



# Asperger's Syndrome: A Developmental Puzzle

Contributed by Michael McCroskery

Cognitive and social skills, which shape personality and character, develop throughout life. However, genetic or environmental obstacles can obstruct development, especially early in life. One such obstacle is Asperger's Syndrome.

Asperger's Syndrome (AS) is a congenital neurobiological condition that affects 0.25% of the population. AS is linked to autism spectrum disorder, and includes autistic-like behavior and marked deficiencies in social and communication skills. Individuals with AS are of average to above average intelligence, some with unusual gifts and creativity. As a diagnosis, it has been known in Europe since the 1940's, but has only been included in our medical diagnostic manuals since 1994. Thus many adults and children remain undiagnosed. Consequently AS is relatively unknown and not clearly understood, even among professionals.

AS is indeed a puzzle, and researchers are working to identify the pieces and form them into a meaningful picture. My experiences as an adult recently diagnosed with Asperger's, together with my studies in child development, suggest that individuals with AS are like young children—stuck in time, so to speak, never able to advance beyond early stages in social, cognitive, and language development. For example, most AS difficulties center around social competencies. A salient characteristic of young children is egocentrism—the inability to recognize that other people think and feel differently than oneself. Persons with Asperger's Syndrome remain in this egocentric state, unable to interpret the thoughts and emotions of others, or to experience empathy. Another name given to this condition is "mind blindness"—the incapacity to visualize the mind states of others. Thus it is hard for AS individuals to develop normal friendships, either as children or as adults. Without empathy, they become emotionally stunted. A related problem is the inability to carry out social referencing through understanding nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions or body language. Such cues are "invisible" to those with AS.

A piece of the AS puzzle related to cognitive skills is attentiveness. "Attention span" is the number of mental elements that one can remember at any given time. During preschool years children exhibit "centration," focusing on one piece of information at a time, and briefly at that. The ability to process several elements simultaneously, or to remain focused on a task, comes with greater cognitive sophistication. Unfortunately, the tendency towards centration seems to remain with the AS individual into adulthood. One diagnosis commonly given prior to accurate diagnosis with Asperger's Syndrome is "attention deficit disorder."

A third part of the Asperger's puzzle relates to language. An early stage of language development includes "telegraphic speech"—abbreviated speech in which words not essential to the meaning of a sentence are omitted. People with AS seem not to develop beyond this stage, further stunting their communication skills. The easy flow of spontaneous social conversation is usually beyond their capacities. They must learn social "scripts" through special training and repetition. Even then, AS speech tends to be stilted and formal. Also, children in early stages of language development are quite literal. Figurative use of language, symbolic representation, nuances and double meanings are a later development. Once again, the individual with Asperger's remains in a childhood realm—that of literalism. Linguistic sophistications such as jokes, puns and idioms are hard for AS individuals to grasp. Even the most basic of social interactions become a confusing and humiliating experience.

Understandably, AS individuals encounter enormous difficulties during the transition into adolescence, and later into adult life, since they have not completed the requisite developmental tasks or moved beyond early stages in language, cognitive, and social skills. They frequently remain emotionally dependent upon parents or family members, and suffer from separation anxiety and insecurity when trying to live on their own. Friendships with peers, romantic relationships, marriage and parenting, and entry into the work world are usually beyond their capacity. They remain, in many debilitating ways, stuck in time, trapped in the AS puzzle. They are, in essence, childlike beings attempting to live in an adult world, but without the support and understanding that children are afforded.

---

McCroskery, M. (2000). Asperger's syndrome: A developmental puzzle. *The Reporter*, 5(3), 13-14.  
<http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/index.php?pageId=372>