

BURST THE BUBBLE ON AUTISM!

AUTISM
ASPERGER ACT

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April 2010 Autism Month!

BURST THE BUBBLE ON AUTISM!

an awareness-raising activity of Autism Asperger ACT

Autism Bubble Day 6-9 April 2010

Blowing bubbles is fun! The more you blow, the more laughter will "bubble" over!

We are using the symbolism of bubbles to represent the nature of autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). Bubble Day has been designed to help children with ASDs to burst out of their bubble of isolation, and to raise awareness and understanding of autism in your school's community. Today we know a lot about these pervasive developmental disorders, but we still need to get the message out to the community.

As teachers, you can play a significant role in helping to achieve this through developing strategies and programs for children with ASDs in the classroom, helping others to understand, and integrating children with ASDs into the classroom and playground. We hope that having a great day at school will help you to develop a program that is not only fun but furthers understanding of ASDs in the community.

For parents and children with ASDs, life can be lonely and feelings of isolation are often acute. We appreciate your helping to create an environment of acceptance and understanding.

Many children with an ASD are locked into a world of their own. Reaching out to engage with others and to seek understanding is not easy for them, and many are unable to do so. We are asking for your help with building understanding on their behalf, and to have fun while you do it!

ASDs constitute a range of neurological disorders and require complex diagnosis. In the classroom you might wonder why one child with "autism" is different from another, despite the diagnosis being the same.

Many parents will inform you of an ASD Diagnosis, but as with all children, no two children with an ASD are the same. Each will have a range of strengths and weaknesses unique to themselves and often it is necessary to get more information from the parents regarding the child's individual abilities and needs. As the busy classroom is often overwhelming for a child with an ASD, it can be helpful for the teacher if the parents take videos of their child at home.

This program contains many resources: activities for bubble day, stories about children who have an ASD, books and DVDs, and articles to provide you with expert, current knowledge about the disorders. We hope you find them useful!

Let's have fun and make a difference!



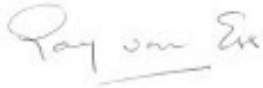
Thank you for taking part in AACT's Bubble Day!

We hope you and your pupils enjoy the activities you choose, and that you are able to help us to raise awareness and understanding of autism spectrum disorders in your school community.

Our message ...

Autism Asperger ACT (AAACT) is keen to spread the word and help teachers and parents understand the complexities of autism spectrum disorders. We are here to advise and provide support. Our committee members are happy to visit your school or your parents' group to talk about the disorders and to suggest ways in which you and others can support children in the spectrum.

We warmly welcome interested people to join our association — membership is free.



Gay von Ess

President AAACT

Use our resources, come to our workshops and talks!

Check out our web site: www.autismaspergeract.com.au

“Book boxes” for classroom and parent use are available to borrow.

A list of web sites, DVDs and useful books is in the research component of this kit.

Talks about autism and Asperger syndrome can be arranged.

Upcoming workshops you may like to attend at AAACT:

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| 3 May | June and Jerry Groden from the Groden Center in the US will be discussing anxiety of people with ASDs
www.grodencenter.org |
| 17th August | Carol Gray — a gifted communicator who will be talking about creating social stories.
www.thegraycenter.org |
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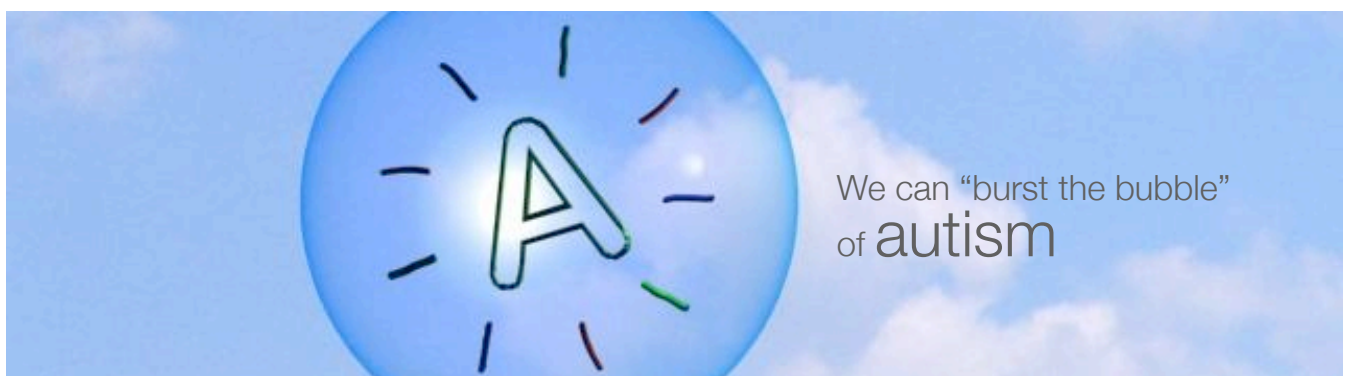
For further information and support, contact:

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BURST THE BUBBLE OF AUTISM!

Let's have fun and make a **difference!**

Autism Bubble Day 6-9 April 2010



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Playing the recorder with the help of bubbles for kids with ASDs; An outline of ASDs; The Discovery of “aspie” criteria.

Overview of Bubble Day

goals and resources

Autism Bubble Day 6-9 April 2010

Goals	Suggested audience	Resources	Action/activities
Developing an understanding of autism	Teachers	<i>Autism Spectrum Disorders</i> Myths and Facts about Autism Spectrum Disorders Letter from a teacher	Distribute to staff
Developing an understanding of autism from the perspective of a child with autism	Teachers and parents	<i>Ten Things Your Student with Autism Wishes You Knew</i> by Ellen Notbohm	Distribute to staff Include in your school newsletter Ask a parent to talk to your class — we have provided pointers to give to parents (page 15)
Developing an understanding of autism from the perspective of a child with autism	Other students – probably from year 3-4 up	DVD Intricate Minds 2 (a copy of this was sent to all primary schools in 2008) <i>For Kids' Eyes Only</i> by Gay von Ess Daniel's Story	Viewing and discussion of DVD Discussion of pamphlet Daniel's story Flyer: Introducing Olivia
Creating a supportive environment in the playground	Teachers	Playground Tips from Sue Larkey	Distribute to staff
Helping children with autism develop social skills and friendships within the school community	Teachers and parents	Friendship and the child with autism	Peer support activities, clubs such as chess, science etc
Developing an understanding of the needs of families coping with autism	Teachers and parents	The first rule of Autism Club by a Canberra mum Daniel's Story Flyer: Introducing Olivia	Distribute to staff Include in your school newsletter
Having a fun activity blowing bubbles	Teachers and parents	Suggested Bubble Day Activities; Recipe for Bubble Mix	See Suggested Bubble Day Activities in this pack
Developing an understanding of the benefits of bubble blowing	Teachers and parents	Bubbles and Autism Spectrum Disorder Learning to play the recorder for children with ASDs	Distribute to staff Include in your school newsletter

Help us to “Burst the Bubble” of **autism** and help children and adults to understand and accept.

Bubbles and autism spectrum disorders

One of the aims of Bubble Day is to encourage children to accept and value diversity

For someone with an ASD, bubbles have significance in the early childhood years through to adulthood. They can be used in activities for skill development and the figurative expression of feelings of isolation and in a technique for developing communication skills. Through understanding bubbles and their many forms, we can “Burst the Bubble” of autism and help the community to understand and accept people with ASDs.

“I live within a bubble”
is how many autistic adults describe their sense of emotional isolation.

Early childhood years

Blowing bubbles can be lots of fun and is a very therapeutic activity for children with ASDs and others with speech impairments. Some of the developmental benefits include:

- improving oral motor skills and control of breath by blowing bubbles (see article on learning to play the recorder)
- building attention skills as children concentrate on blowing bubbles
- strengthening motor skills and improving hand-eye coordination by reaching for and popping bubbles
- relaxing with the rhythm of blowing bubbles as they watch them float.

