

IncludeAll – Enhancing Practice

Students with Asperger Syndrome

What are the key issues?

Asperger Syndrome is a form of autism, a 'spectrum disorder' because it affects people in many different ways and to varying degrees. It is a hidden disability.

Unlike autism, people with Asperger syndrome have fewer problems with speaking and are often of average or above average intelligence. Their difficulties fall into three main areas - social communication, social interaction and social imagination.

A student may have a problem reading the subtle messages of facial expression, tone of voice and/or body language and find it difficult to follow the social cues and emotions which we usually rely on to understand or interpret other people's thoughts, feelings or actions. This makes everyday interactions challenging, leading to high levels of confusion and anxiety and often inappropriate interpersonal behaviour.

People learn different body language, levels of eye contact, gestures and personal space in different cultures which can also cause confusion and conflict. However people with Asperger Syndrome might also have difficulty knowing when to start/how to start a conversation or how to end one and also have difficulty choosing topics to talk about. This should not be taken to mean they are unsociable; it is just that they find it difficult to make friends and take part in everyday chat. This can lead students to feeling socially isolated and for this reason low self-esteem is common.

Many people with Asperger Syndrome do get better at this as they get older and learn the 'rules' of social interaction although they still may not understand them. However early experiences may well have reduced their confidence.

With no social imagination to project into future, or predict/guess what might happen, the world can be frightening. This results in high levels of anxiety which in turn may trigger difficult behaviour. It can also lead to honesty of opinion, which in turn can lead to difficulties in social situations. It can also mean that people with Asperger Syndrome can take words and phrases literally and have difficulty understanding jokes, metaphor and sarcasm.

This is not the same as imagination and people with Asperger syndrome can be accomplished writers, artists and musicians.

However, it can lead to rigid or repetitive behaviour and love of routines. Someone may obsessively collect or organise things or have a single minded pursuit of the current topic of interest. People may have rituals which help them make sense of the world and may insist on rules being strictly adhered to. However, this attention to detail, ability to repeat and love of routine is also a strength in the workplace and is now sought after by many companies, especially when combined with a favourite subject. People with Asperger syndrome will be particularly knowledgeable in their chosen field of interest.

People with Asperger Syndrome often have heightened sensitivity, either low or high, for touch, heat/cold or a particular colour. Some may find jostling in queues where touch is unexpected very difficult or the feel of clothing or water on skin very hard to tolerate. There can often be a low tolerance of noise due to difficulties in filtering out sensory information.

In many instances people with Asperger Syndrome may also have ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), dyspraxia or dyslexia, OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) and sometimes epilepsy.

It is best to see Asperger Syndrome as a learning difference and a different way of viewing the world. The label of disability can be a barrier; each person will be different and have their own individual needs. Like all conditions, concentrate on the strengths not the weaknesses.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Students with Asperger Syndrome may need plenty of time to get used to people, places or procedures. Many may take a year out after school to get used to where they will be going and may still go to University near to home in case anything happens. People with Asperger Syndrome are vulnerable so will be covered by Safeguarding policies.

It is not necessarily the subject that will be the problem. Of course washing, cooking, catching buses and so on need to be learnt by all students but these are particularly difficult for someone with Asperger Syndrome. Settling into halls and perhaps getting on with flatmates and other students on the course may also cause difficulties. There may be inappropriate behaviour – for example standing too close, odd topics of conversation, seemingly uninterested in other people and appearing almost aloof. Frustration and anxiety may result in outbursts of temper.

Students with Asperger Syndrome may be very good in lectures but struggle to find their way from place to place. Many may find large lecture rooms full of chatting people difficult and sensory overload will interfere with learning.

There may be difficulties in taking notes and listening at the same time and perhaps deciding what to write and try and write everything. This is especially true if the student has dyspraxia and/or dyslexia as well. A student may also struggle to process verbal information so, like many students, would benefit from having materials beforehand and on BlackBoard.

Some may do the working out/planning for a task in their heads so appear just to go straight to answer with no working out or planning stages.

Most students with Asperger Syndrome will find activities and group-work particularly difficult due to the difficulties with social interaction outlined above.

Sudden changes in timetable or other routines may be upsetting as can such things as delays when something should have happened at a certain time. Field trips and placements may need more planning and support as they disrupt routine. They may also want to talk at length about the subject in hand so if this is difficult be clear about when you can be contacted by students.

Students with Asperger Syndrome have much to offer – a desire for knowledge, enthusiasm, punctuality, determination and reliability.

What works really well?

- Buddies and mentors – especially those who are enthusiastic about the same subject – and can act as a familiar face to turn to for help.
- Clear timetables; and sometimes indications of what to do in 'free' time; good practice would be a safe quiet, plain place to chill or to spend unstructured time.
- Simple clear, clean language; avoiding colloquialisms and metaphor.
- Unambiguous instructions; keeping sentences short, clear and concise.
- Allowing someone to leave the room if necessary, sit where they need to; a student may want to arrive early to avoid bustle and jostling if the group is large; this also gives time to prepare.
- Empathy and acceptance; keeping calm and trying not to react to erratic behaviour.
- Clear information on academic requirements and deadlines and possibly support with self-directed study; choosing what to read.
- Help and support with planning workloads and assignments and for exams; prioritising and where to begin.

- Quiet feedback about behaviour e.g. 'If you are bored, don't say so aloud.' – but check if this approach is welcome first!
- Actively managing activities and group-work with rules and expectations making such everyone gets a chance to speak; encourage students to get to know each other.
- Non-tolerance of bullying – students with Asperger Syndrome are particularly vulnerable.
- Trying to make sure any changes are announced well in advance.

Further hints, tips and/or background reading

- Talk to Faculty Student Guidance Advisors or the Student Enabling Centre.
- National Autistic Society – Top Transition Tips for Colleges; Education Professionals in FE and HE. Website - www.autism.org.uk
- National Association of Disability Practitioners (2008). Working effectively with students who have Asperger Syndrome. NADP, *Journal of Inclusive Practice in Further and Higher Education*; Issue 1; Nov 2008.
- Case study – The founder of company Specialisterne, Thorkil Sonne, has a son with autism. He now employs more than 40 people with autism capitalising on their focus, persistence and love of routine. Dreaper, J. (2009) Why a firm wants staff with autism. *BBC*. [online]. Available from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/8153564.stm> [accessed 20 May 2015]

Checklist for reflection



For students on the autistic spectrum:

	✓
Are requirements clear and unambiguous?	
Do I actively manage group work?	
Do I announce changes well in advance if possible and in writing as well as verbally?	
Is support for study and assignments clearly signposted?	
Do I make clear the times when I am or am not available to talk?	

Do I look out for bullying and feel confident about tackling it if it occurs?	
Do I try to understand and make allowances for behaviour?	

Reflection into action

Having reflected on the above, my key priorities for making my teaching more inclusive are:



Changes I would like to introduce	By when	Indicators that it has made my practice more inclusive

This document is part of an inclusive practice 'toolkit' - *IncludeAll*. The whole Toolkit, as one complete document or as separate documents, can be found on the University website at www.staffs.ac.uk/inclusivepractice .

It is split into four sections: Core Concepts; Inclusive by Design; Enhancing Practice; Checklists for Self-reflection.

The *IncludeAll* Toolkit has been developed by: **Dr Marjorie Spiller** (Academic Development Unit); **Alison Hunt** (Equality and Diversity Manager); **Dave Allman** (Head of the Student Enabling Centre); **MINDSET Project Team** (Faculty of Arts and Creative Technologies).

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