

## Educational Issues in Asperger Syndrome

This paper by Sue Gething, ex-head of Southlands School, a Cambian Education Services school for boys aged 7-16 with Asperger Syndrome, was first published by the ACAMH (Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Tel: 0207 403 7458) Occasional Papers No 21, 2003.

### Introduction

This paper considers the features of Asperger Syndrome (AS) that create barriers to the learning and inclusion of pupils with AS in school environments. The paper suggests what can be done to reduce the impact of the educational implications of the disorder. The content of the paper is drawn almost entirely from the experience gained from eight years alongside young people with AS in the exclusive community that is Southlands School. Views on a suitable school environment for children with AS are offered, based on what we have found to be best practice, including an ideal person specification for the adults working with these pupils; their approach is crucial.

### Southlands is a 38-week residential school for boys with AS (hence the use of the pronoun 'he' throughout).

The school, which opened in 1995, is situated near Lymington in Hampshire, and currently caters for 44 residential pupils and 5 day pupils with Asperger Syndrome and associated difficulties. The fact that the majority of our pupils have entered the school having 'failed' in main sector education prompted much reflection on and development of practice over time. It also initiated much change of direction in the light of bitter experience! These young people are different, so Southlands has had to become a 'place to be different' in order to do justice to their potential. Some of what we have learned is shared here and offered, mindful of the fact that education is not an exact science and there is no substitute for a little creativity. No single approach suits everyone.

### Why is education such a challenge for those with AS?

The world we live in is a busy and highly 'social' place to be. It can be demanding and extremely confusing for those of us described as 'normal' as we seek to balance the needs of work, home and family with some leisure. The pace and impact of 21st century life is all-pervasive and can be stressful. To cope with the demands of everyday life, job, family, travel, communications and a technological world we are required to work with and relate well to other people. We need to be able to make judgements about people and their intentions at speed, and absorb and sort a considerable range of incoming information to help us form those judgements. Effective two-way communication is crucial to success in everyday life, as is the ability to work with others and in teams. The capacity to understand what other people mean, are doing and are saying is a skill we must all master, and not just when face to face but over the telephone and via email. For all of us, practice and preparation for such an adult world takes place in our childhood years. Being a 'successful' happy child who is well adjusted to school and home life and who has friends stems, very much, from an ability to use social skills to relate to and communicate well with others. This is evident at playgroup stage if we consider the way a young pre school child uses social communication, play and imagination to enjoy and make the most of the opportunity of being with other children.

But what of those who cannot be with others effortlessly and for whom the ability to 'read people' and understand them is poor? What of those for whom the subtleties of language, games, activities, intentions, and even the laughter that others engage in, is forever a mystery? If you consider for a moment when it was you last had no one around you and how long that moment lasted, the life of those experiencing a social and communication disorder, one of which is AS, or an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), is perhaps a little clearer. For such people being with more than one person is a social situation that can be stressful. For many with AS, life is a challenge lived on and beyond the fringes of our own protected comfort zones. Society expects those who are a little different to make the effort to fit the mould of the adult and social world the majority enjoy. For those with AS fitting in and passing for normal are life's goal, and every outing and social activity is a relentless challenge rather than a leisure pursuit. Imagine the hidden effort of living beyond your comfort zone all the time, just to get by.

Every school is a highly social community and certain skills are essential for progress and comfort within it. In order to 'read' the classroom situation and those sharing the space and to 'fit in' pupils must demonstrate an impressive array of developed and emerging skills. A 'typical pupil' profile includes being cooperative, sociable, having play skills, listening and sitting skills, being communicative, flexible, and able to process incoming information accurately.

An 'AS pupil' profile is different. Such a pupil put into a typical classroom environment takes with him an AS-pupil profile of resistance and challenge (non cooperation), poor social understanding and reading of others (resulting in the individual appearing gauche and off the pace) and poor ability to engage reciprocally in play, games and group activities. Also likely are poor attention levels, distractibility and over activity, a pedantic or monotone verbal delivery, inflexibility, and poor verbal and non-verbal processing skills.

These opposing profiles can create a conflict of interest in a mainstream classroom setting and also in a specialist classroom setting if the majority of pupils do not have AS. Such conflict is difficult to mediate and can cause lasting damage on either side. Many children with AS can manage with support in a primary school setting with just one teacher and limited movement to different rooms, and sometimes transfer to secondary school takes place before real problems surface. The ability of a child with AS to cope with education in a mainstream school is dependent on the attitude of the whole school staff. The proximity of a normal peer group can be an advantage and where there is a real commitment on the part of all staff to facilitate and 'include', the experience can be positive.

