ASPERGER SYNDROME: SOCIAL SKILLS INTERVENTIONS

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Asperger Syndrome (AS) is defined by impairments in social relationships and verbal and nonverbal communication and by restrictive, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. On the autism spectrum, AS falls at the high end of functioning. The incidence of AS is still uncertain, with estimates of 25–70 per 10,000 children. As awareness of this condition increases, many families are requesting appropriate educational services to meet their children’s needs. Professionals are also now realizing that while AS has a relatively low incidence rate, it is not a rare disability, and more information regarding interventions in the classroom is desperately needed, especially in the area of social skills.

Those with AS lack appropriate social skills, have a limited ability to take part in reciprocal conversation, and do not seem to understand many of the unwritten rules of communication and social conduct that their peers seem to learn naturally through observation. Research has demonstrated that social skill deficits remain the greatest challenge for children with AS despite their high verbal skills and intellectual ability. The impact of these deficits can range from not being able to develop or maintain friendships to not being able to maintain employment because of lack of understanding of social and work conventions.

School professionals can assist students with AS in understanding and navigating the complex social world through direct social skills instruction. This includes social skills training (SST) in problem solving, conversational skills, identification of feelings, management of feelings, anger control, dealing with stress, and organizational skills.

The school counselor, psychologist, or special education teacher can play a critical role in advocating for this training and can also provide direct social skills instruction to students and train teachers and families to use various social skills strategies such as social stories and Comic Strip Conversations (see “Resources”). In addition, directly teaching these students the hidden curriculum, unwritten rules of conduct, and “mind-reading” are integral parts of social skills curriculum. This training can be conducted in groups and individually.

Social Skills Training Groups

Each student’s social skills strengths and deficits need to be assessed to determine which social skills will be taught in the SST group. Teaching too many skills during SST or teaching one skill for too short a period may inhibit generalization. SST is not a one-shot fix or cure, and the training needs to extend over time. Instruction in nonverbal skills should be included, given the difficulty those students with AS have in reading and understanding the meaning of other’s behavior. Prepackaged social skills curriculum may be used to supplement instruction. This author has found parts of the Skillstreaming series (McGinnis & Goldstein, 1990, 1997; Goldstein & McGinnis 1997) to be helpful resources along with Teaching Your Child the Language of Social Success (Duke, Nowicki, & Martin, 1994) and How Rudel! The Teenagers’ Guide to Good Manners, Proper Behavior, and Not Grossing People Out (Packard, 1997). Effective SST strategies also incorporate modeling, role-playing, and immediate reinforcement procedures.

Programming for generalization and maintenance of skills needs to be established before the start of the intervention. Students with AS experience difficulty generalizing the skills they learn to other people and settings. For example, one 16-year-old adolescent with AS who regularly participated in a Saturday social skills group refused to practice a previously taught social skill on Thursday, stating that Saturday was the only time he did social skills. Clearly, this student had not yet generalized the skills he was taught to other settings. Teaching social skills in multiple settings with multiple implementers could enhance generalization. Ideally, parents and teachers need to teach and reinforce the same skills.
Individual Social Skills Instruction

Mind-reading. Howlin and associates recommend teaching theory-of-mind, or mind-reading, which is the ability to infer other people’s thoughts, beliefs, desires, and intentions and then use this information to interpret what other people say, make sense of their behavior, and predict what they will do next. Normally developing children are able to mind-read by age four. However, children with AS possess varying levels of the ability to mind-read. A deficit in mind-reading can produce the following social challenges: an insensitivity to others’ feelings, an inability to take into account what other people know, an inability to read and respond to others’ intentions, an inability to deceive or understand deception, an inability to understand the reasons behind other people’s behavior, an inability to understand misunderstandings, and an inability to understand unwritten rules. The curriculum designed by Howlin and colleagues, based on the results of empirical study, includes teaching the understanding of emotional states and informational states through the use of photographs, pictures, and schematic drawings. In addition, pretense, or pretend play, is taught through direct instruction.

Social stories and Comic Strip Conversations. Social stories are short stories or minibooks usually written by the adult in the child’s environment to help answer questions that children or adults with autism may need to know to interact appropriately with others; that is, the “who, what, when, where, and why” in social situations. These are personalized for each child, often motivating, and serve as a visual cue that targets one behavior for improvement. Each story contains two to five descriptive and perspective sentences for each directive sentence. Descriptive sentences provide information about the child, setting, and actions. Perspective sentences emphasize possible feelings and reactions of others. Directive statements portray the appropriate behavioral response. Social stories provide the student with accurate and specific information about what occurs in a situation and why it occurs and are designed to bring predictability to a situation that from the perspective of the student with AS is confusing, scary, or difficult to understand.

Gray’s Comic Strip Conversation (CSC) strategy uses stick figure drawings to illustrate ongoing communication. Students with AS often experience difficulty understanding the quick exchange of information that occurs in a conversation. CSCs turn an abstract conversation into a concrete representation that allows for reflection and understanding. The teacher or paraprofessional facilitates or guides the CSC without assuming the lead in order to allow the child to have control during the session. Each CSC visually depicts what people do, say, and think.

Hidden curriculum. Hidden curriculum refers to the unwritten, unspoken rules of the school that most students, except the student with AS, take for granted. It is the culture that makes some schools different than others. Children with AS violate these rules and frequently are not even aware that they have done so. For example, most students figure out in a matter of days which teachers will tolerate missing homework or being late to class and which ones will not. The student with AS typically does not intuitively pick up these unwritten rules and needs to be taught them directly.

In addition, teacher expectations, teacher pleasing behavior, teacher likes, which students to interact with and which students to avoid, safe and unsafe places in the school, and what the cool kids do and do not do are all part of the hidden curriculum that must be explicitly taught. Students with AS must be taught that the hidden curriculum varies across settings, people, situations, and cultures. For example, the hidden curriculum for behavior in a church is certainly very different from the hidden curriculum for behavior at a sporting event.

Summary

It is important for professionals to understand that although the behavior of students with AS frequently appears to be manipulative in nature, it oftentimes is not and is instead a result of lack of social understanding and difficulty in communication.

Remember to keep a sense of humor when working with these students. Hans Asperger (1991) wrote that even though these students can be difficult, even under optimal conditions, “they can be guided and taught, but by people who give them true understanding and genuine affection, people who show kindness to them and, yes, humor” (p. 48).

Resources


teaching prosocial skills. Champaign, IL: Research Press. ISBN: 087822369X.

Websites
Asperger Syndrome Coalition of the U.S., Inc. (ASC-U.S.)—www.asperger.org
MAAP (More Advanced Individuals with Autism, Asperger Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder/Not Otherwise Specified) Services for the Autism Spectrum—www.maapservices.org

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