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# Introduction to Aspergers Syndrome

Teal Shirk-Luckett  
ASD Consultant

School Support Program  
Hands, TheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca



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**“The “dis” in “disability” seemed written in letters ten feet tall; it cast a shadow over the fact there was any ability at all to be found in that word.”**

Donna Williams

Nobody Nowhere, Somebody Somewhere



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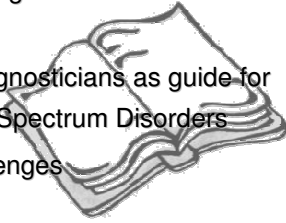
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## Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM IV

- Recognized as a specific entity by American Psychological Association in 1994
- Used by many diagnosticians as guide for assessing Autism Spectrum Disorders
- Benefits and challenges



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## Core Deficits – DSM-IV

- A qualitative impairment in social interaction\*
- Restricted patterns of behaviour/interest activity\*
- **No clinically significant delay in cognitive development, or age-appropriate self-help skills, adaptive behaviour** (other than in social interaction) and curiosity about the environment in childhood



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Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV, 1994

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## Core Deficits – DSM-IV (con't)

- Disturbance causes clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning
- **There is no clinically significant general delay in language**
- Criteria are not met for another specific Pervasive Developmental Disorder or Schizophrenia



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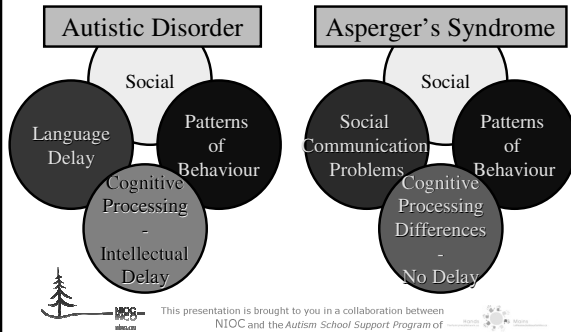
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## Differs from Autism - DSM



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## DSM-IV Challenges

- Hierarchy of diagnosing
- Normal communication example is delayed
- Missing common features of AS
- Differentiating between someone with HFA and AS may not be useful beyond childhood



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## Asperger's Information

- Prevalence for AS ?
  - Prevalence for ASD umbrella 1:142-1:166 (Frombonne, E, 2009)
- Life long
  - Often diagnosed later than Autistic Disorder
- Unrelated to social, economic, or cultural history
- Gender differences



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## Common "Other" Diagnosis

- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Attention Deficit Disorder
- Oppositional Defiant Disorder
- Conduct Disorder
- Nonverbal Learning Disorder
- Language or motor delay or disorder



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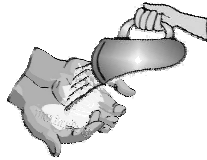
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## Communication

- Hyperlexic tendencies
  - Expansive vocabularies
- Literal speech
  - Use and interpretation
  - Precision and clarity
- Monotone speech



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## Social Communication

- Blunt, straight forward style
  - No subtext
- Difficulty with pragmatics (or context) of language
- Unaware of nonverbal communication
- Humour
  - May have strong humour
  - Many Neurotypical (NT) people may not understand



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## Social Challenges

- Emotional awareness
- Theory of mind
- Hidden curriculum
- Social thinking
- Specific social skills



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## Displaying Affect

- Flat voice
- Flat facial expression
- May not use eye contact or body language to modulate conversation
- May not understand and/or not be comfortable with social repair strategies

(hugs)



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## Emotion Confusion

- “Why are emotions so important, anyway?”
- Difficulty understanding own and others emotions
- Anger often displayed instead of anxiety or sadness
- Understand anger – what it is and how to deal with it



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# Theory of Mind 'Mind Blindness'

Simon Baron-Cohen



Understanding someone might know and think things different than you



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# Theory of Mind

Interpreting other peoples emotions

Explaining their own thinking

Knowing what they might do because of those emotions

Understanding other peoples intentions



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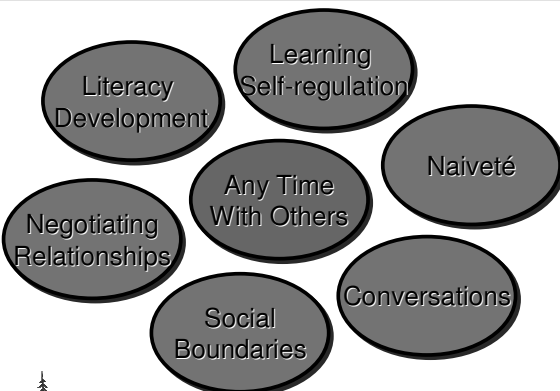
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## Hidden Curriculum

