

Asperger's Syndrome

This condition falls within the Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). Common features include: high intellectual ability, fairly good communication skills (see below for some features of communication) and “normal” appearance. People with Asperger's Syndrome *may* also experience obsessive thoughts and/or compulsive behaviors.

Current thinking about Asperger's Syndrome is that among the key dysfunctions is a problem with the development of the child's “theory of mind”, which is to say that s/he has difficulty in creating mental representations of others' mind states (e.g. understanding that others have beliefs, knowledge, etc. which may be different from ones own). This difficulty affects the development of various social skills, including empathy.

Among the difficulties with social interaction which can occur in people with Asperger's Syndrome are the following:

- The person may have unusual non-verbal behaviours, for example some people with Asperger's Syndrome have difficulty in making eye contact or in maintaining that contact; whereas others may maintain eye contact more than is usual, which can be very disconcerting for the person to whom they are speaking.
- The dysfunction in theory of mind can result in a tendency to fail to adapt the content of conversation to others' interests and knowledge (e.g. talking endlessly of one topic which is of interest only to the speaker) and a tendency to fail to notice non-verbal cues which indicate that the listener has lost interest.
- In some cases the person may develop a very fixed, rigid style of social interaction and may be disconcerted if others react in ways they find unpredictable.
- The person with Asperger's Syndrome may not understand metaphorical language and will often take such comments *literally* rather than as the speaker intended. They may miss jokes and may also fail to grasp the true meaning intended in ironic or sarcastic comments.
- The person may make unwarranted assumptions that the listener shares their own knowledge (and therefore may fail to tell the listener key facts).

- The comments made by a person with Asperger's Syndrome can sometimes seem very hurtful or tactless, though in fact they are intended simply as observations and there was no intention to cause distress.
- Some people with Asperger's Syndrome develop obsessive thoughts or compulsive behaviours, which are sometimes expressed as an intense interest in one particular topic or activity.
- Some people with Asperger's Syndrome have extremely good memories (for material which interests them) and in particular they may have a very strong visual memory.

If you are concerned about a student with Asperger's Syndrome or if you require more information on how to support them, please contact Enabling Services for more information.