

Asperger Syndrome: Strategies for Adolescents



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Introduction



About Adolescence

- “The period of life beginning with puberty and ending with completed growth and physical maturation” (Stedman’s Medical Dictionary, 1995)
- A time of tremendous cognitive, social, and emotional change
- A time of “ Sturm and Drang”?
- A time of changing expectations and values, from within and without

About AS

Individuals with AS share many characteristics:

- ✓ “At least average” cognitive and language skills
- ✓ Differences in social communication and comfort
- ✓ Differences in social cognition (“Theory of Mind”)
- ✓ Remarkable interests and “passions”

About AS

People with AS also show great diversity:

- ✓ Visual spatial challenges or visual spatial strengths
- ✓ Math/science inefficiencies or math/science accomplishments
- ✓ Social disinterest or “interested but odd”
- ✓ Motor clumsiness or not
- ✓ Anxiety, obsessive-compulsive tendencies or not
- ✓ Substantial variability in cognitive profiles
- ✓ Variability of sensory profiles

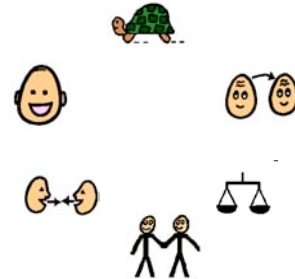
“Protective factors” of AS

- ✓ Belief in, and need for, rules
- ✓ “Black and white thinking”
- ✓ Reduced concern for “what others think”
- ✓ Decreased desire for “popularity”
- ✓ Ability to focus on things that matter (passions and preoccupations)
- ✓ Intellectual ability and special talents

“Downsides” of AS

- ✓ All of the above
- ✓ Poor regulation of the “Four As”
- ✓ Clumsiness
- ✓ Difficulties in “seeing the forest for the trees”
- ✓ Challenges in organization and problem solving
- ✓ Inefficiencies in social communication and perspective-taking (Theory of Mind)
- ✓ Inexperience

The Hidden Curriculum of Adolescence and Beyond



Adaptive Self-Management in Everyday Life



Adaptive Self-Management

- Self-regulation and The Four A's
 - ✓ Arousal/alertness
 - ✓ Attention
 - ✓ Activity
 - ✓ Affect
- Most individuals with ASD have a repertoire of self-regulatory strategies...it's just that many of these strategies are neither adaptive nor efficient



How to teach/learn self-regulation

- Always identify the purpose of the activity or task, including what's salient and what's not
- Identify how “load” interferes with achieving the purpose
- “Leverage” passions and special interests as vehicles for self-regulation
- Use concrete visual supports that fit the individual's profile of strengths and challenges



How to teach/learn self-regulation (continued)

- Use a program such as the “How does your engine run?” (Shellenberger and Williams) to teach self-monitoring
- Help the individual develop a repertoire of adaptive strategies for “perking up” or “settling down”
- Practice “Low and Slow”



Load Chart

Sign	State	Reason	Remedies
High voice	“Too revved”	New teacher in history	Deep breathing Review name of teacher Re-read notes in regular voice

Load Chart

Sign	State	Reason	Remedies
Slumping Falling asleep in class Can't think	“Too low”	Up too late Too much information	Power walk with heavy books before class Ice water Peppermint Isometrics in class

Examples of Adaptive Self-Management Skills

- Exercise
- Listening to or making music
- Relaxation strategies (including meditation, yoga)
- Reading about one's passions/preoccupations
- Drawing/painting/sculpting/writing/drama
- Chatting (real or virtual)
- Observing others



Distracting Skills (from Miller, Rathus, & Linehan, 2007)

- A**ctivities
- C**ontributing
- C**omparisons
- E**motions
- P**ushing away
- T**houghts
- S**ensations



The Relaxation Response (from the Mind/Body Medical Institute)

1. Pick a focus word.
2. Sit quietly and close eyes.
3. Breathe slowly, in through the nose and through the mouth.
4. Repeat the focus word silently on the exhale.
5. Continue for 10 to 20 minutes.
6. If you lose focus, say “Oh well” and return to the meditation.
7. Practice twice daily.

Take Home Message

“You can't think right when your underwear's too tight.”