However, some pupils may need the support a specialist school can offer, but whatever school the child attends, if there is a blind expectation that he must get on and 'fit in' with the majority, or where there is little support given either to the child with AS or

indeed to the peer group working alongside him, the experience may be negative for all. In all cases, the barriers to learning are similar, as they are within the child. It is the responsibility of the school to find an appropriate solution. Individual schools should not agree to meet the needs of these unusual children if that school cannot or will not be flexible in order to do so.

### Common factors that may impede progress in all schools The peer group

Children with AS appear different to others (even others with AS) who can in turn refuse to accept and include them. All have the capacity to be easy targets. Individuals can be too compliant, vulnerable and easily led, and do as they are told, by anyone, including other pupils, and may be 'set up' by them.

*Jacky was keen to impress others, and wanted to be seen to be cool by the gang. He was encouraged to smoke, by his 'friends'. As the school is a non-smoking site they resorted to covert measures and hid their cigarettes in plastic bags in the hedges along Undershore Road. It was not long before Jacky was being sent out to buy cigarettes illegally for the others. His reward was a 'special' cigarette that only tough guys used. It turned out to be a roll-up made from a teabag.*

Bullying may go unreported or may not be properly dealt with. Isolation and loneliness leading to underachievement and even mental health problems is a risk if this is not acknowledged and supported.

### General coping and confidence

**Perfectionist** traits may cause failure to complete work (or even start work) because individuals are never satisfied with it or will not commit to paper before finding out if the answer is correct.

**Homework.** Individuals may struggle with this added pressure, particularly in later years approaching coursework and examinations. Such pressure may prove unbearable.

**Retrieval.** A child with AS may experience problems retrieving from his memory knowledge he in fact does possess. Like a computer, the right keys need to be struck for the required screen to come on display.

**Other avoidable distracters** teachers and other adults should be mindful of are the loss of security an AS child can feel from the movement of others, the teaching styles of staff, incorrect resources or kit, and changes to the school day – for instance the presence of supply teachers.

### High anxiety

High anxiety can cause error through panic, stress, and poor concentration/attention, leading to underachievement. Many young people self-medicate by using alcohol or cigarettes.

*John bought Jack Daniels whiskey and concealed it by adding it to his Pepsi bottles. His performance in fact improved a little with the relaxation that resulted, but the reason behind this was quickly identified!*

### Lack of concentration

Inability to block out distractions, or sit still, may cause disruption in class, and an attention deficit causes the child to 'miss' important instructions and teaching, impacting on achievement. Factors also present may be the twin distractions of effort for little perceived gain followed by despair, and mental health issues such as depression. ADHD may also form part of a dual diagnosis.

### Language barriers

Working alongside others and sharing space will be difficult, as will reading and understanding the intentions and the meaning of conversations, activities, thoughts, games and behaviour of others.

Language difficulties, particularly the social use of language, are common and have been well documented. The level of articulation and intelligence of those with AS leads us all into assumptions about their capabilities which are frequently at variance with reality.

Misunderstandings in classrooms are a daily occurrence with individuals who lean naively on the literalness of language, particularly when in so doing certain hopes and aspirations seem promised.

*Stuart knew (and told us every day) he could have sex when he reached age sixteen. The birthday dawned and he was hopeful.*

*He went to the market in Lymington and came upon a stall selling sunglasses. "Buy these, son, you'll score with these my boy, best Italian model and yours for £14.99". Stuart (who knew what 'score' meant) was greatly encouraged, bought them and spent the next two hours walking around the town looking to 'score'. When this ambition was not fulfilled he went back to the trader, called him a liar and demanded his money back – with menaces!*

### Physical issues

Coordination difficulties are often present, including Dyspraxia and writing legibly at the required pace may be an issue. Adults working with young people with AS frequently underestimate the impact of influential sensory problems. Such implications can cause barriers to learning through ignorance. Distress from strong smelling perfumes, after-shave or body odour is not uncommon, and sight disturbances and touch sensitivity can cause many problems ranging from difficulties with the fabric of uniform and furniture to the lighting arrangements in classrooms and noise disturbances. Hygiene problems may be due to tactile defensiveness.