Brenda Smith-Myles

- Unwritten social rules that govern daily interactions and social behaviour
- Differs based on gender, culture, age and immediate social group



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## Social Thinking

Michelle Garcia Winner

- “Thinking about you thinking about me”
- Social referencing
- Changing personal behaviours based on expectations of the group



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## Initiation

- People with AS have difficulty initiating interactions
- Enjoy being asked
- Past experience may affect ability to participate (teased or bullied when play)
- Just say ‘hi’



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## Behaviour

- Stereotyped behaviours
  - Freedom to engage or substitution
- Area of special interest
  - Asset and challenge
- Stereotyped or repetitive motor mannerisms
- Preoccupation with parts of objects



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## Sensory Challenges

- Many people with ASD have sensory modulation issues
- Someone may be:
  - hypo-sensitive (will seek sensory input)
  - hyper-sensitive (will avoid sensory input)



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## Special Interest

- Serves multiple purposes
  - Vocation, hobby, relaxation
  - Personal identity, social group
- Can interfere with daily functioning
- Can be used to help increase interest in other areas
  - Paula Kluth



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## Motor Planning and Co-ordination

May have...

- difficulty with eye/hand co-ordination
  - handwriting, buttons, tying laces
- difficulty with physical activities
  - walking, running, riding a bike
- difficulty with body awareness, personal space, and high pain tolerance



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## Anxiety

Children with high functioning Autism & Asperger's Syndrome experience higher levels of anxiety and depression than control groups.

Zwaigenbaum, L. (2005)

- Anxiety is assumed given profile of characteristics



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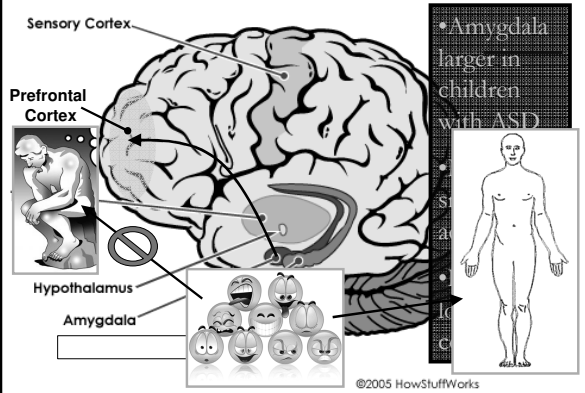
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## Parts of the Brain Involved in Fear Response



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## Overload

- Sensory input
- Communication breakdowns
- Too many distractions
  - Social, environmental
- Too many instructions
- Too many demands
  - Social interaction, transitions, unstructured time, task demands, restricting behaviours



ASO  
Autism Society of Ontario

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## Meltdowns

- May be embarrassing for individual
- Often frequency, duration and intensity reduces as person matures (gets older)
- Releases internal pressure



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## Personal Insight to Meltdowns

- Autism Society of Ontario: What do you see when you see me?



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Autism Society of Ontario

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## Common Associated Features

- Sleep difficulties
- Food sensitivities
- Difficulty with language based critical thinking
- Difficulty discerning relevant from irrelevant stimuli



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## Executive Function

- Problems with:
  - Planning
  - Organizing
  - Shifting attention
  - Impulse control
  - Generalization

Problem Solving Skills



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## AS and Girls/Women

- Differs
  - Diagnosis
  - Social observation
  - Adopting persona and re-enacting situations (dolls)



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## Mood Disorders

- 65% of adolescents with Asperger's Syndrome have an affective or mood disorder (Attwood, 2007)
- Anxiety, depression, delusion, paranoia and conduct
- Contributing factors



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## Challenging Behaviours

- Behaviour is a form of communication
- Behaviour is functional
- Most people want to do what is 'right' or expected whenever possible



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## Outcomes

### Despite strong cognitive ability:

- Most do not develop meaningful sustained relationships
- People with AS who graduated post-graduate programs were generally not working in their field and doing menial jobs
- Many adults with AS were living with their parents

Patricia Howlin, 2000



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“One of our goals needs to be to teach [people with AS] to use the structure which will allow him/her, in turn, to practice and develop independent work skills.”

Asperger’s... What Does it Mean to Me?  
Structured teaching ideas for home and school

-Catherine Faherty



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## Motivation a.k.a. What’s in it for me?