Hanes Corp., 1977



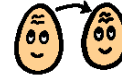
A Corollary

It's also hard to act "right" when your self-management skills are inefficient.

Don't forget to consider any interfering behavior within the context of load and developmentally incompetent self-management!



Social/Emotional Competence in Everyday Life



Social/Emotional Competence



Social cognition (Theory of Mind)



Reciprocal interaction



The rules of the social road



Friendship and romance

Teaching Social Cognition

- Social cognition emerges from experience, the so-called "hidden curriculum."
- Only a small part of social cognition is taught directly in a typical classroom.
- Many with AS were unavailable for this experience as younger children. Or if they did have the experience, they may not have learned the lessons that their peers learned.
- Effective teaching of social cognition rests upon comprehensive assessment of what the person already knows.



What to Teach about Social Cognition

- Information about "normative" interests, feelings, thoughts, and behavior
- Information about guidelines for acceptable behavior
- What makes a friend a friend (and a boy/girlfriend a boy/girlfriend)
- "Display rules" for your culture or community
- "Rules" about touch and interpersonal distance
- Acceptable topics of conversation



"Polite Company"

Sometimes adults say, "You shouldn't do that in polite company." They mean that you shouldn't say or do certain things in certain places or with certain people.

Some people may be offended by our language (such as swearing). Some may be offended by our actions (such as scratching private parts). Some may be offended by loud body noises (such as passing gas). When you're with people who may get offended, you're in polite company.

Adults understand that teenagers sometimes get annoyed that they can't swear or scratch or make loud noises. But they also know that teenagers pay a price for those actions. It's usually a good idea to follow the adults' suggestions about what to do in polite company.

What to Teach about Social Cognition (Continued)

- Humor (when, where, how much)
- Ways to identify “set ups” and other forms of teasing
- Manners and other “rules of the social road”
- “Little White Lies” and “Sins of the System”
- Perspective-taking (Theory of Mind)—even if at a “rule bound” (rather than intuitive) level
- Empathic behavior (even if the student is not yet ready for true empathy)



Reciprocal Communication

- Most adolescents and adults with AS do a great job of talking, especially about things they want or need.
- Stephen Gutstein suggests that this “instrumental” communication is quite efficient in individuals with AS. It’s the process called “experience sharing” that is more of a challenge.
- Virtually all of work skills have a communicative component.
- Reciprocal communication is best taught within the context of a working partnership.



Understanding the Message

7% words

38% prosodic features
(intonation, inflection, pitch, rate, fluency, loudness)

55% nonverbal or “body language”
(Mehrabian, 1972)

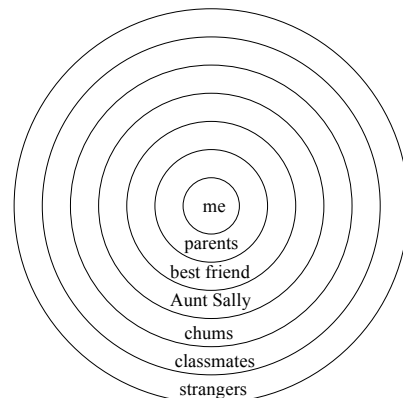
Communication Tips

- Allow ample time for processing and for clarifying.
- Use the communication system employed by the adolescent.
- Try to model “congruent communication”—mean what you say and say what you mean. Make sure that your nonverbal cues match your words.
- Be aware of your own use of figurative language, slang, and gesture. Be prepared to “translate” if necessary. Avoid sarcasm.
- Look for “natural opportunities” for direct teaching of abstract communication.



Communication Tips (Continued)

- Know (and teach) the communicative conventions of the peer group.
- Know (and teach) the things to avoid at all costs.
- Ensure that the individual has easily accessible means to express desire/need, preference, protest, confusion, and need for assistance. Help the adolescent develop skills for communicative repair and conflict resolution.
- Don’t forget to teach about “code switching.”
- Do not make assumptions about what the person understands!



