



Middle School Anyone?
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Asperger Syndrome and Adolescence: Middle School Anyone?

As a psychologist specializing in social processing, I have attempted to support many children with Asperger Syndrome through the social jungle of school. Middle school is by far the most troublesome and for many children, the worst of times. On some occasions the classic pattern of “predator” bullying behavior has been apparent. The child with AS child is targeted for a variety of reasons, ranging from timidity, outspokenness, weak physical stature or academic ability. Perhaps one of the most difficult realities faced by parents and caring adults is the fact that we often find ourselves powerless in the social arena of our children. Intimidation occurs at many levels and when children step into the school environment they are instinctively aware of how separate and challenging this world can be.

Protecting children from hostile behaviors of peers should, I believe, be a concern shared by adults. Schools must overtly address these issues and seriously pursue harassment and bullying. This does not however, guarantee acceptance and tolerance at more subtle levels. These behaviors reflect the character and culture of the peer population and their home environments. In a macro pop culture where clothing is accepted as the main criteria for acceptance or rejection by many circles of teenage girls, we have a serious problem. Culture, character and behavior are frequently dictated by popular images beyond the classrooms. In shopping malls and television music shows, teens are continually exposed to an early sexual emphasis and countless fads. Such influences are typically not conducive to positive character traits and emphasize superficiality and sexual attraction above all else.

Thus concerned educators, teachers and parents have to somehow negotiate this enormous backdrop in the politics of the classroom. In my own experience with the social lives of aspergian children, I have found that one of the most potent supports through the difficult early adolescent years can be found in friendship or interest groups. Many children with AS are oblivious or unconcerned about the latest fad or “in” group. Their wish for contact and camaraderie is frequently driven by their interests rather than social

impression. Thus providing groups for interests and exchange is a potent force against alienation. This is an intervention that is relatively simple to implement. Examples are chess, anime and science clubs.

Along with helping the children with AS find their social niche, we must also continue to foster character development in all children. Beyond the media culture lie real and fundamental human needs and concerns. Helping autistic spectrum children adapt and develop social competence is a key concern, however, as adults we must also confront the destructive distractions that infect the social behaviors of all children.

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

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