



What is Asperger's Disorder?

By Dr. Linda Hancock

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Hancock has written a regular weekly column entitled "All Psyched Up" for newspapers in two Canadian provinces for more than a dozen years. Over the years, her readers and clients have said that they have benefited from her common-sense solutions, wisdom, and sense of humour. Dr. Linda Hancock, the author of "Life is An Adventure...every step of the way" and "Open for Business Success" is a Registered Psychologist who has a private practice in Medicine Hat. She can be reached at 403-529-6877 or through email office@drlindahancock.com

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Autism and Asperger's Disorder are both classified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM-IV) published by the American Psychiatric Association as Pervasive Development Disorders.

Asperger's Disorder causes clinically significant impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning. The criteria for diagnosis involves two specific categories.

Qualitative impairment can be evidenced in use of nonverbal behaviours, failure to develop appropriate peer relationships and lack of social or emotional reciprocity. Eye contact, facial expression, postures or gestures are observed by professionals who are charged with making the diagnosis.

Patterns of behaviour which include repetitive and stereotyped interests and activities can occur in preoccupation or intensity of focus, apparent inflexibility regarding routines or rituals, stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms or persistent preoccupation with parts of objects.

Those with Asperger's Disorder do not have significant general delay in language or cognition, development of age-appropriate self-help skills, adaptive behaviour or curiosity about the environment in childhood.

As a therapist, I have had several opportunities to work with individuals who have been diagnosed with Asperger's Disorder. I remember many, many years ago when I was working with school personnel to develop an Individual Learning Plan for one of my clients. The teaching staff was very concerned that this child did not interact well with other children during recess and lunch breaks. When I talked with the child about this, he said "Please don't make me have to go out for recess. I have to put up with those kids all day long". Obviously, he wasn't interested in building relationships.

Another client explained to me that he only had one friend in the world. I immediately started to focus on what I thought was a rare "positive" by asking me to tell me about the friend. He gave me a big smile and said "It's you!"

A was pleased to learn from a wise principal who heard several complaints for students when their peer continually turned the lights off in the lunch room. This professional allowed the "offending" student to have his own lunch room and gave him control of the light switch.

Often those with Asperger's Disorder have amazing abilities in one or two areas. For example, one might be a concert pianist, mechanical engineer, or computer expert yet, at the same time, not be able to do what we might think are "simple" tasks such as crossing the street or carrying on a conversation with others.

As a psychologist I am required to work with clients to determine whether they fall into categories of "can or can't" compared with "will or won't". My goal is to help individuals to have a good day based on assessment of these.

We all have strengths and weaknesses. Those with Asperger's Disorder face the same dilemma. The difference is, of course, that society might not understand or have the insight to help them deal with the weaknesses so they, too, can have a good day.

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