Other implications that can affect the school day include thirst particularly if on medication) and hunger (often appetite peaks late in the day).

### The curriculum

Skill areas are likely to lie within factually based subjects such as Maths, Science, Technology and Information and Computer Technology. Difficulties in more emotional literacy-based subjects such as Religious Education, History (apart from the factual bits) and English Literature, are very possible. Pupils may experience some difficulty separating fantasy from reality, and this may have an impact in drama, and with fiction, watching videos etc.

Difficulty with PE and Games lessons, not only with motivation for physical effort but with the processing of the verbal instructions, and in 'reading' the behaviour and intentions of the team, are common. Many attempt to avoid these situations, using a variety of tactics, due to anxiety about failure. Another frequent barrier to learning is a curriculum that is not sufficiently challenging and stretching for these pupils.

### Specific learning difficulties

These may be present and require extra support.

### Self-control (different responses/behaviour)

An AS pupil may have difficulty seeing himself as being a central part of situations that cause annoyance, or offence, to others. He may also have difficulties understanding that 'seeing' equals knowing. This is frequently characterised by comments such as 'It wasn't me. I didn't do anything' when challenged about behaviour. This is often because he may not connect that someone who witnesses him stealing, for instance, can make inferences about the event that are true. There is also a problem of ownership.

A five-pound note in a communal living room drawer was once seen as "Finders keepers. It is no one's money because the

### OASIS publications

- SEN Information Sheets
- First Guide to ...
- Cards explaining 9 learning disabilities
- Legal advice Information Sheets
- SEN 'How to' guides

All OASIS publications can be downloaded from [www.oasis.co.uk](http://www.oasis.co.uk)

drawer doesn't belong to anyone else". That it was not Aaron's money did not influence his position on the matter at all.

Mood swings and outbursts of temper, often borne of frustration, can cause individuals to leave or be excluded from the classroom, thus reducing achievement. Many become angry, abusive, aggressive, and out of control when things do not go their way, disrupting the class through a lack of alternative strategies. Running out of class or other disruptive behaviour to avoid stressful situations can become a pattern. Pupils with AS may react badly to discipline and be unable to accept and acknowledge being at fault. Poor respect of and co-operation with authority figures may be a problem, resulting in challenging behaviour and non-compliance with head and teachers. Refusal to attend school is a likely result.

#### **Getting on with others. Being accepted/acceptable**

Pupils with AS have little, if any regard for the emotions, moods and feelings of others. They are unlikely to respond in an appropriate way when others share their feelings and emotions.

Eye contact can be different, either showing a lack of appropriate eye contact or an inappropriate level of strong gazing, which can alarm other children. A pupil with AS frequently stands too close to others, invading their space and inadvertently causing irritation, and negative attitudes. Stalking another pupil who is desired as a friend is a problem that all too often damages the chances of that happening.

An air of superiority and chauvinism is common, and a pupil may experience tensions because he treats all people as equal, e.g. be unable to gauge and formulate responses to people according to their age, or role, or position of authority.

He may talk incessantly, oblivious to the attempts of others to comment or change topic. He may insist on answering all questions that are put to the class, assuming they are all for him.

#### **Self-esteem, self-preservation**

The young person with AS has another way of viewing life, his way, which is perhaps not unreasonable, but it can be unnerving. In our social world (and he works hard to fit in with it), he is out of his own comfort zone. For security he will lean on his own resources, not ours, as it takes time to learn tolerance of the seemingly strange ways of others.

Many appear super-sensitive to criticism, advice, guidance, new teaching and knowledge, appearing to see it as a personal affront to their credibility and own view of their (perceived) superior knowledge. The lower their self-esteem, the higher this problem appears to feature.

#### **Obsessions and special interests**

Many have a restricted set of interests and/or obsessive drives. These obsessions may cause, for example, individuals to gather information, use materials, and dwell on images in repetitive, inappropriate and intrusive ways, even during lessons. Special interests can cover a wide range. Some examples are gathering telephone numbers, locks, maps, lists, or information on a particular disaster or a pop star. Other examples are playing an instrument, writing stories, working with computers, and eating certain foods. Obsessions with images can be centred on violence, death and the macabre in films, books, or real events. These interests may intrude into the school day and disturb concentration.