Feelings of isolation

“I live within a bubble” is how many adults with autism describe the sense of emotional isolation they experience. Living within society but confused and baffled by the behaviours of other people creates a feeling of living within the community but somehow apart from it. The inability to “read” facial expression and body language, and understand emotions and communication challenges, can mean many attempts at friendship are unsuccessful, forcing a retreat into solitary pleasures to avoid negative experiences of attempting to make friends.

Communication!

Conversation and thought bubbles are used in “comic strip conversations” — a visual method devised by Carol Gray of breaking down, analysing and dealing with problem behaviour of children with ASDs. This technique can be used to understand situations from the child’s perspective and gain valuable insight into their unique way of thinking. Comic strip conversations can also be used to help a student with an ASD to gain insight into another person’s perspective.

The sequence of a problem situation is broken down into the main steps and a different picture is drawn for each, using stick figures. In each picture, the child is asked to say what s/he was thinking and feeling and what s/he thought the other person was thinking and feeling. These are written in thought bubbles, using different coloured pens for different emotions. The child chooses the colours for the different emotions. Initially in this activity, you are listening and asking for information; and later, beginning to move towards corrective information and problem solving.



Suggested Bubble Day activities

For younger children

Make bubble mix:

Get the students involved in making their own bubble mix.

Bubble blowing competitions:

See who can make the biggest, smallest or most bubbles.

Create bubble blowers:

Make bubble blowers out of household items, e.g. coat hangers, pipe cleaners, pieces of bent wire, a tin can with both ends cut off, cookie cutters and straws.

Read stories:

Read and discuss books that value differences, e.g. Round Fish Square Bowl, by Tom Skinner.

Bubble prints 1:

Mix 1 tablespoon of powder paint and 3 tablespoons of water in a shallow dish or cup. Blow gently into this mix with straws and place paper over the top. This will create a beautiful bubble print. Paper created makes lovely wrapping paper or background for a collage.

Bubble prints 2:

Give each child a piece of white posterboard or a sheet of heavy paper. Have other children gently blow different coloured bubbles into the air, and invite the children to catch the bubbles on their papers.

Water trolley:

Make a massive bubble bath and see how high you can make it. Encourage the students to take a handful of bubbles for fun play.

Bubble circles:

Students stand in a circle blowing bubbles. Say "Ready, set, go!" and see how many bubbles they can make. Children in the centre of the circle can pop them.

Activity books:

Create a [Bubble Activity Book](#).

For older children

Intricate Minds 2:

In this DVD children with Asperger syndrome explain how it affects them and how they would like other children to treat them. It is aimed at the middle to upper primary school age group.

Science of bubble blowing: shapes and sizes:

Make different shapes with different materials such as pipe cleaners and straws. The straws can then be joined with connectors from a straw construction kit. This can be done in pairs and small groups.

Child in a bubble:

Prepare a bucketful of bubble solution and after it sets for at least a day (the longer the better), pour it into a small toddler pool. Place a hula hoop into the pool and a small step stool in the middle of the hula hoop. Set a child on the stool and then lift the hula hoop up over the child. As you do this a giant bubble should form around the child.

Mathematical bubbles:

Pop a bubble on paper and measure its diameter. Then grade according to size.

Passing bubbles:

Use a funnel dipped in bubble mix to pick up a bubble and pass it onto another student.

Bubble High Jump: Stretch out a piece of rope and get students to blow bubbles over the rope using a hoop. See how long they can do this as the height of the rope is raised.

Touchabubble:

Bubble mix that sticks together and can be held is available for purchase from the Australian Geographic Shop. Students could see how far they can walk with a bubble on their finger or head.

Recipe for Bubble Mix:

3 parts dishwashing liquid, 7 parts hot water, 1 part glycerol (or sugar).

The glycerol helps the bubble to last longer by slowing thinning at the top of the bubble. It is available from chemists and some supermarkets. If you cannot get any glycerol, use sugar instead.

Mix thoroughly.

Tips: If possible leave overnight or longer. This tends to make bubbles of a better quality.

For something different add some scented oil or powdered tempera paint to the mix.

For more: Check out this Questacon web page <http://mathssquad.questacon.edu.au/bubbles.html>

Building relationships in the classroom, playground and beyond

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A teacher's insight

A challenge ... but rewarding and enjoyable

When I was asked to write about what I enjoyed about teaching children with autism, it really made me stop and think.

I really enjoy working with children with autism – helping to guide their development and watching them achieve things that would never have seemed possible. For example an overnight excursion to Sydney staying at the backpackers with peak-hour train rides, ferry and monorail rides, an IMAX experience and a pyjama trip to Luna Park!

It's great to be able to work with parents to support them in their role as prime educators and provide opportunities for the students to experience all of the school events that are normally taken for granted by mainstream children — for example, camps, carnivals, excursions, singing at Canberra Theatre with Limelight, and graduation dinners.

I believe that every child can learn and that my key role as an educator is to provide an environment, in conjunction with parents and the general school community, that uses the child's interests, talents and skills to further develop and broaden their skills, and to maximise their ability to be everything they can be.

Teaching allows me to work with a broad team of people to make a positive difference in the lives of those children and their parents. Every day I gain something from opening my eyes to their experiences — looking at life through different coloured glasses. It's a privilege!

Steph Martin

Follow-on suggestions:

Invite a parent to give a talk about autism spectrum disorders to your class or school assembly, or your school's parent body.

AAACT can also help with speakers — see page 3.

Include an article from this kit or the AACT website in your school's newsletter.

Add a copy of *For Kids Eyes Only* for pupils to take home; give to newly enrolled children; add to your school's newsletter; send to the president of your parent body.

Playground tips

by Sue Larkey

Some ideas to try and thoughts on play

Most children go out in the playground to relax, socialise, eat, drink, go to the toilet, run around and come back to class refreshed. Unfortunately for many children with ASDs, the playground is the most stressful part of their school day. For some students we may need to devise structures to help reduce the anxiety of the playground. (This also includes “outside play” in the early years while at pre-school, daycare etc.)

Clubs:

Chess club, music etc.

Using visuals:

Circuit / Schedule of Activities using visuals. This should also include drink, toilet, line-up etc.

Safe area:

If children have a repetitive action or other behaviour that they do to calm themselves during the break, you may need to designate a safe area for this activity. I recommend within view of a teacher.

Smaller areas:

Many playgrounds are big areas where the rules change depending on the area. For example, the oval may have different rules to the asphalt. You may need to start with just one area and teach children with ASDs how to play in that area, teaching them games suitable for that area and appropriate interactions. Then add a new area, and so on.

Shorter breaks:

The break may be too long. Some children are fine in the first short break, but they find lunch too long. These children may benefit from a shorter time in the playground. (An indicator is an increase of undesirable behaviours towards the end of play.)

Activity box:

Many schools give out physical education equipment (balls, hoops etc) but not all students find these easy activities, as most require good gross motor skills. Put out a box of books, Lego, a mat with cars/blocks, dinosaurs, Pokemon cards and a drawing table.

I find it particularly wonderful when children say, “I do not have anyone to play with!” You can say, “Read a book from the book box.”

Often it is not just children with ASDs who are lost or confused at breaks.

Having a range of activities ensures a “meeting point” for these children. It always warms my heart to see two children reading a book together or sitting drawing together who five minutes earlier were upset because they had no one to play with.

It is much easier to direct to an activity than trying to find a “child to play with.”

Playground tips

CONTINUED

Undesirable behaviours

(Excerpt taken from *Teacher Assistants BIG RED Book of Ideas* page 32)

These often take the form of:

- dobbing
- following other students around but not engaging
- escaping and running away
- irrelevant, rude comments
- wanting to be inside
- constantly sitting outside staff rooms, office etc
- hitting other students
- walking around periphery of playground
- walking and talking to teachers regarding a special interest
- sitting and reading books (for girls).

Why do students exhibit these behaviours?

The following are some possible explanations:

- they want friends, but don't know how to join in with other children
- they want to be good
- they feel high anxiety in the playground and during unstructured time
- high anxiety causes them to lose the basic social skills they have already learnt. They are unable to generalise play skills learnt in various settings (e.g., they may cope with losing in a game played in the classroom, but struggle with losing in playground activities).

