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Asperger's Disorder is Confusing, Overwhelming for Families

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He's okay as long as we let him stay in his world
-Parent of an Asperger's child

His day starts off with a bang, his hearing is hyper-acute and the buzz of the alarm is just too loud. As he begins dressing he is on edge because the shirt he picked out last night is too red and feels itchy on his skin. It is the first day of school. Upon entering the school his excitement about the first day is soon replaced with apprehension. Dozens of children are talking at once. The intercom is booming the morning greeting. The fluorescent light is not only too bright, it hums and buzzes. The room seems as if it is constantly changing and he can no longer tell where his body is in the space. In overload and on his way to a meltdown, he knows that if a meltdown happens he will probably be in trouble with the teacher and his mother. Worst of all, other children will tease, bully, or refuse to play with him. He is a child with Asperger's Disorder.

The world of those with Asperger's Disorder is confusing and overwhelming. AD is a developmental disorder that causes significant impairment in many areas including socialization, communication, behavior, thinking, and motor skills. Symptoms of Asperger's are seen in a variety of settings, including home, classroom, playground, and extracurricular activities. Symptoms may begin to develop as early as age two and include poor conversational skills, inability to read social cues and play appropriately with peers. Children with this disorder may have sensory sensitivity and be overly reactive to sound, touch, light, and textures. They do not understand abstract humor, figures of speech, or metaphors because they tend to interpret experiences literally.

Children with AD prefer to be alone because interaction with others is difficult and they are not tuned into happenings beyond their private world. They tend to make inappropriate conversational exchanges, responding in manner that does not match the social situation—totally unaware of the impact of their behavior on others. This is due to an inability to accurately identify and correlate emotion with the facial expressions or body language of others. The Asperger's child typically displays a narrow range of facial expressions, makes limited eye contact and tends to be disinterested in the activities and conversations of others.

Asperger's children seem to have an intense preoccupation with one or two areas of interest and talk incessantly about these topics. They typically pursue advanced knowledge about their interests and without regard to the current topic of discussion, tend to use social situations as an opportunity to present this information with encyclopedic precision. Adherence to a rigid routine is a priority and AD children often insist on imposing this routine on others.

Recently, as I greeted an Asperger's child in the waiting area of my office, she did what she typically would do. She walked past me on her way to my office upstairs. Her mother and I then proceeded to engage in our typical routine as well, which included stopping the child and guiding her through the normal social greeting ritual. With guidance, we navigated the steps of an appropriate hello including steps that most individuals follow without thinking -- "Hello, how are you?" followed by an appropriate reciprocal response. Afterwards, I typically ask, "Are you ready to go to my office?" or "What are we going to do today?" It all seems so simple, but for thousands of children and individuals with AD this type of interaction cannot happen without guidance and practice. Even children who have participated in social skills groups need weekly reminders to greet others. They are simply not interested in social niceties and it is hard for them to understand that their failure to greet others or tendency to give at best a robotic hello makes other children see them negatively.

There are some tips for helping children with Asperger's Disorder learn important life skills:

- Consistent routines and structure are important. AD children should be prepared in advance for changes and transitions, including things such as schedule breaks or vacation days.
- Many of these children can be fairly rigid about following rules quite literally. While clearly expressed rules and guidelines are important, they should be applied with some flexibility.
- Most children with Asperger's are visual learners and respond well to the use of written schedules, charts, lists, and pictures.
- Try to keep communication and directives concrete. Avoid language that may be misunderstood by the child with Asperger's, such as sarcasm, confusing figurative speech, or idioms.
- Avoid escalating power struggles. These children often do not understand rigid displays of authority or anger and will become more rigid if confronted. Their behavior can then get rapidly out of control. It is always best to anticipate such situations and take preventative action when possible to avoid the confrontation through calmness, negotiation, presentation of choices, or diversion of attention elsewhere.