The inability to be shocked by the horrific can explain, in part,

an obsessional interest in activities that cause some emotional reaction or revulsion in others, such as watching unsuitable video violence or pornography. Approval and street cred is desperately important to many with AS, even that from dangerous role models. Some individuals are aware that their responses are unusual and seem to worry about this, thus increasing anxiety problems.

#### **All pupils vary in the type and level of difficulties that they experience.**

Some can perform very well much of the time, with the above difficulties causing a significant impact only when situations are particularly demanding. Others are much more challenged by the disorder and will require ongoing awareness and adaptations for a full range of implications, on a daily basis.

#### **What can be done?**

As well as looking creatively at addressing the range of potential barriers listed above, what really makes a difference to the education and care of children with AS is to focus on the qualities and the strengths that an autistic spectrum disorder can bring. Find them, develop, celebrate and reward them. 'Enhance the best while you support the rest' is a useful adage.

More importantly it is important to focus on the 'beliefs' that individuals may hold about themselves. These may be responsible for some of the inner conflicts that spill over into conflict at school. What we believe about ourselves, in the light of known facts about our life and circumstances, generates a raft of 'feelings'. These feelings can influence, for good or bad, our behaviour. This is perhaps particularly true of those with special needs.

Any educational provision for a child with AS, whether in inclusive or specialist centre, must take into account the beliefs that a young person has about himself or herself. Such beliefs may be in total contrast to what may seem apparent at first glance or to what is generally expected at that age. Such beliefs can range from a belief that they are tainted, stupid, a disappointment to their family, that no one will ever like them, no one understands them, and that there is no point in living, to a belief that they are superior to others. The feelings generated by such beliefs include passive acceptance, determination, sadness, despair, self-loathing, and suicidal thoughts.

Challenging these dangerous beliefs in the school years requires some effort and planning on the part of professionals and will not occur by accident. Yet challenge them we must if we are to provide these often-talented young people with a suitable school experience that does not ill prepare, over protect or institutionalise by location, but provides some transition to adult life. Experience of the development of pupils at Southlands indicates that successful challenges to deeply held beliefs should include:

- a culture of unconditional acceptance of and respect for pupils, from all staff
- knowledge and understanding of AS on the part of staff and an ability to pass it on to pupils
- a culture of strong focus on qualities and strengths, with confidence and self-esteem developed and boosted through recognition of achievement and daily positive and honest feedback.
- a small, low distraction classroom environment and suitable curriculum, and a culture flexible enough to say 'yes' to

- pupils' realistic time-bound goals and make them happen
- therapeutic support as required
- strong rules and clear discipline based on natural justice
- a mentor, outside of the family, to assist with transition to adult life

Anthony believed there was no point in living. He was challenged by AS, hated being different, was embarrassed to be at a special school, was beset by anxiety, had a failed relationship with a local girl behind him, and wanted to return to main sector.

We did not believe he was ready. He told me he had entered the world as a sperm, foetus, newborn, baby, toddler, child, and adolescent and was now on the threshold of manhood.

His view was 'I am going to be a man for a long time and then die. Why not bring forward the death date and cut out the misery in between. I can return re-incarnated as someone or something else, without AS.' We resolved this issue only in part, because 18 months later he attempted the geographical cure.

He had been training around the grounds with bricks in his pack for months, keeping himself fit, in line with his special interest in all things military. There was no reason to suspect that the gear he kept in his room (his parents had a yacht on the local marina) was anything other than the kit for his sailing weekends with the family. One night he dressed in his wetsuit, donned his military gear complete with boots and helmet, and crept past the night care staff, flotation aid in hand, left the school site, and walked to the river.

He swam some considerable distance, and was sighted at the mouth of the Lymington River by a fisherman at 1am in the morning, striking out for the Isle of Wight. The fisherman's surprised hails were met with "I'm quite all right, thank you", and Anthony swam on. Thankfully, the fisherman had other ideas and called the Coastguard who rescued the boy from certain drowning in the dangerous currents of the Solent.

Anthony's kit bag contained women's clothing, hair dye and shaving equipment along with his treasures wrapped in cling-film and plastic that sadly did not keep the salty water out. Anthony's belief was that he could lie low on the Island, camouflaged as a woman, and then catch a ferry and a train 'up north' and leave the school, and therefore his AS, behind. Depression followed a full realisation of the misplacement of his beliefs.

