

So, you have a child with Aspergers Syndrome in your class...

What is Aspergers Syndrome?

Aspergers syndrome (AS) is a form of Autism. This means that he or she has problems with social interaction, communication, and imagination – known as the triad of impairments. People with AS also often have repetitive behaviours, restrictive interests, and some have sensory hyper or hypersensitivities. Autism is a spectrum condition, with very diverse levels of functioning. Some individuals may require life long support, others go on to become some of the greatest contributors to society. Some people thought to have AS include Albert Einstein, Wolfgang Mozart, and Immanuel Kant. People with AS are always very different, just like everyone else

What does that mean in real life?

Social difficulties: People with AS don't have the intuitive sense of how to act socially. This means they may have problems with establishing and maintaining Friendships, Managing unstructured time, and working cooperatively.

Communicative difficulties: People with AS often find it hard to read non-verbal communication like body language and facial expressions. They can also have problems with literal interpretation, jokes and sarcasm. Imagine trying to hold a conversation with someone via E-mail or instant messaging services; you do not get the same level of conversations with just words alone.

Imaginative difficulties: People with AS are able to imagine, for example they can read fiction, however they have problems with imagining what will happen in the future, or what other people think or feel. This means they often have problems coping with unexpected changes, planning and organisation, and generalisation. They can sometimes also have some problems with empathy – It is not that they cannot feel for others, but that they have to think about it, and cannot do it on the intuitive level others can.

Sensory difficulties: People with AS may be very sensitive to touch, loud noises, bright or flashing lights, new foods or smells. This can make seemingly normal environments very distracting, or even scary for them. Others may be hyposensitive, and actively seek out noise, bright lights, new, strong or unusual tastes, or textures. Imagine having a cold, and not being able to taste as well, you prefer out stronger foods to get that "sensory kick".

Repetitive Behaviours and Restrictive interests: People with AS may find repetitive behaviours to be comforting. Since they have problems dealing with change, and the social world, doing the same thing brings a sense of safety and predictability in what is, to them, a chaotic world. Restrictive interests are an enjoyable activity and means of relaxation, but also provide consistency, safety, and sometimes facilitate communication.

What can I do to help?

- Get to know them – everyone with AS is different, find out what is hard for them, and what you can do to help
- Think before you speak – People with AS have problems with non-verbal communication, and literal interpretation. Try and avoid idioms/metaphors. Be clear in your instructions – rely on words, not voice/body language
- Provide somewhere quiet for them to go. Sometimes people with AS need some time away from the chaotic and unpredictable environment of a classroom. Try and allow them to do this with as unobtrusively as possible
- Be aware of their difficulties in social interaction, for them it is done cognitively, not instinctually, and despite trying, they will make mistakes.
- Work to their interests – people with AS are extremely motivated in their specialist interests. If you can tap into this, and use these interests academically, then that enthusiasm can transfer.
- Avoid group work where possible – people with AS often find it hard to join a group, and work co-operatively. If group work is needed, assign groups yourself. Select group-mates with care, try and put them with people who will encourage them, and are patient.
- Be aware of bullying – People with AS are born targets for bullying. More than **40%** of children with AS have been bullied.
- Remove unstructured time – Unstructured time is unpredictable, and often requires social interaction. Structuring time where-ever possible, can make life a lot easier.
- The Home/Work divide: People with AS often live two separate lives – they be anxious at school, but seem fine, and let it all out at home. Because of the home/school life divide, people with AS may be unable to do homework at home, so providing time at school to do it can really help
- People with AS have islets of abilities. They may struggle in some areas, but be very good in others. Play to their strengths. Weaknesses should be addressed with support, or if not needed for living or work, avoided.
- People with AS often lack incidental learning – everything needs to be directly taught

Where can I get more information?

Your SENCO should have some training in autistic spectrum disorders, and will be able to provide you with some advice. The National Autistic Society

(NAS) has a wealth of information online – www.autism.org.uk. The NAS also runs an autism helpline, call 0845 070 4004.