

## Students on the Spectrum Discussion

Ideas for discussion of classroom issues

Pam Schwartz, Ph.D.

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"Aspies have great memories, pay attention to details, are persistent, focused, and love structure." – Temple Grandin, **The Way I see It**, Future Horizons, 2011.

### Areas of Deficit that may be present

#### *Social understanding*

- Difficulty picking up visual social cues
- Difficulty picking up verbal social cues
- Understand code of conduct as applies to their behavior
- Resulting "overload" point easily reached in social groups with confusion, need to interpret, self-questioning, etc.
- Person with Asperger's builds a mental library of social experiences and social rules. "Some adults with Asperger's syndrome consider that social conversations appear to use a completely different language, for which they have not translation and which no one has explained to them." Tony Attwood, *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*, page 92.

#### *Language Patterns*

**Definition of Pragmatic-Semantic language deficits** – Difficulty understanding the social language skills we use in daily interactions resulting in overly literal interpretations; difficulty with understanding the meaning of language both at word and sentences level, inability to identify key points or topics in sentences, difficulty interpreting word order and grammar.

- Literal interpretation of language;
- Knowing that you have to answer when a question has been asked;
- Being able to take turns with the other speaker;
- Ability to notice and respond to the non-verbal aspects of language (reacting appropriately to the other person's body language and 'mood', as well as their words);
- Awareness that you have to introduce a topic of conversation in order for the listener to fully understand;
- Knowing which words or what sort of sentence-type to use when initiating a conversation or responding to something someone has said;
- Ability to maintain a topic (or change topic appropriately, or 'interrupt' politely);
- Ability to maintain appropriate eye-contact (not too much staring, and not too much looking away) during a conversation; and

- Ability to distinguish how to talk and behave towards different communicative partners (formal with some, informal with others).

### ***Restricted and Repetitive Interests, routines and Behaviors***

- Internet Addiction and other isolating special interests

### ***Motor Coordination***

- Avoidance of physical exercise

### ***Sensory Sensitivity and Sensory Overload***

- Lights, sounds, physical pressure

### ***Anxiety and Depression***

- OCD
- Social Anxiety disorder

### ***ADHD***

- Distractibility
- Easily distracted
- Fixate on details
- Difficulty shifting attention
- Identify relevant information while filtering irrelevant details

### ***Sense of self efficacy resulting from diagnosis (or non-diagnosis)***

- Failure, a can't do attitude
- Fear of discovery by others of areas of weakness

## **Factor that can impact college level academic performance**

### **Executive Function**

- Inhibition of irrelevant responses
- Difficulty with:
  - Self-reflection and self-monitoring
  - Working memory
  - Cognitive flexibility
  - Retain a goal and steps needed to accomplish in one's mind.
  - Adopt new strategies when old one fails
  - Slow processing speed
  - Decision making issues

### **Social Communication and Language Difficulty**

- Tendency to go off topic or change topic to irrelevant topic
- Difficulty answering questions due to lack of understanding of meaning
- Reading cues from listeners body language

- Limited turn taking
- Difficulty understanding metaphors, sarcasm or other forms of abstraction

### Reading Comprehension

- Difficulty:
  - Relating information to what they already know
  - Understanding cause and effect
  - Interpreting characters behavior and feelings from text
  - Predicting what will happen next in a story.
  - Appreciating the Gestalt of a story.
  - Answering questions after reading text
  - Grasping abstract concepts
  - Inability to write about reading (see above)

### Writing

- Difficulty:
  - Making connections with material and analyzing information may be challenging
  - Using multiple sources in a research paper difficult due to need to change focus, recombine and keep track of information
  - understanding overarching themes
    - Difficulty with organization
    - Write off topic, go off on tangents
  - Graphomotor skills

### Group Projects and presentations

- Perfectionism
- Inability to negotiate
- Poor social interaction
- Social anxiety and strong work ethic make it hard

### Classroom Social behaviors

- Interrupting or speaking out of turn
- Correcting the instructor
- Walking out of the classroom
- Difficulty with change
- Difficulty understanding nuances or abstractions in lecture and discussions
- May isolate self or engage in over friendly behavior and ignore physical and conversation boundaries
- May dominate discussions

