special interest for longer than a few minutes at a time.
- Arrive on time to pick the child up after school on the first day – actually, most days – or make sure the child is aware that you will be late.

## Parents have needs too

Never forget that you are teaching a child who is loved by someone.

Read that sentence again: Never forget that you are teaching a child who is loved by someone.

Parents love their children. Sometimes, as a teacher, that fact is easy to forget. If the child is difficult, disrespectful and disobedient then you will want the parents to know all about how hard your life is with *their* child in *your* classroom. Perhaps you even think, although you may never say it aloud, that you could do a much better job of bringing up that child than the parents are doing.

You would be wrong, of course.

When a child is diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, it is well recognized that parents go through various stages of understanding and acceptance:

1. First comes some sort of grief as the parents come to terms with the fact that the child they thought they had does not exist. They may be overwhelmed with 'facts' about Asperger's, many of them inaccurate and even frightening. If you meet parents who are in this stage, the last thing they need to hear is how hard your life is in trying to deal with problems in the classroom. Be gentle and supportive. If you already know the

child, then mention every positive thing you can about her. Assure the parents that, together, you and they will create a great environment in which their child will thrive.

2. The parents may then go through denial. If you are trying to explain difficulties to parents in this stage, then it is quite likely they will simply tell you to be a better teacher as there is nothing wrong with their child. In this case, simply deal with each issue gently and calmly and do not refer to the diagnosis of Asperger's.
3. This is closely followed by anger and frustration. Someone or something has to be blamed for the child's diagnosis. The parents may barge into school and demand that unrealistic things be done for their child and they should be done *now*. Always listen to the angry parents and allow them to have their say. Understand that it is anger and frustration talking, and that the parent most likely has no ill feeling towards you. Keep calm and try to devise a plan that combines home and school to assist the child.
4. The parents may then slip into depression and guilt. They may blame themselves for the child's diagnosis and feel that they are useless parents. They may feel that their child has no real future and that things will only get worse. If you recognize that the parents are in this stage, do everything you can to highlight the positives of the child. Build up the child's self-esteem in class. If you have to talk to the parents about problems that have arisen, then make sure you stress positives first. Don't expect the parents to come up with a plan to solve the issue as they simply will not have the energy. Rather, have a plan in mind of how you want to deal with the situation and express real hope that things will be sorted soon.
5. Finally the parents will come to the realization that their child is not so bad after all. They start to see the real child rather than mourning a child they thought they had. They will start to laugh at anecdotes and be proud of successes and recognize the unique way of thinking as a good thing. These

parents will fight you like a lion protecting a cub if you do not come up to their expectations and do not support and protect their child. However, if you actively work with them and you do whatever it takes to teach their child then you will have a friend for life.

## Manners

Manners matter. This is a fact of life that is true for everyone but is even more so for those with Asperger Syndrome. When a child does not automatically understand social expectations or pick up on communication clues, being able to fall back on good old-fashioned manners can be a lifeline. Manners are even more important when the child reaches an age where she seeks a job or starts to interact with adults on a daily basis. For many people, being 'normal' simply means knowing the manners expected in a situation and following them. A child does not have to 'read' a situation in order to shake hands with someone she is being introduced to or say good morning first thing in the morning. A child who eats with her mouth closed gets less attention than one who shovels in food and masticates for all to see. A peer might not care too much about pushing in a chair after getting up from a table, or holding a door open for others, but adults and prospective employers notice these things. For a child with Asperger's, not being noticed for the wrong reasons is just as important as being noticed for the right reasons.

Over and over again, adults on the spectrum (those who have an Autism Spectrum Disorder) who have written about their life experiences stress how manners have allowed them to be accepted in the 'normal' world and how simply applying manners opens doors when intelligence and aptitude without manners often fails.

Of course, good manners can benefit all your students, so take the time to instil, inform and expect good manners in your class. Make sure that you model these behaviours on a daily basis.

Some commonly accepted good manners are:

- Greet people appropriately when you meet. This might mean a high five to friends, a polite 'Good morning, sir' to the

headmaster each time you see him and shaking your dad's boss's hand when he comes to visit.

- Say please, thank you, excuse me and sorry.
- If you can't say something nice, do not say anything at all.
- Do not interrupt when others are speaking.
- Do not comment negatively on other people's personal hygiene or looks.
- Hold the door open for others. Allow others, especially adults or people more senior or 'important' than you, to go through doors first.
- Knock on closed doors before entering.
- Let older people, or someone carrying something heavy, or pregnant ladies, have your seat on a bus or train.
- Push in your chair when you get up from a table.
- Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze.
- Do not talk with your mouth full.
- Learn to use cutlery correctly.
- Introduce the friends you are with to the people you meet.
- Do not burp or pass wind in others' company. (There are exceptions when around mates.)
- When receiving gifts, thank the giver with a positive comment even if the gift is not liked.



