

Appropriate Educational Placements for Children with Asperger's Syndrome

The child with Asperger's Syndrome does not have the behavioural and learning profile of a child with classic autism, and schools or units for such children may not be an appropriate option. The child is also not acutely disturbed and psychiatric services can be reluctant to provide services for someone with a developmental disorder. The child may have specific learning problems but not be considered eligible for services for the intellectually disabled. Thus the conventional government services often have few resources, services and policies for people with this syndrome.

First and foremost, the family and teacher need access to expertise in this area, as well as resources and programs for specific areas of concern. A review of the research and range of resources available for people with autism has shown that the education of such children requires expertise above anything else. The same is probably true for Asperger's Syndrome. Individual members of relevant professional groups need to develop specialist knowledge in this area. For example, Education Departments can enable designated staff to acquire training and skills so that teachers can contact them for advice. The author's home State of Queensland, Australia has Advisory Visiting Teachers for such children. The designated specialist teacher can visit the classroom to observe the child and provide explanations, strategies, resources and in service training. Should distance be a problem then modern technology can be of assistance using video recordings and telephone conferences.

Parents can also help by providing information for the teacher from the Internet and specialist book publishers such as Future Horizons in the USA and Jessica Kingsley Publications in the United Kingdom. It should also be recognised that although parents are not professional experts in Asperger's Syndrome, they are experts on their child, especially their developmental history, personality and the success or failure of previous strategies. This is invaluable information when planning and monitoring school programs. The author has found that once a particular school gains experience and a reputation for successful programs, there is likely to be an increase in enrolments for similar children. Parents and professionals have an informal "good school guide".

Many of the remedial programs for children with Asperger's Syndrome require opportunities for one-to-one tuition and small group activities. These may require the services of a teacher's assistant allocated to a particular child. Their role is crucial and complex but their main responsibilities are to:

- encourage the child to be sociable, flexible and cooperative when playing or working with other children;
- help the child to recognise social cues and learn the codes of social conduct;
- provide personal tuition on understanding and managing emotions i.e. Affective Education;
- tuition and practice to improve friendship and team work skills;
- help the child to develop special interests as a means of improving motivation, talent and knowledge;
- implement a program to improve gross and fine motor skills;
- encourage the understanding of the perspectives and thoughts of others using strategies designed to improve Theory of Mind skills;
- encourage conversation skills;
- provide remedial tuition for specific learning problems;
- enable the child to cope with their auditory or sensory sensitivity.

Thus the teacher's assistant applies a program designed by the teacher, parents and relevant therapists and specialists that addresses behavioural, emotional, cognitive, social, linguistic, motor and sensory abilities. Education Departments often have limited budgets for a teacher's assistant and parents may consider supplementing their hours from their own financial resources. It is also important that the assistant receives training in aspects of Asperger's Syndrome and access to knowledge and professional expertise.

The child with Asperger's Syndrome is most likely to be enrolled at a conventional rather than special school. The author advocates inclusion with ordinary children as it is important to have a peer group who demonstrate appropriate social behaviour and have the intellectual and social ability and motivation to learn how to relate to the child and personally contribute to the development of their social skills. What are the attributes of a good school? The author has had extensive experience of observing and supporting children with Asperger's Syndrome in a wide variety of schools. The general conclusion is that certain attributes are essential, while others are of limited relevance. The most important attributes are the personality and ability of the class teacher, and their access to support and resources. The child with Asperger's Syndrome is quite a challenge. Teachers need to have a calm disposition, be predictable in their emotional reactions, flexible with their curriculum and style of teaching to accommodate the child with Asperger's Syndrome, and recognise their positive aspects. It is essential to be able to see the world from the perspective of the child with Asperger's syndrome. A keen sense of humour will also help. At times the child is likely to enchant them, and a moment later, totally confuse them.

An interesting feature of Asperger's Syndrome is the variability in expression of the signs from day to day. On a good day the child concentrates, conforms, socialises and learns reasonably well, but on other days they seem to be self absorbed, and lack confidence and ability. It is as if the signs come in waves or a "tide" that has a cycle internal to the child. On such days it is best to concentrate on revision of well practised and successful activities, and be patient until the tide recedes and the child can progress once more. Should this become an issue, then parents and teachers can chart the cycle and examine the internal or external factors that may influence the cycle.