Examples of Portable (and Cool) Communication

- Using the current slang (correctly)
- Asking a question without sounding argumentative or pedantic
- Changing style when talking with the “guys” vs. talking with your grandmother
- Using a shrug of the shoulders and a half-smile to communicate “Whatever”
- Using eye gaze, facial expressions, and body language that convey the message that he/she wants to send
- “Non-reactions” to teasing and taunting



How to Teach Communication/Interaction

- Social interaction depends upon some degree of mastery of basic communication and some semblance of social cognition.
- It also rests upon reasonable regulation of the Four A’s. Just like “You can’t think right if your underwear’s too tight,” you also can’t socialize when you’re “wicked uncomfortable.”



How to Teach Communication/Interaction (continued)

- Problem solving
 - ✓ Use visual supports (such as Comic Strip Conversations or storygrams) to illustrate sequence of events.
 - ✓ Help the adolescent identify mental states.
 - ✓ Brainstorm about “logical interpretations” of the behavior of involved parties.
 - ✓ Make a plan about what to do next time.
 - ✓ Practice—using role play and/or videotape.



How to Teach Social Communication/Interaction (continued)

- Peer Coaches and Circle of Friends
 - ✓ Secure parental/self permission to share information about the student
 - ✓ Identify peer(s) and secure their parents’ permission
 - ✓ “Coach the coaches”
 - ✓ With all of the students, identify goals.
 - ✓ Allow the students to formulate plans and identify resources (with adult as censor/facilitator)
 - ✓ Implement plans first in a pre-arranged and well-supervised situation
 - ✓ Encourage extension to the “real world”



How to Teach Social Communication/Interaction (continued)

- Other avenues
 - ✓ Structured curricula
 - ✓ Social stories (Carol Gray)
 - ✓ Power Cards (Elisa Gagnon)
 - ✓ Social skills groups (with carefully selected participants)
 - ✓ Psychotherapy
 - ✓ Speech/language therapy (individual and/or group)
 - ✓ Groups that revolve around a special interest (with coaching)
 - ✓ Part-time jobs (with a coach)



Video Modeling


- Take advantage of what we know about modeling in general: use models with higher status (in the eyes of the student); show reinforcement of models; use activities that are relevant or interesting to the student
- Gear the video to the strengths and challenges of the student
- Be prepared to preview, teach, and review




Conversations

Who? \ What?	Girls	Guys
Activity		
Seating		
Touching		

Examples of Social Curricula


- *Navigating the social world*—Jeanette McAfee
- *Social skills training for children and adolescents with Asperger Syndrome and social-communication problems*—Jed Baker
- *Super Skills*—Judith Coucouvanis
- *Inside out: What makes a person with social cognitive deficits tick?*—Michelle Garcia Winner
- *Autism-Aspergers: Solving the relationship puzzle*—Steven Gutstein 

If You Talk the Talk, You'd Better Walk the Walk...


- Monitor your own nonverbal communication and modify if necessary.
- Model listening with eyes and ears.
- Have a life that includes social and recreational activities
- Remember your sense of humor 

A Sad Truth...


Some of us can get away with more.

Help individuals build “social capital.” 

The Rules of the Social Road

- Understanding the “unwritten rules” (including ADLs)
- “The literal detour”
- Self-management
- Sexuality 

“The Literal Detour”

- “Tell me exactly how you feel.”
- “You can take this to the bank.”
- “Would you like to read next?” 

ToM and High School English

- “Write a play that describes the teenage experience in 21st-century America.”
- “Using your impressions from Ibsen’s ‘The Doll’s House,’ write a diary entry from the perspective of a woman trapped in an unhappy marriage.”



Interfering Behaviors: The Failure of Self-management

- Occur when load is poorly controlled or understood and OVERLOAD ensues
- Occur when the adolescent has no other way of meeting the need/want of the moment
- Occur as a function of previous reinforcement (learning)
- Tend to be socially-penalizing
- Are best understood through a functional assessment of behavior (FBA)



Emotional Competence

- Awareness of one’s own emotions
- Understanding the antecedent of emotions
- Adaptive expression of emotions
- Adaptive modulation of emotions
- Capacity for self-soothing and self-reinforcement
- Managing behavior according to situational expectations



