



The High School Experience

Author: Richard Howlin

Added: 07/13/2003

Type: Paper-Adolescence

Asperger Syndrome and the High School Experience

Although generalizing behavioral syndromes is inherently problematic, there are some important commonalities in the challenges faced by adolescents with Asperger Syndrome (AS). They pose a unique quandary for schools and expose the importance of social programmatic needs. Throughout the journey of socially avoidant youth, peer relationships remain a tenuous and problematic issue. Often, the Aspergerian adolescent may have one or two select friends with whom he may socialize. These friends are themselves typically on the fringe of high school peer culture. Common and unusually intense interests often form the social glue of these relationships. Computer games, Japanese animation and science fiction top the list for many Asperger teens.(*). They are often well aware of the social scorn such preoccupations may illicit from others. Such scorn is countered by a system of rigidly held beliefs usually referring to the obvious inferior intelligence of typical high school students.

Aspergerian teens are not immune to the turmoil of identity issues faced during the adolescent period. They are in many ways, however, extremely socially and emotionally restricted and thus stunted in their role explorations. Difficulties in recognizing emotional states in themselves and others create a pattern of social withdrawal. An almost complete dependence of self-worth in academic or special interest areas emerges which renders a fundamental vulnerability in a social world that they would much rather avoid altogether. Many AS teens are intellectually above average, however there is often an unrealistic appraisal and inflation of their own competence and potential in this regard. In some cases the AS teen develops a narcissistic and idealistic world that is painfully frail and desperately defended.

In terms of accommodations, a case manager is often the most important component of high school support. The CM, could be an assigned special support staff member or counselor. This commitment is vital support for day to day functioning. The individual can also provide a designated "cool off" room in times of stress. The use of such supports should be mapped out with the student in advance in the form of a simple, graduated self-management program. A strict behavioral contract should be employed if it is expected that the teen may become angry or hostile: "What to do when " This contract or plan

should contain clear and concrete expectations regarding teacher and peer respect. Some AS teens are compliant and extremely passive while others may verbally attack teachers in areas of perceived intellectual weakness. Irrespective of the specific nature of behavioral difficulties faced by the AS child, an anxious and rigid inability to cope with interpersonal interactions is the dominant underlying feature.

Helping the social integration of the AS teen in the high school can be achieved by allowing for diverse and intellectually oriented activities. Chess club (a favorite) or science fiction book clubs are wonderful opportunities for students to find peer connections. Using the expertise of the AS child as an academic and knowledgeable resource is another way. The case manager can function as facilitator in such circumstances. It is my contention that AS teens require monitoring as they chart their way through the terrain of school and concrete structure and empathy when things "fall apart" as they often do within their very different experience of everyday events.

Finally, the parents of AS teens, due to the persistent issues of social management, need frequent feedback. Weekly or, when necessary, daily reports are helpful. Encouragement for both the teen and the parent in recognizing each small step in social progress is an essential component of this journey.

(* In a survey of English and American teens diagnosed with AS (n= 26), the author found striking similarities of special interests in this regard.



This article brought to you by the Asperger Society of Michigan.

For more information, please write to:

Asperger Society of Michigan

5047 West Main Street #358

Kalamazoo, MI 49009-1001

Or Email to:

info@aspergersmichigan.com