It is not essential that the teacher has experience of similar children as each child with Asperger's Syndrome is unique, and a teacher uses different strategies for each individual. Learning how to understand and relate to each other may take several months, so one must not use how the child responds and learns in the first few weeks as an indication of how they will be throughout the year. The child is also likely to take some time to settle in to the school routine after an absence or vacation. They are also likely to be anxious if their usual teacher is temporarily replaced by a new teacher. It does not matter how old the teacher is, how big the school, or whether it is a government or private school. What is important is the size of the classroom. Open plan and noisy classrooms are best avoided. The children respond well to a quiet, well-ordered class with an atmosphere of encouragement rather than criticism. Parents find that with some teachers the child thrives while with others the year was a disaster for both parties. If the teacher and child are compatible, then this will be reflected in the attitude of other children in the class. If the teacher is supportive then the other children will amplify this approach. If they are critical and would prefer the child were excluded, other children will adopt this attitude. The author has noted that children with Asperger's Syndrome tend to promote either the maternal or predatory instincts in other children. The teacher will need to monitor and guide the child's interactions to ensure they avoid the "predators".

It is also important that the teacher has emotional and practical support from colleagues and the school administration. The teacher and school will have to make some special allowances. For example, if the child finds school assembly a challenge with its noise and having to wait, then it may be prudent to suggest the child waits quietly in the classroom during assembly. Special allowances may have to be made for school tests and examinations when the child's performance is affected by anxiety or depression.

Once parents have located a school that provides the necessary resources, then it is important to maintain consistency. Going to a new school means changing friends and the school not being aware of the child's abilities and history of successful and unsuccessful strategies. It is inevitable that the child will have to move to junior high and high school, but this can be made easier if they transfer with friends they have known for several years, and teachers and support staff from both schools meet to discuss how to facilitate the transition. Several features of the transition have proved to be very important, namely allowing the child to visit the school several times before the new term to ensure they know the geography of the campus and routes to classes. It is also advisable to have a teacher who is allocated specific responsibility to monitor the child's adjustment to the new school and identify children who can become a "buddy" to support the child when teachers are not present.

Attending high school can present new problems. In elementary school, the teacher and child are together for a year and have the time to understand each other. The atmosphere at elementary school

also has a supportive or maternal quality from staff and children that can more readily accommodate and tolerate the child with Asperger's Syndrome. At high school, the teachers do not have the time to devote to one child and have a more rigid curriculum. Teenagers can also be far less tolerant of the child who does not associate with the distinct social groups usually identified by clothing styles and interests.

The diagnostic signs may also be minimal at this age, and some high school teachers have no concept of this type of disability. The child is considered as simply defiant, wilfully disobedient or emotionally disturbed, and conventional discipline assumed to be effective. To prevent potential confrontation and despair for all parties, it would help if there can be a brief in service program on Asperger's Syndrome for the high school, clarifying the problems faced by the child, their means of coping with frustration, change and criticism, and emphasising the qualities they can exhibit in special areas. Once they are understood and their point of view explained, teachers can accommodate their unusual behaviour in class.

Unfortunately some teenagers with Asperger's syndrome can develop the clear signs of an anxiety disorder e.g panic attacks and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, depression with thoughts of suicide or intense anger with episodes of aggression that may lead to expulsion from school. The author would like to point out that this only occurs in a minority of children and is more likely when they are having major adjustment problems to the social aspects at school. As a matter of expediency, the teenager may require medication and psychological services. For some, the situation can become so serious that the option of home schooling is considered. The author has noted considerable success with this option. The circumstances for each application for home schooling must be examined carefully, ensuring adequate access to trained teachers and preventing complete isolation from other children. However, this approach can be a constructive alternative to strong medication and an admission to an adolescent psychiatric unit. Parents can be concerned as to how well conventional schools can adjust and help a child with Asperger's Syndrome, and consider whether the child would be better placed in a class, unit or school exclusively for such children. A residential school has recently opened in the United Kingdom for children and adolescents with Asperger's Syndrome. Classes have a ratio of six pupils to two staff and a curriculum designed for such children. A day school is due to open in San Francisco in September 2000 and some large High Schools in Queensland, Australia have designated units for such children.

Finally, the author would like to stress that appropriate educational placement must also be based on a comprehensive assessment of the child's abilities, in particular their social reasoning skills, and subsequently the careful selection of an appropriate educational setting, access to expertise, information, individual support and the development of a team approach. With this combination we have the opportunity to significantly improve the abilities of children with Asperger's Syndrome.

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