## Hygiene

Some children with Asperger's have difficulty with hygiene issues. Some do not like to shower or wash their hair or change their clothes. Younger children may unself-consciously pick their noses. They may not brush their teeth or comb their hair or wear deodorant. Frankly,

as a teacher there is not a lot you can do about these things. However, if you notice that they become an issue for your student or are causing the child to be isolated by others, it is worth having a quiet chat with the child and alerting the parents and caregivers to the problem.



Understanding why the child behaves in a certain way is important. Often the issue is a sensory one. The child with touch sensitivities may hate the feeling of water on her body and in fact may feel pain from water shooting from a nozzle. Toothbrushes can hurt gums and the taste of toothpaste may make the child gag. The smell of soaps and deodorants can be overwhelming and make the child physically ill. Some clothes are rough and scratchy on the child's skin so she sticks to the ones that are comfortable. A child with balance (vestibular) issues may be afraid of falling in the slippery shower and hates lowering her head to wash hair. Talk to the child and parent about all this and seek alternatives that the child can tolerate.

Sometimes the issue is one of priorities. The child simply does not see the need to groom properly when she could spend time on a special interest. Or it may be an issue of not being able to organize herself (executive functioning) to complete hygiene-related activities within a daily schedule.

The child also often does not make the link between good hygiene and making friends. She is not bothered by her own body odour and therefore does not understand that others avoid her because she smells. A teenage girl may not understand that, to be accepted by others, it is best she shaves her legs and underarms. A teenage boy might not realize that he is turning girls off by not trimming that straggly beard and brushing his hair. The younger child cannot comprehend that picking noses in public disturbs others.

All these issues can be discussed quietly with your student, parents and caregivers so a solution can be found. Your role as a teacher is to lead the classroom in treating the child with respect and dignity. *Never* berate or embarrass your student by pointing out hygiene issues publicly.

## Educating the rest of the class

It is easy for your students to see that a child in a wheelchair cannot walk, and that those who are blind cannot see. It is not so easy to see or understand why someone with Asperger Syndrome behaves in certain ways. And the most important question here is, does your whole class need to know about the diagnosis of the Asperger child anyway?

If the child has obvious needs where she is taken from the room for extra help, or has a shadow teacher, or often displays unusual traits such as meltdowns and stimming (e.g. flapping hands, jumping on the spot, moving body), then naturally the other children will start to question why. It is important to have an explanation ready.

In many parts of the world, disabilities in any form are not talked about, or are hidden, or are a source of shame to the family. A child with a 'label' may be taunted by teachers and students alike. At other times, the parents may know of the diagnosis, but for very good reasons of their own have not told the child, or they do not want others to know about the diagnosis. In situations like this, it is most likely that you will be told of the child's diagnosis in confidence by the parents, or you simply believe from your own experience that your student falls within the spectrum. In those cases, it is vital that you as the classroom teacher keep that knowledge to yourself, all the while implementing every technique you can to help your student achieve her full potential.

Here are some things you can do:

- Explain to your class that everyone has strengths, weaknesses and needs, and each strength is to be valued and each weakness and need is to be understood and supported.
- Explain things such as stimming as simply how this child expresses happiness or fear or excitement. Be casual about it and the class will take your lead.
- If the child has a meltdown or is reacting badly to an overload of stimulation, be calm and in control, and say to the class 'It all got too much for Jimmy today. Let him calm down and I will talk to him later.'

- If other children ask why a child goes off for extra help or has a shadow teacher, say things like ‘Everyone needs help in something that they are learning, and Jimmy needs help in English.’
- Build up an atmosphere of acceptance and support amongst your students and model it at every opportunity.
- Create a story where the main character has an Asperger trait that saves the day, for example: special interest knowledge solves a mystery; hypersensitive hearing overhears a plan for a robbery.

Where your student comes with the diagnosis and the parents and child are happy for others to know about it, then there are ways to help the rest of the class understand Asperger behaviours:

- In each chapter of this book there are classroom activities specially devised to explain a certain Asperger trait in a way that your other students can understand and empathize with.
- Read books to your class that explain Asperger Syndrome. See the References for some of these.
- Explain to the class ways in which they can help a fellow student with Asperger’s. For example: invite them to play; if they look like they do not understand something, explain it to them; if they are acting ‘weird’ then try to understand why, rather than being upset or taunting them; if they are being socially unacceptable, gently point it out and help them understand what they did ‘wrong’.
- Many sporting people and actors and businessmen are beginning to be open about their diagnosis. Invite a person with Asperger’s who may have succeeded in some area to come and talk to the class.

At all times, present Asperger’s as a different way of thinking and experiencing the world, and *not* as a defective way of being.