

Meeting the Needs of Teens and Adults on the Autism Spectrum

Strengths of those with Autism

People with high-functioning autism are often exceptional in their ability to remember details of situations. For instance, if a discussion on any topic has become heated, the autistic adult is the one most likely to clearly remember who was present. He or she will not have focused on the words said or their emotional content, but on the visual image of the situation.

With a preference and aptitude for visual association between objects and concepts, autistic adults can be exceptional at creating visual presentations of abstract (theological) concepts.

Autistic adults and teens love to share information on their favorite topics. With guidance, their expertise can be channeled and be of benefit to the entire congregation. Their attention to detail is phenomenal. Because they are passionately interested in their chosen subject, and able to sustain their focus for long periods of time, those with high-functioning autism often enter such fields as engineering, computer programming or research.

◆ The following excerpt from a paper by Attwood & Gray called, *The Discovery of "Aspie" Criteria*, further details the strengths of being an "Aspie"...

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).

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. New ways of thinking often lead to discoveries that consequently discard their outdated predecessors.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.

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Discovery Criteria for Aspie...

- 1) Qualitative advantage in social interaction, as manifested by a majority of the following:
 - a) Peer relationships characterized by absolute loyalty and dependability
 - b) Free of sexist, "age-ist", or cultural biases; ability to regard others at "face value"
 - c) Speaking one's mind irrespective of social context
 - d) Ability to pursue personal theory or perspective despite conflicting evidence
 - e) Capable of: enthusiasm for unique interests and topics
 - f) Consideration of details;
 - g) Listening without continual judgment or assumption
 - h) Interested primarily in significant contributions to conversation; preferring to avoid 'ritualistic small talk' or socially trivial statements and superficial conversation.
 - i) Seeking sincere, positive, genuine friends with an unassuming sense of humour

- 2) Fluent in "Aspergerese", a social language characterized by at least three of the following:
 - a) Determination to seek the truth
 - b) Conversation free of hidden meaning or agenda
 - c) Advanced vocabulary and interest in words
 - d) Fascination with word-based humour, such as puns
 - e) Advanced use of pictorial metaphor

- 3) Cognitive skills characterized by at least four of the following:
 - a) Strong preference for detail over gestalt
 - b) Original, often unique perspective in problem solving
 - c) Exceptional memory and/or recall of details often forgotten or disregarded by others, for example: names, dates, schedules, routines
 - d) Avid perseverance in gathering and cataloguing information on a topic of interest
 - e) Persistence of thought
 - f) Encyclopaedic or 'CD ROM' knowledge of one or more topics
 - g) Knowledge of routines and a focused desire to maintain order and accuracy
 - h) Clarity of values/decision making unaltered by political or financial factors