



# Through the **Asperger** lens



Some pupils are unable to see our perspective, so we have to learn to see theirs, says educational psychologist **Julia Dunlop**...

**M**any children have teachers scratching their heads in confusion. Many children show behaviour which puzzles teachers and parents alike. By and large, in time, things fall into place.

But how do we make sense of:

- the 7 year old child who can read *Harry Potter*, but fails to follow even the simplest verbal instruction?
- the child who can solve  $293 \times 87$  quicker than a calculator, but can't share out 10 grapes between 5 children?
- the boy who can reel off all the kings and queens of England, together with dates, but can't contribute to a discussion about life in Victorian times.

In other words, how do we make sense of the child with Asperger syndrome?

## Identifying Asperger syndrome

Asperger syndrome is a condition on the autism spectrum. It is characterised by subtle difficulties in three main areas of development:

- Social communication
- Social interaction
- Social imagination and flexibility of thought

In addition to these difficulties, many people with Asperger syndrome are either over-sensitive or under-sensitive to sensory input. For example, a 10 year old might have a 'terrible twos'

**"Looking at a picture of a girl in tears, one boy described her as having 'drips of water' on her face – failing to appreciate the wider emotional context"**

tantrum – just because his underpants are itchy. Alternatively, a five year old might fail to cry or show distress – even though he's just fallen in the playground and grazed his knees.

There are often additional difficulties in motor coordination and planning which show up in the playground or in PE, together with poor organisational skills which impact on task completion in the classroom.

Pupils with Asperger syndrome have cognitive abilities within the average to above average range and mostly attend mainstream schools. Recent research (Baird et al 2006) indicates a prevalence rate of 100 children on the autism spectrum per 10,000. This means that the average primary school of 300 pupils is likely to include three on the autism spectrum – probably Asperger syndrome.

In order to provide effective education for children with Asperger syndrome it is essential to try to appreciate how they see and understand the world.

## The Theory of Mind

Most children, by the time they enter a Reception class, are aware that other people have thoughts and feelings which may be different from their own. They use this skill, termed 'Theory of Mind', quite naturally to:

- 'read' the intentions of others around them
- anticipate how others will react to the things they do
- tease others and recognise deception



- recognise and understand emotions
- develop social relationships

The child with Asperger syndrome may never achieve this awareness – certainly not during their time in primary school. Without this 'Theory of Mind', the social world can be an anxiety-filled, unpredictable place within which they are quite vulnerable.

### Different perspectives

Most children in primary school can look at situations and activities and see them as wholes, identifying the links between smaller parts and understanding the wider context. Generalisation of learning is quite straightforward.

The child with Asperger syndrome focuses on the fragmented parts, not seeing how they are connected. For example, looking at a picture of a girl in tears, one boy described her as having 'drips of water' on her face – failing to appreciate the wider emotional context. This inability to make connections restricts creative thinking and helps to explain why children with Asperger syndrome prefer to stick with familiar routines. It also limits the child's ability to transfer skills from one context to another.

### Misinterpretation

Children with Asperger syndrome can easily misinterpret us. They may misunderstand what someone says, for example leaving the room when asked to 'Take your book out'. They may misread someone's actions, perhaps believing they have friends because others are laughing – not realising they are being laughed at.

We can also misinterpret them. It is easy to think a child is being 'deliberately aggressive'

when we see them push someone in the playground. Perhaps this was actually one child, rather clumsily, trying to initiate play with another child – not realising how that push would feel to someone else.

### The Asperger lens

To see what the child with Asperger syndrome sees is a bit like using an Asperger lens. By looking through the Asperger lens we can begin to interpret their behaviour and understand why they say what they say and do what they do.

Simple observation, recording and behavioural intervention are not enough, since the trigger to behaviour may be almost undetectable and the function the behaviour is serving may be quite unexpected from our point of view.

Before reading the behaviour of the child with Asperger syndrome, it helps to widen the field of our perception. We need to check which lens we are using and pose likely possibilities from the point of view of the Asperger lens on the world. Use of the Asperger lens in appraising any behavioural difficulties occurring in children with Asperger syndrome helps to locate the source of the difficulty and to determine appropriate and, therefore, effective intervention.

### Seeing the child's perspective

Children with Asperger syndrome think differently and perceive the world differently. They are not being deliberately awkward or annoying or attention-seeking – they simply perceive things in quite a unique way.

Because they are unable to see our perspective we have to try to see theirs.

## Behaviour management

WHEN A PUPIL HAS ASPERGER SYNDROME, A CONVENTIONAL APPROACH CAN PRODUCE UNEXPECTED RESULTS...

### PROBLEM

Whenever Connor sees a baby, he tries to hit it. This causes particular difficulties at the end of the school day, when many mums are waiting with babies in pushchairs as he leaves the building.

### ORIGINAL INTERVENTION

- A behaviour support teacher attempts to counsel Connor
- They make a scrapbook about babies and the teacher emphasises how vulnerable they are.
- The teacher tries to get Connor to reflect on what he was like as a baby.

### OUTCOME

Connor becomes more obsessed with hitting babies.

### WHAT THE ASPERGER LENS SHOWS US

- Connor lacks empathy.
- He lacks the social imagination to try to understand how a baby might feel.
- Connor is unable to reflect on his own feelings.
- He is able to follow clear, directed rules better than negotiation.
- He is hypersensitive to loud, unpredictable noises.

### NEW INTERVENTION

- Connor is given a clear rule – 'no hitting babies.'
- He leaves school by a different door and is no longer confronted by a row of prams.
- Work on promoting reflective thinking and empathy is carried out (without a baby focus).

### NEW OUTCOME

- Connor stops hitting babies.
- He begins to develop some insight into his own feelings and those of others.
- He is less anxious at the end of the school day.

## Find out more

For practical strategies on teaching children with Asperger syndrome and for more information on using the Asperger lens, read *Asperger syndrome – a practical guide for teachers*, and *Autism in the Early Years – a practical guide*. Both books have been co-authored by the Educational Psychologist Julia Dunlop, along with Val Cumine and Gill Stevenson. Second editions were published in late 2009 by David Fulton.

*Asperger syndrome – a practical guide for teachers* (978-0-415-48371-1)

*Autism in the Early Years – a practical guide* (978-0-415-48373-5)

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