The above article, which comes from Sue Larkey's *Success E-zine*, has been included with the author's permission.

You can subscribe to this free magazine by going to Sue Larkey's website:

<http://www.suelarkey.com/Ezine3.php>

When you sign up you get smart strategies, information articles and action steps to make teaching and living with ASDs a success.

We can "Burst the Bubble" of **autism** and help children and adults to **understand and accept**.

Friendship and the child with autism

Forming meaningful relationships

Children with ASDs have tremendous difficulty understanding other people. This hinders their ability to form meaningful relationships with peers. The difficulties are not insurmountable; they can be ameliorated with careful peer mentoring, training and incidental learning overseen by supportive adults.

A child with an ASD can experience difficulty processing verbal language, reading and understanding other emotions (theory of mind) and understanding non-verbal gestures. Often referred to as “egocentric”, children with ASDs follow their own agendas and areas of interest.

Social understanding

Lack of social understanding colours every experience in their lives. Often young children with ASDs show little interest in other children and forming friendships. Like all children, there is great variation and some are very talkative, seeking attention, while others are more withdrawn. However, children with ASDs desperately need to learn social skills to enable them to function and progress independently as adults.

Growing up

As these children progress through childhood toward adolescence, many begin to crave friendships; but at the same time, they become more aware of how they come across to others in social interactions and feel that they do not quite “fit in”. This unfulfilled desire for friendship on top of school pressure to conform, constant rejection and harassment can often cause clinical depression in teenagers with ASDs. They grow more isolated even as they crave more interaction with others.

Socialising

Some people with ASDs can and do form friendships. Enlisting the assistance of caring and nurturing children in the classroom to mentor the child with an ASD may help to develop social skills.

Children with ASDs benefit from help in the following areas:

- reading non-verbal cues
- learning how to take another’s perspective
- overcoming difficulties encountered
- learning about kindness and ways to be kind
- taking turns in activities and conversation
- learning what to say and what not to say
- achieving empathy and ways to display empathy for others.

Firm friendships may develop with children with ASDs – they may become loyal and dependable friends.

Almost 100% of children with ASDs experience bullying during their school years. Unless specifically asked if they are being bullied, the child may not be forthcoming and the offence will remain unreported. It is important for teachers to be vigilant, be aware of potential problems, and intervene when necessary.

Help us to “Burst the Bubble” of **autism** and help children and adults to understand and accept.

Girls with autism spectrum disorders

by Sue Larkey

Autism Bubble Day 6-9 April 2010

Girls with ASDs are often undiagnosed, because original diagnostic criteria have a boy bias. The criteria were created by actually examining mainly boys, and the girls can be very different. I think we all know “neuro-typical” boys and girls are very different in their social, communication and behaviour. There are many characteristics that are very similar to boys with ASDs but I thought I would list the main differences for girls with ASDs.

Ten ways girls with ASDs differ from boys with ASDs

- Their special interests are usually animals, music, art, literature.
- They often have a very good imagination which includes imaginary friends, games, being animals or taking on persona of other girls.
- They often see speech therapists for their speech and may be diagnosed with specific language disorders; however, there is something different about this girl no one can quite put their finger on.
- They often play with older children or much younger children. This play is sometimes unusual: for example “mums and dads”, but she will want to play the same role and game every time. She usually wants to be the pet or baby, whereas most girls want to be the mum or dad.
- They often have hyperlexia — the ability to read but comprehension does not always match their reading skills. They are often the class book worm or write stories, but they write the same story over and over, changing a few characters. Many have a special interest in literature.
- They have unusual sensory processing, like the boys, but bigger fluctuations often going from one extreme to the other.
- They get anxious like boys, but their anxiety is rarely physical or disruptive. In fact many have great coping mechanisms at school; however, the family see a very different child at home where the anxiety can explode.
- Often their difficulties with social skills are called “shy”, “quiet”, “solitary”.
- They often like to organize and arrange objects. I watched one little girl spend hours seemingly playing “my little ponies” — but on closer examination she was just arranging and re-arranging the horses over and over.
- The main difference is there are *many* more undiagnosed girls/women than boys/men.

Currently we only diagnose 1 girl to 7 boys. Many psychologists predict that in future the ratio could be more like 5 to 7 as we become more aware of this group.

Recommended resources are available online at www.suelarkey.com

This article is included with permission of the author.

Help us to “Burst the Bubble” of **autism** and help children and adults to understand and accept.

Autism Asperger ACT

Sibs Club!

Autism Bubble Day 6-9 April 2010

Sibs Club! is an activity-based support group specifically for siblings or primary-age family members of people on the autism spectrum.

We have fun activities and discussions about things the children bring up in conversation. *Sibs Club!* is not a therapeutic group as such, but there are therapeutic moments that occur as we chat about issues relevant to the children. *Sibs Club!* members have input into development of AACT's program of activities each year.

Bobbi Cook, a child counsellor, facilitates the activities of the *Sibs Club!* supported by a team of volunteers.

Bobbi says "We provide a supportive fun environment for children to be with peers experiencing similar things with family members who have ASDs. We run activities and outings that many children may not be able to do in their family situation. Children may join the group from the middle of kindergarten through to year 6. Older children are welcome to come along as junior leaders and helpers."

Sibs Club! meets on the 3rd Friday of each month from 6 to 8 pm.

The *Sibs Club!* is run by Autism Asperger ACT. To participate, families are required to be members.

Membership of AACT is free; there is a fee for joining the *Sibs Club!*

Contact: Polly McIntyre, Business Manager
Autism Asperger ACT — 0406 726 674.

Program for 2010 3rd Friday of the month

Friday March 20 *Birthday Party night.* Yummy food and lots of fun games at BCC.

Friday April 16 *Boy Girl Night.* The children will split into 2 groups and do traditional boy / girl activities

Friday May 21 *Rock Climbing* at Hume indoor rock climbing. Parent helpers for belaying appreciated tonight.

Friday June 18 *Cooking night* at BCC.

Friday July 16 *Xmas in July* at BCC. HO HO HO — we celebrate Christmas in style.

Friday August 20 *Trip to Kids City* in Mitchell.

Friday September 17 *Biggies and Littlies night.* Children will be split into two groups and do some separate activities

Friday October 15 *Fancy Dress Night* with dinner and games at BCC.

Friday November 19 *Zone 3* in Belconnen.

Help us to "Burst the Bubble" of **autism** and help children and adults to understand and accept.

Pointers for parents giving a talk on ASDs

from Autism Asperger ACT

Autism Bubble Day 6-9 April 2010

Sometimes parents are asked to give a talk to their child's class about autism spectrum disorders and are uncertain where to start.

An abbreviated form of Carol Gray's *The Sixth Sense* is always a good starting point. (This booklet is available through Autism Asperger ACT's library.)

Carol talks to the children about difference — and in particular the difference caused when one of the five senses is impaired. The children quickly relate to what it would be like not to be able to see or hear. Valuable discussion can then be generated around how to best help a hearing-impaired or vision-impaired child.

After a more cursory discussion of the other senses, taste, touch, smell (children who have allergies and anaphylactic reactions will relate to these), the adult introduces the concept of the sixth sense — the social sense.

This can be explained to the children as a difficulty to make friends, interpret body language and understand what other people think.

The main focus of the discussion needs to be on helping the children to come up with ways that they can help children who have difficulty with the sixth sense.

Get a teacher to scribe the ideas that arise from this brainstorming session.

It can also be interesting to ask all the children to keep their eyes shut and then raise their hand if they think they have difficulty making friends. It is surprising how many children do.

Whether the child with an ASD is present for this discussion is something that should be discussed privately with the child beforehand. Obviously if the child has not been told about his/her diagnosis, the words autism, Asperger syndrome or ASD should not be mentioned.

Autism Asperger ACT has boxes of children's books on ASDs for loan to schools.

