What is Autism?

Autism is a complex and varying array of behavioral excesses and deficits.

Autism is a spectrum of behaviors.

Autism is a neurological disorder that produces significant impairments in:

1. Difficulty with social interaction
   - Nonverbal: eye gaze, facial expression, body postures
   - Peer relationships
   - “Joint attention”
   - Social/emotional reciprocity

2. Difficulty with communication
   - Delayed or lack of spoken language
   - Trouble sustaining conversation
   - Stereotyped, repetitive, or idiosyncratic language
   - Lack of varied spontaneous make-believe play

3. Restricted, repetitive or stereotyped behaviors, activities, and interests
   - Intense focus on restricted interests
   - Nonfunctional routines or rituals: inflexibility
   - Repetitive motor mannerisms (i.e. hand/finger flapping)
   - Preoccupation with parts of objects

Prior to the age of 3 years, delays or abnormal functioning in at least one of these areas:
   - Social interaction
   - Language as used for social communication
   - Symbolic or imaginative play

What is Asperger’s Syndrome?

Asperger’s Syndrome is at the mildest and highest functioning end of the Autism Spectrum.

It is characterized by difficulties with:
   - Social relatedness and social skills
   - Pragmatic or social language (with normal overall language development)
• Repetitive and perseverative behaviors
  o (i.e. “The rule is *I always do math homework before dinner.*”)
• Limited, but intense range of interests

People with Asperger’s Syndrome have at least average (and sometimes very high) IQ levels.

**What might be difficult for people with Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome?**

• Listening skills
  (People with autism tend to be stronger visually.)

• Spontaneous conversation
  o Making small talk
  o Using appropriate nonverbal signals (facial expressions, eye contact, and proximity)

• Abstract or conceptual thinking
  o Describing events that are not immediately present
  o Discriminating between real and fake
  o Understanding cause and effect (in their environment and in behavior)

• Engaging in meaningful and symbolic play

• Manipulating others
  (People with autism tend to be egocentric and are seldom capable of being manipulative. They behave in ways that will get their own needs met. Don’t take their behavior personally.)

• Taking another’s perspective

• Interpreting facial expressions and other social cues

• Figurative or sarcastic language; knowing when someone’s joking

• New events; changes in routine; being flexible
• Understanding and interpreting inconsistency
  o Work best with rules
  o Rules provide order and control in an otherwise disorganized and overwhelming world

• Sensory Processing

(People with autism can be easily overloaded and underestimated.)

**Strategies for working with people with Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome**

Make things **VISUAL, ORGANIZED, and CONSISTENT.**
- Calendars, schedules
- Pictures
- Organization of toys on the table
- Routine of session

Use a **PICTURE SCHEDULE** or an activity board to help with transitions and predictability.

Create a **SOCIAL STORY** to review or plan for difficult events:
- Person connection
- Pictures or photos
- Sequences to learn
- Right way/Wrong way

**PREVIEW** and **REHEARSE** difficult events and changes. **REVIEW** routines and topics from previous sessions.

Use **CONCRETE language** (i.e. “after lunch”) rather than open-ended (i.e. later). Better yet, show it visually.

Break tasks down in **SMALL STEPS** or present it in different ways (visually, verbally, and physically). **USE SHORT, CLEAR SENTENCES.**
Allot specific, limited times for intense areas of interest. Use timers, clocks, and other visual cues to help with the transition of these topics.

**Recognize, use and accept DIFFERENT MODES of communication.**
- Pointing, gesturing, reaching to request and object
- Physical manipulation (placing hand or object)
- Giving/showing objects
- Simple or single-word speech or signs
- Imitation as a form of connection
- Aggression as a form of protest, rejection, or escape
- Crying, tantrums, self-injury to indicate frustration, distress, or anger
- Incessant questioning/arguing is a sign of stress in people with Asperger’s

*An increase in unusual or difficult behaviors probably indicates an increase in stress.*

**Resources**

**References:**
Barnard, John, M.Ed., Hineline, Phil, Ph.D., Advanced Curriculum Design for Students with ASD.” Presentation.

Guld, Amanda, Ph.D., “Effective Teaching Strategies, PBS, and Ethical Behavior Interventions.” Presentation.

Levenberg, Rebecca, MS, “Working with Children with Autism.” Presentation.

Ortiz, John M., Ph.D., “Neurodevelopmental Disorders: Unraveling the Tapestry.” Presentation.


**Resources and further reading:**

Developing and Implementing a Personal Safety Curriculum for Children with Developmental Disabilities

Mary Worthington, M.Ed.
Mary Richter, M.Ed.


Articles:


Tips for Teaching High Functioning People with Autism, Susan Moreno, Susan and Carol O’Neal, O.A.S.I.S. (Online Asperger’s Syndrome Information and Support).

“Working with Families with Children/Parents with Developmental Disabilities.” Virginia Cruz, D.S.W., The Social Work Program, Metropolitan State College of Denver, P.O. Box 173362, Campus Box 70, Denver, Colorado, 80217.

Online Resources:
www.autismspeaks.org
www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/dd/dd1.htm
www.NCTSnet.org
www.autismnj.org