

## **Teaching Strategies for Faculty Working with Students with Asperger's Syndrome**

Asperger's syndrome is considered to be on the high functioning end of the Autism spectrum. Although identified in 1944 by Hans Asperger, it was not until the 1990s that the disorder was given widespread attention. Asperger's can generally be distinguished from other forms of autism by two areas of relative strength: more normal language function and higher cognitive abilities. Seen as an invisible disability, Asperger's tends to present itself as a nonverbal learning disability with deficiencies in social skills and interaction. Individuals with Asperger's have a great deal of difficulty reading nonverbal cues (body language) and often have difficulty identifying proper personal body space. Because adults with Asperger's generally have extreme difficulties expressing frustration, anger, and/or fear, reactions tend to display as outbursts that are typically inappropriate. It is important to remember that individuals with Asperger's perceive the world *very* differently. Therefore, behaviours that seem odd or unusual are due to those neurological differences and not the result of intentional rudeness or bad behaviour. In addition, students with Asperger's often show a lack of motor coordination, adaptability and flexibility, repetitive patterns of behavior and have an exceptional skill/interest in one particular area. However, with average to above average intelligence, students with Asperger's, given the appropriate accommodations and a supportive environment, can succeed at the postsecondary level.

### **Learning Characteristics:**

- Well developed long term memory
- Good visual skills
- Hyperactivity
- Delayed response time
- Needs help to problem solve
- Short attention span to some activities and not others
- Problems organizing

### **Characteristics that Influence Functioning in the Academic Environment**

It is important to understand the idiosyncratic nature of Asperger's and to consider problematic behaviors in light of characteristics associated with this disability. Following are some general characteristics as described by Williams (1995):

- Insistence on sameness: easily overwhelmed by minimal changes in routines, sensitive to environmental stressors, preference for rituals.
- Impairment in social interactions: difficulty understanding the "rules" of interaction, poor comprehension of jokes and metaphor, formal speaking style.
- Restricted range of social competence: preoccupation with singular topics, asking repetitive questions, obsessively collecting items.
- Inattention: poor organizational skills, easily distracted, focused on irrelevant stimuli, difficulty learning in group contexts.

- Poor motor coordination: slow clerical speed, clumsy gait, unsuccessful in games involving motor skills.
- Academic difficulties: restricted problem solving skills, literal thinking, deficiencies with abstract reasoning.
- Emotional vulnerability: low self-esteem, easily overwhelmed, poor coping with stressors, self-critical.

This excerpt was taken from:

[http://www.autism-society.org/site/DocServer/LWA\\_Behavior.pdf?docID=4181](http://www.autism-society.org/site/DocServer/LWA_Behavior.pdf?docID=4181)

### **Suggestions for Faculty:**

- Provide a detailed course syllabus (with deadlines) and adhere to it as closely as possible.
- Use visual supports—graphs, charts, lists, pictures—to enhance your lectures.
- Post lecture notes and course changes clearly on Blackboard.
- Arrange seating away from windows or other sources of distraction
- Be concise and direct in your instructions.
- Encourage the student to ask for clarification or to rephrase instructions as needed.
- When asking questions in class, allow extra “wait time” before expecting a response from the student. Address the student by name, and then ask a question.
- Provide specific, concrete feedback.
- If the student engages in repetitive questioning that interferes with classroom instruction, engage the student in developing individual strategies. Strategies may include suggesting that the student writes their questions for discussion after class. If this does not work, you may wish to incorporate a visual cue or signal as a reminder that they have asked enough questions for that class.
- Address behavioral concerns with the student after class and reinforce with clear expectations.
- These students tend to be left out and have difficulty making social connections.. When group projects are a must, foster cooperation and partnership by assigning students to groups or encourage students to work in pairs.
- If there are areas of concern, consult with the student's Disabilities Counsellor identified on the Individual Student Plan.

### **Suggestions for Co-op/Placement Supervisor:**

- Provide a detailed explanation of duties and responsibilities/expectations.
- Orientate student before placement begins to transportation, location, and personnel.
- As much as possible, maintain a structured routine. Wherever possible prepare the student for potential changes or transitions.
- Provide concrete step-by-step instructions.
- Avoid using slang as students with Asperger's tend to interpret language literally and may misunderstand your true meaning.
- If student appears to be getting overwhelmed or agitated it may be due to stress. Provide the student with a safe place to relax. Work with student to understand triggers to stress and potential strategies.
- A peer may be useful to help the student to redirect or refocus attention/concentration or to answer questions.