Please contact our business manager, Polly McIntyre, if you wish to borrow a box for a term:

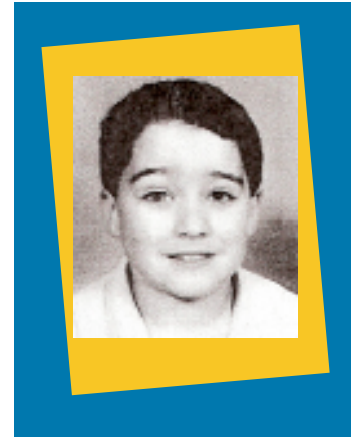
bm@autismaspergeract.com.au

Help us to "Burst the Bubble" of **autism** and help children and adults to understand and accept.

Hello! I'm Daniel — this is my story

Here Daniel's mother has described Daniel's feelings on entering school. She helps us understand how children with ASDs feel in a school environment. This can be a good way of explaining to your pupils the daily life and the concerns of a child like Daniel.

Thank you, Daniel, for giving permission for us to use your story!



My name is Daniel and I go to a Canberra primary school. Let me tell you a little bit about me.

I like going to school but sometimes it can be a bit difficult for me. This is because I have autism. Autism is a disability. This means that sometimes I have difficulty doing things which other people may find easy or just do without having to think about it.

You can't see autism like you can with some physical disabilities. Autism makes me think, learn and understand differently, and sometimes I act differently.

There are many people in the world who have a disability and it is OK to have a disability. I know I have autism and it just means that I do some things differently from other people and it is OK to be different.

There is a lot to learn about me and my autism. If you have any questions please ask your teacher or my mum — they will be happy to help!

How my autism makes me different

My autism affects the way I see and hear the world.

Sometimes I see things differently from other people:

Sometimes I walk around in my own world and do not notice other people. I sometimes bump into them because I do not notice them.

I may put myself in danger because I walk through the school car park and forget to look for cars.

I may walk out of bounds in the playground.

I may walk through some other students' game that they are playing because I did not notice them.

I do not do these things on purpose — I just do not notice them.

My autism also affects the way I hear things. Sometimes when I am walking around in my own thoughts I do not hear things. It may look like I am ignoring people or that I am deaf. I can hear very well — actually sometimes I hear too many things, and this may cause me to get a bit distressed or upset. When the noise stops I feel OK again.



Daniel's story

continued

What I like

I like to play Nintendo games, especially Pokemon, Playstations, Gameboys and computer games. I am very good at all of these.

I like watching videos. My favourite videos are Pokemon, Shrek, Harry Potter, Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory, and lots more.

I like to eat chicken nuggets and chips. My favourite take-away place is KFC.

I also like to go to Sizzlers for tea because I can get my own drink and ice cream.

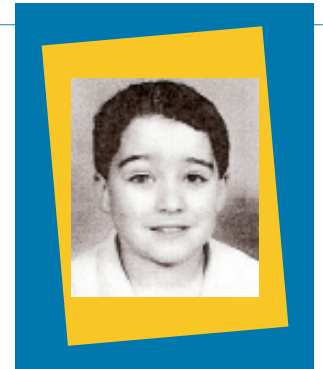
I like to giggle and repeat stories that I have heard. I do this as I am walking around and some people think this is a bit weird but it is not as I think this is fun.

I can repeat many stories word-for-word — I have a very good memory.

I like to run — sometimes nowhere in particular — and I like to make funny noises when I do this. I am OK and you do not need to worry as I am having fun.

I like skateboards. I like to play Tony Hawk's CD at home on my computer. I like to do The Ollie, Grinds, Flip Tricks and Lip Tricks.

I like to watch other children play, especially when they are playing ball games. Sometimes I find it hard to join in but I like to watch and you can say hello to me and tell me your name. If I don't talk, this means that I am in my own thoughts but I am OK — so maybe you could try talking to me another time.



What I do not like

I do not like really loud noises — this really upsets me. I don't like loud whistles or screams. Sometimes I scream when I hear these noises and I will stop when the noise stops.

I do not like crowds. I like to see a few people at a time but I do not like to be surrounded by people.

I do not like people holding me still. I do not like people pulling me along by my arm or holding my arm or hand tightly.

I do not like people yelling at me. If you want to tell me something, please tell me quietly. If I do not seem to be listening and it is not important, please try again later.

Can you help me, please?

Sometimes when I am distressed I forget to ask the teacher for help. If you see that I may need help can you please tell the teacher?

Can you please keep on eye on me in the playground to make sure that I am safe? I may need someone to tell the teacher if I am doing something that may be dangerous or if I walk towards the road or I just need help.

If I look distressed because of loud noises can you please take me to a teacher or ask the teacher for help?

Don't forget to give me space to play. I just need you to be aware that I am in the playground and keep an eye on me.

Thank you for helping me and being a friend.

Introducing Olivia!

Olivia's mother decided that producing a colourful flyer to introduce Olivia to her new schoolmates was a good idea. It was sent out with the weekly newsletter to all families in the school. It has been a great success, explaining her ASD to her fellow pupils, and children starting at the school.

Thank you Helen and Olivia for giving permission for us to use this flyer!



Hi, my name is Olivia and I am in grade one. I live in Jerrabomberra with my mum Helen. I am new to school this year. I thought it might be nice to introduce myself and say hi because sometimes you might see me in the school playground or at school activities or sometimes one of your kids might tell you something funny about me at home.

My mum tells everyone I am “special” and that is because I am mildly autistic. “Autistic” is a very big word but it might help explain to you why sometimes I have trouble concentrating. Things like sitting still for school assemblies are really hard for me and you might notice that I have my very own pink flower mat that my teacher uses to remind me where to sit.

I am also very “social” so I might come up and say hi to you and maybe give you a hug. My teacher and mum are trying to remind me that not everyone wants to be hugged. They are still working on that one!

I love books and I am a very good reader. I also love anything related to water — I am a great swimmer and I really love the beach.

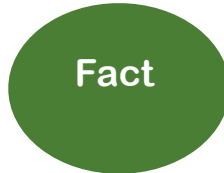
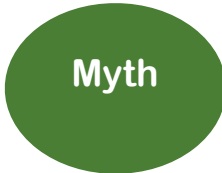
If you have any questions about me you can talk to my teachers and of course if you see my mum or me in the playground, please say hi!

Building an understanding of ASDs

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Myths and facts about ASDs

There are many different myths surrounding autism spectrum disorders in the world. Here are some of the facts.



ASDs are rare.	ASDs affect 1 in every 100 children in Australia.
ASDs are an emotional disturbance.	ASDs are neuro-developmental disorders.
Poor parenting causes ASDs.	Parents do not cause ASDs. Parents need support to manage difficult behaviours with structure and consistency.
There is a cure for ASDs, or people will grow out of the disorder.	People do not “grow out of” ASDs. With early intervention and good educational programs, progress may be significantly better.
Everyone with an ASD behaves in the same way.	People with ASDs are individuals with strengths and needs unique to each individual.
All people with an ASD have special savant or genius-like skills.	Very few people with an ASD possess special savant or genius-like abilities. However, many have interests that they pursue with intensity, using high memory ability.
All children with an ASD should be taught the same way.	There isn't one single treatment that is appropriate for all children with an ASD at all times.
People with ASDs have to be in special programs “for the autistic”.	Individually designed programs best meet the needs of a person affected by an ASD. They need to be learning, living and working in settings where there is ample opportunity to communicate and interact with others who have the skills they need to acquire.

10 things your student with autism wishes you knew

Children's Voice article, May–June 2005
by Ellen Notbohm

When my article, 'What Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew', appeared in the November–December 2004 issue of *Children's Voice*, I couldn't have imagined the response. Reader after reader wrote to tell me the piece should be required reading for all social service workers, teachers, and relatives of children with autism.

"Just what my daughter would say if she could," said one mother. "Screams wisdom throughout every word and sentence," said another. As the article travelled from website to website, I pondered what was happening and decided the resonance was coming from the fact that the piece spoke with a child's voice, just like the name of the magazine in which it first appeared.