1. Walk on hot coals for!
2. Good but not great
3. Couldn’t care less



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Reinforce adaptive and socially acceptable behaviours

Tell the person with AS when they have shown ‘expected’ social behaviour



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## Your Language

When talking with someone with AS:

- Say what you mean and mean what you say
- Avoid grey areas
- Do not expect them to understand your body language



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## Affective Education

- Emotion books
  - What does it look like? For me? For others?
  - What makes people feel that way?
  - How do they act when they feel that way?
  - What is the expected reaction for me?
- Mirror work
- Acting practice (Soap opera strategy)
  - Voice and body



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## Specific Emotion Strategies

- Stories
  - Explain why people engage in certain emotional behaviours (hugs, eye contact, social niceties)
- Cartooning
  - Specific situations to help fill in missing thoughts or feelings of others



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## Building Emotional Toolbox

- Increase ability to identify personal feelings
- Increase strategies someone will use to help them feel better
  - Practice lots
  - Physical, cognitive, social, special interest



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## Teaching the Hidden Curriculum

- One a day
- Anthropological view point
- Expect and review mistakes
  - Emphasize we all make social mistakes



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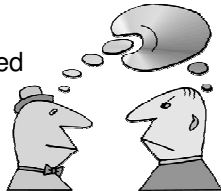
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## Guide Social Thinking

Michelle Garcia Winner

- Expected and unexpected behaviours
- Others are thinking about you
- Social reputation
- Affects how you are treated
- Social rules/guidelines



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## Specific Social Skills

- Review strengths and needs
- When teaching, think like an outsider
  - Why do people engage in that social skill
  - What are the distinct steps to that skill
  - Remember current social environment
- Remember if this does not come naturally, it is difficult



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# Flexibility



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## Specific Social Skills

- Ensure you model the skill, regularly
- Prompt the skill
- Reinforce the skill when demonstrated
  - Even if prompted, to start

Practice at every opportunity!



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## Social Strategies and the Law

- Social behaviour mapping (Winner, 2007)
- Contingency mapping
- Five is against the law (Buron, 2007)
  - Okay, odd, and scary behaviours
  - When a 2 becomes a 3 or 4 becomes a 5



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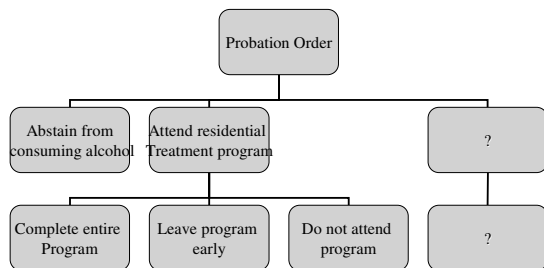
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## Graphic Organizer



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## Social Interaction

- Teach specific age appropriate phrases
  - Teach variations and when to vary
- Look for an accepting peer group
- Practice



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## Sensory Strategies

- Sensory integration theory
  - Provide appropriate sensory input prior to the body needing to search it out
  - Added benefits
- Behavioural approach
  - Give an appropriate activity to fill the need the person is demonstrating



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## Limiting Special Interest

- Only consider this if it is negatively affecting self or others
- Provide a time to engage in the special interest
- Remember: can be a calming strategy!!



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## Relaxation

- Practice regular relaxation
- Physical exercise
- Learn and practice 'in the moment' strategies
  - Stress Hierarchy, (McAfee, 2002)



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## Behaviour Detective

- Teach behavioural indicators you use to tell you how they are feeling
- Teach individual to watch for these indicators in their own bodies
  - Engage in specific calming strategy



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## Reduce Distractions



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## Reduce Distractions

For people easily distracted or having difficulty focusing on what is important:

- Avoid loud, interactive displays
- Offer a distraction reduced area
- Individual space screened from others



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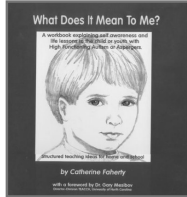
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“The ability to work independently is more crucial than acquiring specific academic skills.”



Asperger's...What Does it Mean to Me?  
Structured teaching ideas for home and school

-Catherine Faherty



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## Independence

- How do I build my own structure?
- How do I ensure others know and respect my needs?
- How do I make and keep friends?
- How do I interact with coworkers?
- How do I organize and manage daily life?



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## Self Advocacy

- Help the person develop an understanding of Asperger's Syndrome
  - How it affects the individual
  - Best personal strategies to cope
- Teach short appropriate phrases to express needs
- Practice



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## Developing Independent Skills

- Teach to follow directions: step by step
- Teach to ask for clarity about expectations
- Teach organizational schema for work space, supplies and materials
- Ensure they know how to do the work
  - How to ask for help



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## Language

- Teach that people do not always mean what they say
- Practice interpreting tones and sarcasm
- Practice asking for clarification
- It's OK to make mistakes



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## Making Life Predictable

- Teach the value of routine
- Chunk tasks into manageable parts
- Creating and using personal schedules



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## Make it clear

- What do I have to do
- How much do I have to do
- When it is finished
- What is next



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“Above all, I would encourage those who have strived to help people like myself that their efforts are not useless. Responding in an indirect or detached manner is not synonymous with indifference.”

Donna Williams  
Nobody Nowhere, Somebody Somewhere



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