This very near miss forced on us a realisation that our comfortable square hole was not suiting our square pegs with such creative logic, and we took a risky u-turn to bring about a semi resolution for the boy that in part met his objectives. He needed to leave the specialist environment so the notion of 'you can do it' was laid on with a trowel. His timetable was suspended in favour of just his GCSE entry subjects with supported private study and counselling and psychological support. He rose to the challenge and he passed what he needed for entry to an enlightened 6th form college prepared to take him one year early. He gained his additional GCSE exams in main sector along with his A-levels.

As I write he has just completed his first term at university, reading Cybernetics, where he is not at all out of place.

### What makes a difference? Suggested strategies

The school experience depends for its success on curriculum approach and flexibility, and adults who can take account of the implications of the disorder. Without enlightened staff, many opportunities may be wasted.

### Relationships

Understanding others and the rules of relationships are crucial. Social skills, social language and everyday communication should be taught formally as a part of the curriculum. Personal and social

education, using role-play, use of video, drama and all practical strategies to make the issues stimulating and 'alive' are much more important to these children during the school years than, perhaps, a Modern Foreign Language. All the qualifications in the world will not allow a young person with AS to use them if he has no ability to understand and relate to others. Schools should consider dis-application of some subjects to make room for those subjects really essential to the child's future.

### The classroom

Make the classroom Asperger friendly. Identify and offer safe places and safe strategies to facilitate expressions of anger and frustration. Have an open exit policy where it is acceptable for a child under real stress to leave the classroom and return when calm. Lost lesson time should be made up, and in this way the young person learns, over time, to make a choice regarding his or her own ability to cope. Together with the open exit policy and safe place to go to should be a safe person to talk to – identified for his or her understanding of the disorder.

Consider the lighting, the height, texture and bouncy nature of furniture, and levels of noise. Then consider the best seat for the child – near teacher, low distraction etc.

### Resistance to change

Always be positive yourself. Reduce anxiety through predictability, routine, structure, and warnings of changes. Always provide positive and clear instructions. Use any visual cues and prompts possible to augment communication and clarity. Timers and timetables are also useful. A planned 'surprise' (with support strategies already in place) is a good way to allow children to experience a successful 'coping with change' experience.

### Poor coping skills

Provide predictability. Consider teaching the use of action planners and Filofax. Teach the use of post-its to aid memory – we all use lists. Provide discreet signals and cues that are understood by the AS pupil only (such as a coloured card on the corner of the desk). Consider the use of additional crib sheets and survival sheets in the pocket for those who need help with basic skills such as how to 'clear up'.

Tailor learning opportunities to the specific needs of a child rather than make the child fit a process. Some curriculum flexibility may be required.

Consider the issue of loneliness and isolation, perhaps facilitating interactions with peers and contact with other young people experiencing similar challenges in life, either through local groups or the many Internet and email / pen pal opportunities. Ensure supervision on the Internet and seek safe sites.

### Distraction

Consider the immediate environment and its effect on any sensory issues that may be a problem for the child – over acute sensitivity to light, noise, texture, smell etc, as mentioned above. Put up screens in the room to reduce the impact of stress triggers or remove/reduce them. Displays may cause distraction as can the type of seating and proximity of others. Low noise and natural light are also important for concentration.

Consider the possibility that mood disorders, attention deficit or depression are contributing to the problem, and whether therapeutic help from medical practitioners is indicated.

Consider if perfume, after-shave, rustling clothes, or the creaking shoes of others around is contributing to a problem, and try to reduce the impact. Allowing the use of personal stereos in class can have a surprisingly beneficial effect on overall concentration.

### Confusion and overload

Ensure timetables are predictable and personalised. Provide transition support from room to room, either by a peer or staff member. Provide pastoral and tutor time for the resolution of issues and concerns. Provide some non-social opportunities during the day such as computer time, headphones, and a safe place.

Adapt to how over-sensitive individuals with ASD can be and avoid the use of harsh criticism, sarcasm, irony and ambiguity that may cause confusion or embarrassment.

Consider very carefully the issue of homework. We do not give homework at Southlands as a matter of routine, believing that out of school hours are needed for the essential life and social skills that are so under developed. Time is made in the school day for all curriculum demands and our examination results appear unaffected.