Behaviour is communication

All behaviour occurs for a reason. It tells you, even when my words can't, how I perceive what is happening around me. Negative behaviour interferes with my learning process. But merely interrupting these behaviours is not enough — teach me to exchange these behaviours with proper alternatives so real learning can flow.

Start by believing this

I truly do want to learn to interact appropriately. No child wants the negative feedback we get from "bad" behaviour. Negative behaviour usually means I am overwhelmed by disordered sensory systems, cannot communicate my wants or needs, or don't understand what's expected of me. Look beyond the behaviour to find the source of my resistance. Keep notes as to what happened immediately before the behaviour — people involved, time of day, activities, and settings. Over time, a pattern may emerge.

There is a great need and, I hope, a great willingness — to understand the world as special-needs children experience it.

Never assume anything

Without facts to back it up, an assumption is only a guess. I may not know or understand the rules. I may have heard the instructions but not understood them. Maybe I knew it yesterday, but can't retrieve it today. Ask yourself:

Are you sure I really know how to do what you're asking of me? If I suddenly need to run to the bathroom every time I'm asked to do a math sheet, maybe I don't know how, or I'm afraid my effort won't be good enough. Stick with me through enough repetitions of the task to where I feel competent. I may need more practice to master tasks than other kids do.

Are you sure I actually know the rules? Do I understand the reason for the rule (safety, economy, health)? Am I breaking the rule because of an underlying cause? Maybe I pinched a snack out of my lunch bag early because I was worried about finishing my science project, I didn't eat breakfast, and now I'm famished.

Look for sensory issues first

A lot of my resistant behaviours come from sensory discomfort. One example is fluorescent lighting, which has been shown over and over to be a major problem for children like me. The hum it produces is very disturbing to my hypersensitive hearing, and the pulsing nature of the light can distort my visual perception, making objects in the room appear to be in constant movement. An incandescent lamp on my desk will reduce the flickering, as will the new, natural light tubes.

Or maybe I need to sit closer to you; I don't understand what you're saying because there are too many noises in between — that lawnmower outside

10 things your student with autism wishes you knew

CONTINUED

the window, Jasmine whispering to Tanya, chairs scraping, the pencil sharpener grinding. Ask the school occupational therapist for sensory-friendly ideas for the classroom. It's actually good for all kids, not just me.

Provide me a break to allow for self-regulation before I need it

A quiet, carpeted corner of the room with some pillows, books, and headphones allows me a place to go to regroup when I feel overwhelmed, but isn't so far physically removed that I won't be able to rejoin the activity flow of the classroom smoothly.

Tell me what you want me to do in the positive rather than the imperative

"You left a mess by the sink!" is just a statement of fact to me. I'm not able to infer that what you really mean is, "Please rinse out your paint cup and put the paper towels in the trash." Don't make me guess or have figure out what I should do.

Keep your expectations reasonable

That all-school assembly with hundreds of kids packed into bleachers, and some guy droning on about the candy sale, is uncomfortable and meaningless to me. Maybe I'd be better off helping the school secretary put together the newsletter.

Help me transition between activities

It takes me a little longer to move from one activity to the next. Give me a five-minute warning and a two-minute warning before an activity changes, and build in a few extra minutes on your end to compensate. A simple clock face or timer on my desk gives me a visual cue as to the time of the next transition and helps me handle it more independently.

Don't make a bad situation worse

I know that even though you are a mature adult, you can sometimes make bad decisions in the heat of the moment. I truly don't mean to melt down, show

anger, or otherwise disrupt your classroom. You can help me get over it more quickly by not responding with inflammatory behaviour of your own. Beware of these responses that prolong rather than resolve a crisis:

- raising the pitch or volume of your voice (I hear the yelling and shrieking, but not the words)
- mocking or mimicking me (sarcasm, insults, name-calling, or humiliating remarks will not embarrass me out of the behaviour)
- making unsubstantiated accusations
- invoking a double standard
- comparing me to a sibling or another student
- bringing up previous or unrelated events, or
- lumping me into a general category ("Kids like you are all the same.").

Criticize gently

Be honest — how good are you at accepting "constructive" criticism? The maturity and self-confidence to be able to do that may be light years beyond my abilities right now. Should you never correct me? Of course not. But do it kindly, so that I actually hear you.

- Please, never try to impose discipline or correction when I'm angry, distraught, overstimulated, shut down, anxious, or otherwise emotionally unable to interact with you.
- Remember that I will react as much, if not more, to the qualities of your voice than to the actual words. I will hear the shouting and the scorn, but I won't understand the words and therefore won't be able to figure out what I did wrong. Speak in low tones, and lower your body as well, so that you are communicating on my level rather than towering over me.
- Help me understand the inappropriate behaviour in a supportive, problem-solving way rather than punishing or scolding me.

We can help children and adults to understand and accept.

10 things your student with autism wishes you knew

CONTINUED

- Help me pin down the feelings that triggered the behavior. I may say I was angry, but maybe I was afraid, frustrated, sad, or jealous. Probe beyond my first response.
- Practise or role-play — show me — a better way to handle the situation next time. A storyboard, photo essay, or social story helps. Expect to role-play a lot over time. There are no one-time fixes. And when I do get it right next time, tell me right away.
- It helps me if you yourself are modeling proper behaviour for responding to criticism.

Offer real choices — and only real choices.

Don't offer me a choice or ask a "Do you want ...?" question unless you're willing to accept no for an answer. "No" may be my honest answer to "Do you want to read out loud now?" or "Would you like to share paints with William?" It's hard for me to trust you when choices aren't really choices at all.

You take for granted the amazing number of choices you have on a daily basis. You

constantly choose one option over others, knowing that both having choices and being able to choose provides you control over your life and future. For me, choices are much more limited, which is why it can be harder to feel confident about myself. Providing me with frequent choices helps me become more actively engaged in everyday life.

Whenever possible, offer a choice within a "have-to." Rather than saying, "Write your name and the date on the top of the page," say, "Would you like to write your name first, or would you like to write the date first?" or "Which would you like to write first, letters or numbers?" Follow by showing me: "See how Jason is writing his name on his paper?" Giving me choices helps me learn appropriate behaviour, but I also need to understand there will

be times when you can't. When this happens, I won't get as frustrated if I understand why:

- I can't give you a choice in this situation because it is dangerous. You might get hurt."
- "I can't give you that choice because it would be bad for Danny."
- "I give you lots of choices, but this time it needs to be an adult choice."

The last word

Believe. That car guy Henry Ford said, "Whether you think you can or whether you think you can't, you are usually right." Believe that you can make a difference for me. It requires accommodation and adaptation, but autism is an open-ended disability. There are no inherent limits on achievement. I can sense far more than I can communicate, and the number one thing I can sense is whether you think I can do it. Expect more, and you will get more.

Encourage me to be everything I can be, so I can stay the course long after I've left your classroom.

"I can sense far more than I can communicate"

Ellen Notbohm is a columnist for Autism/Asperger's Digest; coauthor (with Veronica Zysk) of *1001 Great Ideas for Teaching and Raising Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (2004, Future Horizons), from which this article was adapted; and parent of a child with autism.

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Contact her at:
ellen@thirdvariation.com

We can "Burst the Bubble" of **autism** and help children and adults to understand and accept.

The first rule of Autism Club

by a Canberra mum

If you have seen the film, 'Fight Club', then you most likely know that the first rule of Fight Club is "we don't talk about Fight Club".

When we got hit between the eyes with the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder for our son in December 2007, we had no idea we were joining such a large club. The sensation of knowing for certain that my heart-achingly precious, adorable, vulnerable child has autism was soul-crushing. And all I wanted to do was say it out loud.

If we don't give voice to this condition, we do the ones we love the most a great disservice. So many of these people don't have a voice of their own. That is why I vowed that my first rule of autism club was that we *do* talk about autism club. Almost every day I speak to someone about my child and how autism affects his life. I have had some wonderful, important conversations with people, who are grateful for the chance to learn more, especially parents whose children attend school with my son. The most important job I have, as a mother, is to advocate for my children. By being honest, open and willing to talk, and to share a part of our lives, I am opening not only people's eyes, but their hearts.

