



Asperger's Syndrome in the Classroom and at Play: My Own Observations

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Introduction

I am a teacher at a Christian school for children with special needs. My son Nicholas, who has Asperger's Syndrome (AS), is a student at this school. What I offer here are my own views and observations of Asperger Syndrome as I have dealt with it in my own son and in several of my students. I do not offer this as medical advice or as a clinical or scientific study. These are simply things I have learned through my own research and observation that I hope will be beneficial to my readers.

In the classroom

Like any child, children with Asperger Syndrome bring a unique set of problems and benefits to the classroom. Several key characteristics of the AS child are presented here as they relate to the classroom setting.

Extreme focus

Because of their ability to focus in on one area of interest, AS children can make good students. Their ability to focus, however, can also be their weakness. The AS child may, for instance, be expert at history, but will study that subject to the detriment of all other subjects. It is up to the teacher to help the AS child to broaden his interests. It helps if the teacher can find a tie-in from the subject of the child's interest to the subject at hand. For example, if the student is a history buff and you need to get him on board with math, it might help to give him some historical information related to math. Introduce him to some of the greatest mathematical minds of all time like Pythagoras, or Sir Isaac Newton and go from there to some of the mathematical concepts that they used or invented.

Fair play

If you have a classroom situation where your students are conspiring against you, or are trying to cover for the misbehavior of a particular student, and you have a child with AS in your room, consider yourself blessed! Because of their strong sense of fair play, you can very often count on the AS student to tell you exactly what is going on. If Suzie has hidden all the erasers, and you ask the class, "Who took my erasers?" Your AS student will tell you that Suzie took them, where she hid them, and who served as her co-conspirators. (The AS child's limited understanding of social interactions makes him unable to fully appreciate the social consequences of exposing a plot.)

If it becomes necessary for you to discipline an AS child, be prepared to explain in logical fashion why a particular disciplinary action is being meted out. The AS child's strong sense of fair play and his limited ability to see beyond himself may work together to keep him from understanding the reasons behind the consequences of his behavior. He may even become very angry at the whole situation. If this happens, allow the child some

alone time. The AS child needs this in order to "decompress." Then, after he has had some time to cool down, explain to him step-by-step what his behavior was, why discipline needs to be meted out, what the terms of the discipline are, and what he can do in the future to avoid similar consequences.

Desire for routine

Substitute teachers will learn to appreciate the AS child in their classroom. While everyone else is working hard to throw the substitute off, the AS student will be working hard to remind the class of the usual routine. On the downside, the AS child's strong desire for routine can make change very difficult. Help the AS child by giving him as much advance warning as possible. If a field trip is coming up, take time to explain to the class when it will happen, how they will get there, when they will return, how they should behave on the bus and at the event, and so on. If you know a fire drill is coming up, explain the escape route, what the alarm will sound like - and be prepared for a potential panic attack on the day of the drill. People with AS are sensitive to certain sounds and a loud alarm may actually cause them physical pain or discomfort. It may even confuse their thinking. If they need to cover their ears, let them. If they need someone to take them by the hand and lead them out of the building, do that, or assign someone in the class to do it for you.

Awkward communication skills

When it comes to communication, people with AS tend to talk at people rather than to people. Because of this, they come across as rude or blunt when that is not their intent at all. Being factually minded, a person with Asperger's Syndrome uses words to state facts. The ambiance of language is largely lost on them. As their teacher or parent, it is up to you not to take it personally if your AS child says something plainly without regard for the fallout that may be attached to his word choice. Parents and teachers need to take on the role of "social coach." If the words were genuinely unkind, you need to tell the child they were unkind, why they were unkind, and what they must do or say to make things right. If the words were innocent but blunt, you need to inform the child of this as well, and perhaps give him different words to convey the same idea in a kinder way.

Excellent capacity for memorization

Children with AS often have an excellent capacity for memorization. On the positive side, this makes AS children very good at rote memorization and recitation of fact. On the negative side, they are not as good at application or understanding why certain things are so. For example, if you have an AS child in a literature class, he can tell you all about what is happening in the story, but may be hard pressed to explain why the characters are acting and reacting the way they are. In your role as social coach, you can help your AS student by explaining the reasons behind the behaviors of the characters in a story.

Mimicking of behavior

Oddly enough, people with AS can be very good at role-playing. Many people with AS say they study human behavior and do their best to mimic it in order to fit in. As a result, some of them make excellent actors and impressionists. So if you have an AS student in your speech class, don't write them off because they cannot interact well in normal social situations. Use their memorization skills to their advantage. Beyond just memorizing the words, help them to memorize gestures and vocal inflections to bring a role to life.

Social behavior

The biggest obstacle for people with AS is what has been described as "social blindness," an inability, or limited ability, to perceive and respond to social situations. This social blindness manifests itself in a number of ways. AS people...

- do not understand personal space and social distance and may either stand too close to someone or too far away.

- talk at people rather than to people because they use language primarily as a means of communicating fact.
- do not understand the give-and-take of language.
- fail to read their audience and therefore do not see when their listeners are becoming bored or irritated.

At play

It is often during play that a child learns how to interact socially. For the parent or teacher of a child with AS, play time can be very instructive both for parent or teacher and for the child with AS. The playground offers many opportunities for social coaching.

Team sports

As a general rule, most people with AS do not like participating in team sports. There are too many activities going on at once for them to process. That's not to say that all people with AS avoid team sports. Of the five AS students I had one year, two of them played team games at recess quite regularly. One was only mildly affected with AS, and the other had all the classic characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome. It just goes to show that AS does not affect everyone in exactly the same way. In fact, the affects of AS can vary from time to time within in the individual.

Sense of fair play

When children with AS do participate in a team activity, they are very much "by the book." They will cite every infraction they witness and be adamant that all the rules be strictly enforced. While this can be trying for you as the parent or teacher, it is also an opportunity to teach the child about...

- diplomacy: "Yes, so-and-so did go out of bounds, but screaming about it at the top of your lungs and demanding like the Queen of Hearts that their heads be removed, might not be the best way to enforce the rules."
- seeing things from other perspectives: "I know you think so-and-so broke that rule, but just because you saw it that way doesn't mean the referee saw it that way, or that he saw it all."
- flexibility: "Remember, we're not playing for the championship here. We're just playing for fun. Just enjoy the game."

Playing with others

At play, children with AS will play 'with' other children, but not in the fluid and interactive way typical of most children. If the AS child is playing with other children, it is often in the role of director, and the AS child expects the other children to play according to his interests. So, for example, if the child happens to have an interest in *The Hobbit*, someone will have to play Gandalf, someone else must play Samwise Gangee, and the AS child himself will, of course, play Frodo Baggins. Everything is fine until the other children grow weary of being directed, and decide to go and play something else. It is not at all uncommon to find the AS child in a crowded playground playing by himself, or announcing that there is no one to play with, or that no one will play with them.

All of these playground scenarios are opportunities for parents and teachers to help the child with Asperger's Syndrome deal with similar social situations. The child may not fully overcome all of his social hurdles, but the playground can help to build his social repertoire.

Conclusion

When our son Nick was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, my wife and I were devastated at first. We didn't know what it was, or what it would mean for his future. All

we knew was that our son Nick would have AS all of his life. We couldn't kiss it and make it better. We couldn't make it go away. And many of the struggles associated with AS, Nick would have to face alone. For a parent, nothing could be more heart rending. But as we have come to understand AS, and as we have come into contact with others who have it, we have also come to understand that while Asperger's Syndrome does have its limitations, within those 'limitations' is the potential for great achievement.

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