### Anxiety

Increase independence and choice-making opportunities (it can be helpful to limit choices), and support a gradual taking of control by the pupil. Adopt a non-confrontational approach to discipline and always make time to explain why behaviour is inappropriate and discover reasons for it. Individuals may simply not understand or appreciate the possible consequences. Consider the possible delayed/ different impact and belief about any significant event, loss or bereavement on an individual with AS/ASD and take supportive action. Often this is just time to talk, explain and normalise emotions that are confusing. Keep an open dialogue with families, as it can be crucial.

Luke's older sister had a friend who died in a car crash just after passing her test. When Luke's sister began taking driving lessons Luke's behaviour deteriorated at school in a very alarming way. Luke was consumed with anxiety that the same fate awaited his sister on passing her test. Without a close and open spirited relationship by telephone with this family living some way away in Wales we would not have identified the belief behind the boy's behaviour. Counselling and information on causes and effects, predictable events and pure chance, improved the situation.

### Personal space issues

Identify the proximity comfort zone of individuals with AS and reduce threats to self-esteem, confidence, coping and safety by accepting and responding respectfully to their needs in this matter. Increase toleration levels of touch and crowds over time, by supported experience of such things. Increase relaxation opportunities and strategies and in so doing teach self-management and what works in certain situations. Provide opportunities for space away from others during the school day (headphones, special interests, TV, computer etc).

### Poor motivation

Consider what cues and motivators the individual responds well to and increase their use. Ensure there is no opportunity for boredom by the consistent provision of sufficient, meaningful and varied work in every lesson. Be obvious about the beginning and end of each lesson, and be clear about how long each activity lasts. All lessons for pupils with AS should have a structure; tell them what is going to happen, do it, and then tell them what they just did, and, evaluatively, how well they did with it. Use timers if needed. Be sure the tasks are actually achievable, and break them down into achievable steps. Reward each step.

Some pupils struggle in class, especially if they have a history of failure, or have been out of school for a while. Many can and do attend lessons if allowed to listen whilst 'doing something else', often reading a book. Do not dismiss this as time wasting, as some simple checking usually confirms attention is being paid – but perhaps not in the way we would prefer. Be patient.

Those pupils who struggle with the more abstract subjects can have their motivation and attention improved if they are allowed to have busy hands whilst watching or listening, such as colouring, making, modelling, fiddling etc. Be clear what the real objective is. Is it sitting still or learning?

Consider which rewards and treats are responded to and increase their use. Do not select motivators and rewards yourself, but choose them with the pupil. Rewards must be meaningful to him or her. And be very clear and careful in the use of praise.

### Praise

Praise is trickier than is perhaps apparent. We all offer praise and celebration of achievement to our children. A teacher offers praise to children on a daily basis, either as a word, a phrase or a written comment on a piece of marked work. Praise slips from our lips without effort and too often without thought or consideration of its impact, perhaps because we assume it always has a positive impact. However, for those of us working with young people with AS, the dispensing of praise should never be 'thoughtless'. Careless praise can:

- Cause a reduction in persistence and effort. Praise for work done can set up, in an anxious AS child, an awareness of a new expectation in the teacher of continued effort and success. This knowledge can prompt avoidance of similar tasks, on the part of the child, to avoid failure and therefore a criticism.
- Cause a dependency on the evaluations of adults. A situation can develop that encourages those with poor motivation to perform only on the promise of positive feedback. Pupils give up if this is not forthcoming. This is not a new notion to those of us working with AS and rewards and token economies are common for a range of activities from academic work to hair washing and hygiene. However, rewards for such minutiae of daily life are not a feature of normal adult habits and care needs to be taken in later secondary years to reduce any dependency on this by pupils with AS.
- Drag down performance. An intelligent pupil with AS who is praised routinely for all work including work well within his ability (and that he himself considers very easy) can form the view that others must think him dim or stupid. Unfortunately, he can end up believing this himself, thinking it is why he is praised for all efforts, and perhaps why he is at a special school. Such misunderstandings can prompt a low expectation of success in the future, a consequently low effort, and a 'why bother' attitude.
- Increase pressure. Some AS pupils, particularly perfectionists, can find it difficult to live up to praise once it is given, and the pressure may freeze performance because they fear the failure (imperfection) associated with 'losing' the tribute.
- Undermine motivation. Subtle inflexions in the language and delivery of the praise giver can prompt reactions in the pupil that range from delight to indifference and irritation. The praise may in any case clash with what the pupil believes about himself (and perhaps those beliefs are not being consistently challenged) and is in any case a value judgement.