All children need and deserve love, respect, understanding, patience, tolerance, compassion, to feel safe, and to have a soft place to land.

Parenting is the hardest job anyone can do. It is infinitely harder for a myriad reasons when your child has different needs — when your child does not sleep through the night; when your child cannot tolerate the smell and look of certain foods, when your child is overloaded by their entire world in one way or another.

The label of "parent" encompasses an enormous number of roles and responsibilities. When your child has autism, some of these are greatly enhanced —

"Do talk about it, share, be willing to ask and be willing to listen."

you become their protector, their advocate, their conduit, and their filter in the world. Your home becomes a safe haven, the place of retreat and respite.

The journey of being a parent to a child with autism has been life-transforming for me. I continually adjust to the new normal. Progress can sometimes be hard to see and we sometimes have to accept that this includes backwards steps, too. I take each day as it comes. I have learned to never under-estimate anyone and to dream big.

I have discovered that I possess an incredible capacity to endure embarrassment. Such as when my son, after being instructed not to splash too close to the babies and their mums in the local swimming pool, decided to hug the nearest baby and her grandma. After explaining that my son is still learning about acceptable social boundaries because he has autism, I then got to debunk one of the myths of autism — that all people with autism do not like to touch or be touched. There can be an upside to most situations; it just sometimes takes a while to see them!

Like all parents, I want my children to reach their potential and to have every opportunity to learn, develop and be happy. I try my hardest to be my children's soft place to land, to be their most passionate supporter. This is no different from any family. The intensity might be different, the focus certainly will be. The excitement of seeing your child who previously has struggled to communicate basic needs, respond to a question from a peer with ease and delight is indescribable. I hope you get the picture.

My hope in sharing a little of our story is that everyone knows the first rule of autism — *do* talk about it, share, be willing to ask and willing to listen. If you would like to read more about our adventures with the autism spectrum, please visit my blog:

<http://ishouldhavecalledhimcalvin.wordpress.com/>



We can "Burst the Bubble" of **autism** and help children and adults to understand and accept.

Bubble Day feedback form

Thank you for participating in Bubble Day.

We would appreciate your feedback about Bubble Day in your school.

Would you please comment on the usefulness or problems encountered in the following areas:

Bubble day website

.....

Information pack

Please comment if your school community found any articles especially useful or irrelevant

.....

Were our suggested activities useful? Please give details

.....

.....

Administrative arrangements (invitation to participate, distribution of information etc)

.....

.....

About the day

Did your school community enjoy Bubble Day?

Do you consider that Bubble Day led to an increased awareness and understanding of ASDs?

.....

Please give us some details about your Bubble Day activities so we can develop a fuller list for the future

.....

.....

Your advice

Any handy hints, useful learnings or notes about successful activities would be greatly appreciated.

Please add extra comments on the back of the page if you wish.

.....

.....

Please send your feedback form to:

Polly McIntyre, Business Manager, Autism Asperger ACT, PO Box 717, Mawson ACT 2607

or send an e-mail to bm@autismaspergeract.com.au

Thank you for your participation and feedback.

We can "Burst the Bubble" of **autism** and help children and adults to understand and accept.

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References and background reading

Useful websites

www.autismtraining.com.au

an excellent interactive Australian website.

A must visit for all staff and parents.

www.autismaspergeract.com.au

keep up-to-date with the local autism scene

www.autismawareness.com.au

includes family entitlements

www.asatonline.org

up to date information on treatments and research evidence

www.aspect.org.au

useful Australian site

www.tonyattwood.com.au

world expert on Asperger Syndrome

www.suelarkey.com

useful strategies and resources

www.wrongplanet.com

has a very interesting online forum.

aeiou.org.au

AEIOU Foundation for children with autism; their major television advertisement, titled Bubbles, is at <http://s7.nbm.com.au/ch/4495/2cq9z1s/1153218/8fba14vw.html>

www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetailsKids.aspx?p=335&np=287&id=2339

this is fantastic for children

www.autismtoday.com

lots of current literature and includes an area where you can “Ask the Expert” a question. This includes people with ASD you can ask questions.

www.autismasperger.net

this is the web home of Stephen Shore, author of *Beyond the Wall: Personal Experiences with Autism and Asperger Syndrome*.

www.med.monash.edu.au/spppm/research/devpsych/actnow/factsheet.html

useful fact sheets

<http://raisingchildren.net.au>

an Australian Parenting site. Includes a whole section on autism, with a parent blog.

www.nas.org.uk/

website of the National Autistic Society, UK.

<http://www.nas.org.uk/nas/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=120&a=2202>

a woman with autism dispels some myths.

Helpful DVDs for children

Intricate Minds 2 - short DVD in which primary students with Asperger Syndrome explain how it affects them. Excellent for all staff and middle to upper primary aged students.

www.coultervideo.com




The Transporters — helps to develop awareness of other people’s emotions.

www.thetransporters.com

Model Me Kids has a series of DVDs which are valuable in teaching children social skills.

www.modelmekids.com

A sample of these DVDs:

-  Time for School™ — topics include: listen to the teacher, share, sit quietly, take turns, show interest in others, playground, and more.
-  Time for a Playdate™ — topics include: greet friend, losing, answer, play his way, eye contact, clean up, say goodbye & more.
-  I Can Do It!™ — models appropriate behaviour in stressful situations, including waiting, transitions, birthday parties, handling criticism, and more.

References and background reading continued

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Know. Winter, Matt. (2003). Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Publishers

Autism Asperger Publishing Co. www.asperger.net

Future Horizons Publishing www.fhautism.com

Jessica Kingsley Publishers www.jkp.com

Evans Publishing www.evansbooks.co.uk

Book boxes

A selection of books about autism and Asperger syndromes are available.

Contact: AAACCT, 0406 726 674

bm@autismaspergeract.com.au

Playing the recorder with the help of bubbles for kids with ASDs

Blowing bubbles can be lots of fun! It is a very therapeutic activity for children with ASDs and others with speech impairments. Some of the developmental benefits include improving oral motor skills and control of breath by blowing bubbles.

Read how Belinda Clarke, a teacher from Gowrie Primary School, used bubble blowing to help her students in playing the recorder.

While teaching a small group of ASD students how to play recorder I found that the students:

- had problems with regulating their breath — they would either blow too hard or blow too soft into the recorder
- had difficulties holding a steady note for a period of time
- some would hum into the recorder, not understanding that it was their breath alone that made the sound
- others faced difficulties with knowing when to take a breath while playing a tune
- the students also had a tendency to become stressed by the noise that (as you can imagine) an inexperienced group of recorder players might make.

During my recorder lessons I started with each student blowing bubbles to music. This helped them to develop a sense of music appreciation as well as an understanding of rhythm and composition. Often our bubbles danced around the room in time with the music.

The music selected for bubble blowing included classical numbers such as *Aquarium* by Camille Saint, music from the *Nutcracker* by Tchaikovsky, the sound track from *Star Wars*, or *Dream a Little Dream* by the Mamas and Pappas.

Blowing bubbles helped students to regulate their breathing as they were encouraged to try to blow

big bubbles (requiring a gentler breath) and smaller bubbles (requiring a more steady breath). They were also encouraged to see who could create the most bubbles with one breath — developing their ability to hold longer notes.

The students were also asked to concentrate on the sound that they made when they blew bubbles and were asked to apply that technique to recorder playing. If a student started to hum through the recorder I could then remind them of the sound made during bubble blowing to help correct their playing.

The music accompanying the bubbles developed a sense of calm within the group, allowing the students to be more relaxed and equipped for learning. I also ended each lesson with a relaxation activity to help calm them after a noisy and stressful lesson of tricky recorder playing. These activities included drawing patterns on each other's back to relaxation music or sitting in a circle wafting a large piece of material in time to the music.

The best thing of all is that their motivation for learning is greatly increased — everyone loves bubbles!

Thank you, Belinda, for giving us permission to use this guide.

The best thing of all is that their motivation for learning is greatly increased — everyone loves bubbles!

