

Inside Asperger's: The Little Professor

by Susan M. Carey, Ph.D.

I'm not slow, stubborn, or stupid. In fact my vocabulary is quite advanced. I just have trouble interpreting nuances in the world around me, and making sense of my emotions. I can be shy. I can have sensory integration issues like being extremely sensitive to touch, taste, light, smell, or noise. I don't learn easily from mistakes. Sometimes my motor skills, especially fine motor, can be delayed; and I miss social cues and facial expressions.

Because of this and because I have trouble making sense of my own emotions, I sometimes feel anxious. To make matters worse, I really want to make friends, but often don't know how to do it; and adults frequently expect my emotions to be as advanced as my verbal skills, and blame me when I make social mistakes and can't seem to get work done quickly or efficiently. This happens partly because I have trouble getting organized, and partly because my fine motor skills are delayed, and things seem to get stuck on the efferent pathways out of my brain. Kids tease me a lot and I hate it, so I get angry.

Brain imaging studies show that a part of my brain called the medial prefrontal and temporal cortex is not as active and well connected as others. Many of us with Asperger's (AD), also have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD). Even if we are not hyperactive, they still call it AD/"H"D. This is not logical and annoys me, because I am very literal. I do not like metaphors and will tell you so. I will also tell you if I don't like your hat or your nose, and I will wonder why you are upset because I am only stating what is obvious and logical.

There is a professional journal called, The Journal of Child Psychiatry and Psychology, Volume 45, Issue 4, pages 672-686 that tells about a man named Hans Asperger who decided that there was a syndrome, (I didn't say disease), that has symptoms similar to Autism, only with very high verbal intelligence. Verbal intelligence is my gift; so remember not to focus on skills I lack, but on the skills God has given me.

If you have a child who seems like me, be sure to search out a good psychologist right away. Your family doctor or insurance company can help you find someone who loves to work with kids like me. This is important. Remember, also, that your school district, by Federal Law, is required to teach me social skills while I am still in pre-school. That program is called Child Find. If you take me there and ask (sometimes you have to demand), that the school district test my skills to see if my motor or social skills are thirty points below average in one area or fifteen points below average in two areas on a scale where 100 is average, I will be allowed to be a part of the school program. Regardless whether my profile fits the profile for developmental preschool, I need social skills training very early. Do not try to push my motor skills too early, as these skills have their own timeline; but do provide lots of fun, encouraging stimulating ways for me to experience and practice without getting tired or overwhelmed.

Ask me how I feel with statements like, "Sometimes I feel sad when some things happen to me; Do you feel sad like that?" This helps me to get in touch with my feelings and sort them out. Give me simple choices and two-step commands, rather than overwhelm me, as I am easily stimulated. If you help me keep my self-esteem and let me know I am unconditionally loved, I will have a good long life and make great contributions to society.

When I get stuck, don't force me. Use a Basket Technique: Basket A is for things that are absolute, where the answer is "Yes or No." There should not be many things in Basket A. Basket B should be used a lot. Basket B contains two or maybe three simple choices. Basket C is for when my cingulate gyrus (a long curved part of the brain, which coordinates senses with emotion and regulates aggression) gets stuck. Basket C is used to decide to wait a few minutes or even a day or so to make a decision. Remember, this is not giving in to me or being inconsistent, because we will come back to it. We just won't waste time re-enforcing the "stuck" behavior, when I can't make my brain go any faster. Please don't think I am "showing off" or odd, when I use big words like cingulate gyrus. Just thank God that He has given me such a gift. I enjoy it so; and it will be a great asset later on when I grow into it.

If you are an adult reading this; and you remember feeling like this, when you were a child, don't cry; it's all right. God knows that He made you a special way. You have to search a little bit for specialists who love and understand this learning style; but there's almost a club of us, you know. You are not alone, and are probably highly skilled in certain fields. Just be careful in relationships. Remember if your wife says you are cuter than a dumpling, she doesn't mean a "real" dumpling, and don't tell her she would look better with three freckles instead of thirty. Just tell her she is lovely. Remind yourself many times each day to say nice things like this to your wife and children. It's good to comment positively to your boss and co-workers as well. Look up from your book or your work frequently and smile, even if you're not sure why you are doing it. People like this. Explain to your boss that you like tasks broken down and always ask for advance warning before any change, whether you are a child or an adult.

If you are proud of who you are and how God made you, others will not find it strange. Remember everyone else has unique attributes and foibles as well. They're thinking more about their own problems than yours.

If some of this sounds familiar, but you don't think your style is quite as pronounced as all this, you may simply have a Non-Verbal Processing Disorder. This style usually affects math calculation and written language, because they are in the same part of the brain, posterior parietal. Math reasoning is generally not as affected; and reading problems, although more rare, can be co-morbid. That means that a few folk with Non-Verbal Processing issues (NvLD or simply NLD) may have reading problems as well.

Specialists can help you learn to compensate for most of these issues. Just be prepared to take a little more time with things. Be patient with yourself and politely ask others to be patient also. One good technique is to say something like, "I can do an excellent job for you, but to do that, please allow me sufficient time to be thorough".

Typically, social concerns are raised before academic problems are identified; so don't let people at church or school treat you as if you have a character disorder. There is a genetic component, and this is a style God allowed you to have for a reason. Learn to use your uniqueness to the best of your ability.

For more information about Asperger's relationship to Non-Verbal Learning Disorder, a milder form of a similar style, you might want to read David Dinklage's article in the Spring 2001 issue of the Asperger's Association of New England newsletter. It is posted on the web at http://www.nldontheweb.org/Dinklage_1.htm.