Praise is a minefield! What can we do? The following list may help but is a signpost only, as there is no substitute for knowing the child well and understanding the personal preferences of their unusual and parallel world.

- Don't praise pupils but what pupils do
- Be specific, focus on act, product, worth, innovation
- Avoid phoney voices and phoney praise, deliberate strategies and the un-spontaneous, they will see through it
- Avoid comparison with others and competition
- Consider the impact of public praise. It can be as bad as public criticism

At Southlands School all pupils are asked regularly by questionnaire how they prefer to be praised for the significant. The options are in Assembly and on the head's notice board afterwards (public applause and fanfare), in written form only but on the head's notice board (semi public, without applause and fanfare), verbally in private, or a private written message. Most enjoy the sharing of achievement, others like to see it on my notice board, but a significant few prefer the less public options and need to have this need recognised.

### The school

In addition to providing the strategies detailed above, a school that is meeting the needs of those with AS should:

- Implement very clear rules, expectations and general routines, including the implementation of bullying, general conduct and discipline policies, keeping natural justice at its heart
- Provide a low distraction and calm environment preferably with small classes
- Train staff to understand AS pupils and enjoy working with them, and deploy to the AS pupils only those staff who appear to like them.
- Promote the importance of physical fitness and provide opportunities, aside from team games, to encourage physical activity, relaxation, hobbies and special interests that lift spirits and elevate mood
- Accept the importance of any restricted or unusual diet and timings of meals, encourage the drinking of plenty of water and allow adequate rest (non social time) during each day
- Offer a suitable curriculum flexible enough to offer a strengths focus and meet the needs of individuals with a spiky profile of skills and ambitions
- Demonstrate a flexible attitude to homework, especially where sleep problems prevail
- Demonstrate a flexible attitude to group playtimes
- Understand the necessity for practical and visual support, cues, timetables and sensitively provide them
- Provide for the real needs of those with Asperger Syndrome; social skills training through codes, rules, clarity and social stories, independence training and life skills teaching. Provide sex education with rights and responsibilities training, a behaviour curriculum, an emotional literacy programme, knowledge and understanding of Asperger Syndrome. Provide personal and social education that meets the needs of pupils with social and communication disorders.

### Profile of staff likely to be successful in working with those with AS

Adults should be able to demonstrate that they:

- Cannot be manipulated
- Accept and understand the disorder and what it means for the child, and to the child
- Have an open and very positive attitude that combats pupil negativity
- Have excellent verbal skills and demonstrate clarity using language naturally edited for quantity and colloquialisms
- Can enjoy and like the pupils but are firm, fair and consistent, and offer patient explanations again and again
- Have an exciting and stimulating delivery or teaching style
- Take a long view and can tactically withdraw from confrontation in the pursuit of long-term goals and do not need to win
- Have flexibility, patience and tolerance, and take nothing personally
- Can openly acknowledge error and apologise to a child when required
- Will never undermine confidence or self-worth through put-downs
- Can acknowledge the effort pupils make for small gain, and recognise their fatigue

### Finally

The following statements are my mantra, and should be repeated daily by those of us living and learning with these charming and | engaging young people.

1. Never become indispensable to a child with AS. Sharing is a life skill, and learning to share important people with others is a crucial skill for us all to learn.
2. Know you have years of work and fun ahead that will bring you great joy and many proud moments.
3. Know life will be exhausting. There will be tears. Take the journey one day at a time. Look after yourself and always take help when it is offered.
4. Expect many steps back for a few steps forward but know that progress can and will be made. You must be patient.
5. Teachers and professionals - you need support from your colleagues. Ask for it.
6. Parents - you need fun, friends who care, and a balance to your life. Try to achieve it.
7. And, in the (adapted) words of a Nun's Prayer in Salisbury Cathedral, 'Seek the strength to change what you can, accept those things that you cannot change, and find the wisdom to recognise the difference.'

### References

- Attwood, Tony (1997). *Asperger Syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Gething, Sue (2001). *First guide to Asperger Syndrome*. Cambian Education Services (OAASIS).
- Howlin, Patricia (1998). *Children with autism & Asperger Syndrome*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

### OAASIS publications

- SEN Information Sheets
- First Guide to ...
- Cards explaining 9 learning disabilities
- Legal advice Information Sheets
- SEN 'How to' guides

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