An outline of autism spectrum disorders

Autism spectrum disorders are life-long developmental disabilities characterised by marked difficulties in social interaction, impaired communication, restricted and repetitive interests and behaviours, and sensory sensitivities.

The word 'spectrum' is used because the range and severity of the difficulties people with an ASD experience can vary widely. ASDs include autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder and pervasive developmental disorder – not otherwise stated, which is also known as atypical autism. Sometimes the word "autism" is used to refer to all ASDs.

Studies show 1 in 100 Australians have an ASD and that it is more prevalent in boys than girls. The effects of an ASD can often be minimised by early diagnosis: with the right interventions, many children and adults with ASDs show marked improvements.

The three main areas of difficulty

1. Impairment in social interaction

May include:

- limited use and understanding of non-verbal communication such as eye gaze, facial expression and gesture
- difficulties forming and sustaining friendships
- lack of seeking to share enjoyment, interest and activities with other people
- difficulties with social and emotional responsiveness.

2. Impairment in communication

May include:

- delayed language development
- difficulties initiating and sustaining conversations
- stereotyped and repetitive use of language such as repeating phrases from television
- limited imaginative or make-believe play.

3. Restricted and repetitive interests, activities and behaviours

May include:

- unusually intense or focused interests
- stereotyped and repetitive body movements such as hand flapping and spinning
- repetitive use of objects such as repeatedly flicking a doll's eyes or lining up toys
- adherence to non-functional routines such as insisting on travelling the same route home each day.

In addition to these main areas of difficulties, people with ASDs may also have:

- unusual sensory interests such as sniffing objects or staring intently at moving objects
- sensory sensitivities including avoidance of everyday sounds (such as hair dryers) and textures
- intellectual impairment or learning difficulties.

What are the different types of ASDs?

The term ASDs is an umbrella description that refers to three different diagnoses. Regardless of the specific diagnosis, people with ASDs experience difficulties in many different social situations such as school and work.

Autistic disorder

The diagnosis of autistic disorder (sometimes referred to as classic autism) is given to people with impairments in social interaction and communication as well as restricted and repetitive interests, activities and behaviours that are generally evident before three years of age.

An outline of autism spectrum disorders

CONTINUED

Autism Bubble Day 6-9 April 2010

Asperger's disorder

(sometimes referred to as Asperger's syndrome)

Individuals with Asperger's disorder have difficulties with social interaction and social communication as well as restricted and repetitive interests, activities and behaviours. Individuals with Asperger's disorder do not have a significant delay in early language acquisition and there is no significant delay in cognitive abilities or self help skills.

Asperger's is often detected later than autistic disorder since speech usually develops at the expected age.

How are ASDs diagnosed?

ASD is diagnosed through an assessment which includes observing and meeting with the individual, their family and service providers.

Information is gathered about their strengths and difficulties, particularly in the areas of social interaction and communication, and restricted and repetitive interests, activities and behaviours.

Such information may be obtained by administering standardised tests or questionnaires. ASDs are usually diagnosed in early childhood, but assessments can be undertaken at any age.

There is no single behaviour that indicates ASDs. There are no blood tests that can detect ASDs.

Developmental paediatricians, psychiatrists and psychologists with experience in assessing people with ASDs are qualified to make a diagnosis.

When making a diagnosis, the clinician will usually first determine whether the person meets the criteria for autistic disorder. If all the criteria are not met, they may consider Asperger's disorder, or PDD-NOS (atypical autism).

What causes ASDs?

Currently, there is no single known cause for ASDs. However, recent research has identified strong genetic links. ASDs are not caused by upbringing or social circumstances.

Pervasive Developmental Disorder –

(Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) (sometimes referred to as atypical autism)

The diagnosis of PDD-NOS or atypical autism is made when an individual has a marked social impairment but fails to meet full criteria for either autistic disorder or Asperger's disorder. These individuals may also have communication impairments and/or restricted and repetitive interests, activities and behaviours.

Is there a cure?

There is presently no known cure for ASDs.

However, early intervention, specialised education and structured support can help to develop skills.

Every individual with ASDs will make progress, although each one's progress will be different.

Progress depends on a number of factors

including the unique make-up of the individual and the type and intensity of intervention. With the support of family, friends and service providers, people with ASDs can achieve a good quality of life.

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For more information on diagnosis options available in Canberra, please contact:

Polly McIntyre,

Business Manager, Autism Asperger ACT

0406 726 674 bm@autismaspergeract.com.au

At 9 am on 30 April, Autism Hour will take place..

Web page: <http://www.autismhour.com.au>

For some excellent footage that may be useful in the classroom or to add to your school's newsletter, visit: <http://www.autismspectrum.org.au/>

The discovery of “aspie” criteria

A thought-provoking article by Carol Gray and Tony Attwood, condensed by Robin Tobler.

(The original is at <http://tonyattwood.com.au> then choose Publications → Tony Attwood → Archived papers)

Autism Bubble Day 6-9 April 2010

Some of this century’s best discoveries were creative and determined efforts to answer “What if...?” questions. *What if people could fly? What if electrical energy could be harnessed to produce light? What if there was an easily accessible, international communication and information network?* The answers have resulted in permanent changes: air travel, light bulbs, the Internet. These discoveries have rendered their less effective counterparts to relative extinction from use: gone is the stagecoach, gas lighting, and multi-volume hard-bound encyclopedias. These improvements remind us of our option and ability to experiment, re-mould, re-think, and imagine. In that spirit, this article submits a new question: *What if Asperger’s Syndrome was defined by its strengths? What changes might occur?*

Moving from diagnosis to discovery

Making any diagnosis requires attention to weaknesses, the observation and interpretation of signs and symptoms that vary from typical development or health. Certainly it would be a little disarming to visit a doctor for a diagnosis, only to have her inquire, “So, what feels absolutely great?” The DSM IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) assists in the identification of a variety of disorders. It is used by psychiatrists and other mental health professionals to match observed weaknesses, symptoms and behaviors to text. In DSM IV, Asperger’s Syndrome is identified by specific diagnostic criteria, a constellation of observed social and communication delays and/or deviations. Once diagnosed, a child or adult with the diagnosis is referred to with politically correct “people first” terminology, i.e. a person with Asperger’s Syndrome.

Unlike diagnosis, the term discovery often refers to the identification of a person’s strengths or talents. Actors are discovered. Artists and musicians are discovered. A great friend is

discovered. These people are identified by an informal combination of evaluation and awe that ultimately concludes that this person – more than most others – possesses admirable qualities, abilities, and/or talents. It’s an acknowledgment that, “...you know, he’s better than me at...”. In referring to people with respect to their talents or abilities, politically correct “people first” terminology is not required; labels like musician, artist, or poet are welcomed and considered complimentary.

If Asperger’s Syndrome was identified by observation of strengths and talents, it would no longer be in the DSM IV, nor would it be referred to as a syndrome. After all, a reference to someone with special strengths or talents does not use terms with negative connotations (it’s artist and poet, not Artistically Arrogant or Poetically Preoccupied), nor does it attach someone’s proper name to the word syndrome (it’s vocalist or soloist, not Sinatra’s Syndrome).

What if Asperger’s Syndrome was defined by its strengths? What changes might occur?

Focusing on strengths requires shedding the former diagnostic term, Asperger’s Syndrome, for a new term. The authors feel that Aspie, used in self-reference by Liane Holliday Wiley in her new book, *Pretending to be Normal* (1999), is a term that seems right at home among its talent-based counterparts: soloist, genius, aspie, dancer. With fading DSM potential, the authors submit a description of “aspie” for placement in a much needed but currently non-existent *Manual of Discoveries about People* (MDP I) — Figure 1 (p. 34).

New ways of thinking often lead to discoveries that consequently discard their outdated predecessors. Similarly, the change from Asperger’s Syndrome to aspie holds interesting implications and opportunities. It could result in typical people rethinking their responses and rescuing a missed opportunity to take advantage of the contribution of aspies to culture and knowledge.

The discovery of “aspie” criteria

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The diagnostic criteria for Asperger’s Syndrome and the defining characteristics of aspie are markedly different, although they describe the same group of people. Ultimately, what distinguishes people with Asperger’s Syndrome from aspie individuals is how others respond.