## Out of class social behavior

- *Social Behavior*
- Identifying new acquaintances especially in new situations
- Confusion over use of Social media
- May enter a room without asking
- May hover or watch others without participating and seem to be stalking

## For Faculty: Strategies and Special Considerations

### Advisors

- Prescriptive advising
  - Break down registration process into a concrete timeline with specific task
    - Who to meet with (office location, email and phone), what courses or major requirements to consider, when to register and how to make changes
  - Guide student to courses with professors who are structured and well organized
  - Recommend classes and majors that capitalize on strengths
  - Encourage student to utilize campus resources (ASC, LSC)
  - Be aware of classroom challenges and advise accordingly
    - Consider academic challenges of time management,

### Classroom Instruction

- Classroom lectures
  - Provide notes in advance if possible to allow student to appreciate the context of the lecture.
  - Provide visual organizers and visual cues not just written statements
  - Allow students to record lecture or have a notetaker
  - Encourage student to have a tutor to review notes from class for meaning
  - Eye contact is difficult, don't expect this as a sign of attention
  - Provide advance notice of any changes that need to be made to the class schedule or assignments.
  - Avoid using idioms, words with double meanings or sarcasm.
- Planning projects and papers
  - Try to meet with the student during office hours to review assignment and student's understanding of requirements
  - Ask student to describe project/paper requirements
    - Clarify misunderstandings using verbal statements that are short, direct and concrete. Speak with precision.
    - Watch out for literal interpretations
    - Avoid slang and idiomatic speech
    - With multi step instructions, pause between steps to check comprehension and have them repeat what you said.

- Providing feedback on tests, papers and projects.
  - Give clear directives
  - Have the student make a “to do list” of what needs to be changed and number the changes so they have an order to follow
  - Keep directions simple and direct
  - If you can find a pattern to the revisions organize a “to do list” under the principal heading of purpose of revision
  - Send follow up email listing items to be done, due dates, etc.

Classroom **Example:** (Student arrives at your office at 1:40). "We have only 20 minutes to work together. At 2:00, I'm going to ask you to take my suggestions home and start making changes to your paper. Come to my office tomorrow afternoon at 3:00 and show me what you've done."

<http://www.mnsu.edu/access/faculty/students/asperger.html>

- Behavioral
  - Perseverative questioning
    - Tell them to write questions down and see you after class
    - Agree to answer two questions a day with others after class
    - Agree to statement or hand signal of disruptive behavior
  - Students tend to be rule oriented so if there is a need to address a behavior speaks in terms of “rules” of the classroom. Example: “I can only take two questions from a student each class to give me time to get through my lecture. If you need more clarification please write your questions down on paper and we can discuss them after class.”
  - Always come in at a calmer emotional level than the student to assist remaining in emotional control.
- Group Projects
  - Help student find a role that will be comfortable
  - May not function well in a team because of difficulty understanding other students wishes or needs
    - May insist on own way, get frustrated at inability to appreciate their view or withdrawal in frustration
    - Difficulty motivating themselves if not interested
    - Difficulty understanding other peoples anger and frustration
    - Meeting times: Student structure of group activities may seem arbitrary and unstructured. Uncertainty of time and purpose of group meetings may prove frustrating. They may miss meetings because they fail to understand the meaning of any casual agreements students make at the end of a meeting. Setting up meeting times is a difficult task for many students who are not on the spectrum. As a result they may miss meetings upsetting other team members!

- Faculty may have to act as mediator in these situations or keep in touch with group members to frequently to check progress. Faculty may want to have group leader provide updates on activities so faculty can communicate explicitly with student on meeting times, purposes, etc.

## **Resources**

Attwood, Tony; The Complete Guide To Asperger's Syndrome, Jessica Kingsley Publisher, N. Y. 2007.

Grandin, Temple; The Way I See It, Future Horizons, 2008

<http://www.mnsu.edu/access/faculty/students/asperger.html>

<http://www.lanec.edu/disability/working-students-who-may-have-autism-or-aspergers>