Three helpful re-thought responses are:

1. a focus on potential,
2. meaningful affirmation, and
3. a discarding of social arrogance for accommodation and acceptance.

A focus on potential

There is no argument or doubt that aspie children and adults need support and assistance, just as those diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome do. They need to be informed and learn the secrets of typical social understanding, and require help negotiating through the social world that surrounds them. The challenge may be more comfortable for aspies than for those with Asperger’s Syndrome as a direct result of the people who surround them. Consider this example:

Those who genuinely understand aspies see their strengths clearly and regard their struggles with patience and support. Describing her closest friends, Liane Holliday Willey writes: “...They simply illuminate that which is made better by my AS, my straightforwardness and assertiveness and creativity and tenacity and loyalty. Because they see me first as someone who possesses many good qualities and only then as someone who is just a tiny bit different, they give me the notion to begin to see myself in that light as well.” (p. 73)

Meaningful affirmation

Affirmation is an important social process. A child is praised as valued traits are recognized and acknowledged by others, “Sam, what a great helper you are!” or “Angie, what you did is very

thoughtful!” Children have the ability to perceive even the most indirect “plus” or praise. For example, John helps a classmate find the correct page, and notices an approving glance from his teacher. In an instant, her approval is noticed and may encourage John to assist others in the future. John receives several similarly subtle but important “pluses” throughout the day, enough to help him weather correction from the lunch assistant for failing to toss his trash. A child readily understands the meaning of verbal and non-verbal praise, important messages that influence self esteem. If self esteem is the personal belief

that it’s “a.o.k. to be who you are”, affirmation is the demonstration, and understanding, that others agree.

In contrast, missed opportunities and misunderstanding can derail the efforts of parents and professionals to affirm aspie children. The traits an aspie child values in himself (logic,

memory, intelligence, accuracy and honesty) may be different from the traits typically valued by parents and professionals (sensitivity, generosity, helpfulness). This can make others amiss in responding positively to qualities the aspie child views as very important. From the child’s point of view, “No one ever notices or appreciates me.” Supportive, caring parents and professionals may praise an aspie child as they would a child who is typical, using phrases like “Good job!” or “How nice of you to share...”. These statements may hold little meaning to an aspie child who thinks in visual, tangible terms. The child’s lack of interest in such praise can be misinterpreted, with typical people assuming, “He just doesn’t respond to praise”. By the end of the day, an aspie child may feel overwhelmed and unsupported; his parents and teachers may feel equally at a loss to discover something to motivate him. Even though affirming “blocks to the bridge” do exist on both sides of the social equation, the blueprints are sometimes different.

A child readily understands the meaning of verbal and non-verbal praise, important messages that influence self esteem

The discovery of “aspie” criteria

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To meaningfully affirm an aspie child, an understanding of his strengths and social perspective is helpful. Recognizing and praising the traits the child values in himself, in addition to those skills and achievements that demonstrate social growth, can build a child’s self esteem while he tackles an often challenging social world. Figure 2 (p. 35) describes five specific strategies to add meaning to praise, affirmation, and social gains.

Ultimately, the aspie criteria could return confidence to a deserving population of people. Knowing that others recognize and acknowledge personal strengths could provide needed confidence to build and explore personal talents and tackle challenges. In a description of her friends, Liane Holliday Willey indicates “...they are so loyal in their affirmations that I am fine just the way I am. Through their eyes I am perfectly fine. Each of them dismisses my idiosyncratic ways with a smile and a wave of the arm... They rein me in when I travel too far, they protect me from obvious blunders, and they applaud me when I stumble over some part of me that is particularly worthwhile” (p. 72).

Moving from arrogance to accommodation and acceptance. No fault or finger-pointing intended, typical people are socially arrogant. It seems to be their nature, something they really can’t help. Proof in point: typical people are fascinated by — and concerned about — anyone who isn’t totally thrilled or enamored by their invitations to converse or play. How could this be? Typical people regard themselves as golden social opportunities; of course anyone should be delighted to be their partner in interaction. That is, if they are “normal”.

Figure 1: Discovery criteria for aspie by Attwood and Gray

A qualitative advantage in social interaction, as manifested by a majority of the following:

- peer relationships characterized by absolute loyalty and impeccable dependability

- free of sexist, “age-ist”, or culturalist biases; ability to regard others at “face value”
- speaking one’s mind irrespective of social context or adherence to personal beliefs
- ability to pursue personal theory or perspective despite conflicting evidence
- seeking an audience or friends capable of enthusiasm for unique interests and topics
- consideration of details; spending time discussing a topic that may not be of primary interest
- listening without continual judgement or assumption
- interested primarily in significant contributions to conversation; preferring to avoid “ritualistic small talk” or socially trivial statements and superficial conversation
- seeking sincere, positive, genuine friends with an unassuming sense of humor.

Fluent in “Aspergerese”, a social language characterized by at least three of the following:

- a determination to seek the truth
- conversation free of hidden meaning or agenda
- advanced vocabulary and interest in words
- fascination with word-based humour, such as puns
- advanced use of pictorial metaphor.

Cognitive skills characterized by at least four of the following:

- strong preference for detail over gestalt
- original, often unique perspective in problem solving
- exceptional memory and/or recall of details often forgotten or disregarded by others, for example: names, dates, schedules, routines
- avid perseverance in gathering and cataloging information on a topic of interest
- persistence of thought

The discovery of “aspie” criteria

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- encyclopedic or “CD ROM” knowledge of one or more topics
- knowledge of routines and a focused desire to maintain order and accuracy
- clarity of values/decision making unaltered by political or financial factors.

Additional possible features:

- acute sensitivity to specific sensory experiences and stimuli, for example: hearing, touch, vision, and/or smell
- strength in individual sports and games, particularly those involving endurance or visual accuracy, including rowing, swimming, bowling, chess
- “social unsung hero” with trusting optimism: frequent victim of social weaknesses of others, while steadfast in the belief of the possibility of genuine friendship
- increased probability over general population of attending university after high school
- often take care of others outside the range of typical development.

Figure 2: Five strategies to add meaning to praise, affirmation, and social gains

Strategy 1: The best praise is when others notice a personally valued trait or strength. It’s important for parents and professionals to take time to learn those traits that are the most important and/or valued by the aspie child or adult. In addition, discovering strengths via the new aspie criteria, parents and professionals may more readily identify and acknowledge them when they are demonstrated. Traits like loyalty, honesty, perseverance, logic, intelligence, and sincerity are worthy of frequent praise.

Strategy 2: Meaningful affirmation relies on accurate attribution. For example, a child may doggedly persevere because he’s related to nine family members who also demonstrate that trait.

While aspie may be associated with certain strengths, it does not replace the influence of other important factors, like age, personality, character, or inherited personality and talent. Looking to those factors first when giving credit increases the meaning and accuracy of praise. If other factors do not explain a trait or talent, or its intensity, the aspie factor may deserve the credit, or at least “honorable mention” as one of a combination of factors.

The best praise is when others notice a personally valued trait or strength like logic, memory, intelligence, accuracy or honesty

Strategy 3: The meaning of praise can be enhanced with access to interests (books, music, computers); someone taking time to show interest in a topic important to the child, or the use of visual materials

to clarify abstract achievements (“blue ribbon effort”, or “gold medal helpfulness”).

Strategy 4: Social stories add meaning to social information, including praise. They are “right at home” praising the traits an aspie person values in herself. A Social story can describe a child’s use of logic and intelligence, applaud an achievement, or celebrate a talent. Placing the information — and related photos or work samples — in a story creates a tangible, positive record that may help a child understand his strengths and value.

Strategy 5: Some consideration of the words and phrasing parents and professionals use to express praise — especially for social achievements — may yield big results. Mentioning a talent when applauding social gains (“What a logically friendly thing to do!” or “What an intelligent idea to invite Amber to play!” or “It’s smart to let Beth to play with the toy for a while!”) may recruit a child’s attention and add meaning to the acknowledged social skill.

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