Positive Behavioral Support Plan

- Strengths and challenges
- Interfering behaviors and their functions
- Adaptive (replacement) behaviors to be strengthened
- Modifications/accommodations to support adaptive behavior
- Strategies to teach adaptive alternatives
- Crisis intervention protocol



Excerpts from Christina’s Positive Behavior Support Plan

- Strengths and passions
 - ✓ Intelligence and fund of information
 - ✓ Memory for books and videos
 - ✓ Musical ability
 - ✓ Habit memory for preferred procedures
 - ✓ Passion for soap operas and fashion



Excerpts from a Support Plan

- Challenges
 - ✓ Sensory sensitivities and motor planning
 - ✓ Self-regulation (especially of affect)
 - ✓ Pragmatic communication
 - ✓ Executive functions (especially initiation and planning)
 - ✓ Social experience



Excerpts from a Support Plan

- Interfering behaviors and their functions
 - ✓ Active or passive avoidance of tasks – escape from perception of incompetence, communication of need for help
 - ✓ Loud protests, name-calling, and threats – “fight or flight” responses to aversive stimuli, communication of protest, preference, need for help



Excerpts from a Support Plan

- Current approximations to adaptive behaviors
 - ✓ “Ms. (teacher’s name)” – in loud whining voice
 - ✓ “MOM!!!!”
 - ✓ Complaining to classmates
 - ✓ Promising to try harder
 - ✓ Writing lists for high-incentive events (e.g., prom)



Excerpts from a Support Plan

- Modifications/Accommodations
 - ✓ Proactive relaxation response program
 - ✓ Rubrics and task cards for multi-step tasks
 - ✓ Seating beside competent peers
 - ✓ Peer mentor
 - ✓ Provide choices whenever possible
 - ✓ “Low and Slow” response from adults



Pottery Class

Materials

- ✓ Apron
- ✓ Current project
- ✓ Brushes, other tools

Steps

- ✓ Check easel for current project
- ✓ Gather materials
- ✓ Follow project directions
- ✓ Raise hand for help
- ✓ Think before calling out

Excerpts from a Support Plan

- Direct Teaching
 - ✓ Practice skills for working partnership
 - ✓ Practice skills for goal-setting and self-advocacy
 - ✓ Self-monitoring/self-soothing (“I feel ____, I can __”)
 - ✓ Socially acceptable scripts for help seeking
 - ✓ Socially acceptable scripts for seeking attention



Excerpts from a Support Plan

- “During the storm” responses
 - ✓ “Low and Slow”
 - ✓ Allow her to calm
 - ✓ Describe her actions and make empathic response
 - ✓ Ask her to express her concern
 - ✓ Suggest a scaled back version of the original task or demand
 - ✓ Reinforce compliance with a scaled back directive
 - ✓ Agree to revisit the situation when everyone is in a different frame of mind



Excerpts from a Support Plan

- “After the storm” response
 - ✓ “Low and Slow”
 - ✓ Describe her actions and make empathic response
 - ✓ Ask her to express her concern
 - ✓ Ask her to brainstorm about possible solutions
 - ✓ Evaluate solutions according to criteria of “doable, reasonable, and mutually satisfactory” (from Ross Greene, 2005)
 - ✓ Agree about solution
 - ✓ Debrief about solution



Managing Emotions/Behavior according to Situation

- Provide clear-cut information about situational guidelines
- Use “antecedent controls” whenever possible
- Teach concrete, situationally appropriate coping strategies (“When I feel ____, I can ____”)
- Teach “bail out” options



Sample Feelings Chart

Physical Sign	Emotion	Reason	Adaptive Expression
Picking my cuticles	Anxious	Thinking about turning 18 and having adult responsibility	Tell my parents that I’m worried about handling finances

Feeling Sick at School

I have migraines sometimes. Migraines make me nervous. I think I’m gonna throw up. I think people will laugh at me when I throw up at school or on the bus.

My migraines usually get better when I take medication, though. If I take the medication and think about something else, I usually feel better. If I don’t feel better, I can always ask for help.

Other people feel sorry for kids who have migraines. They probably won’t laugh at me. Instead they’ll try to help.

When I have a migraine, I’ll take my meds. If that doesn’t work, I’ll ask for help. Then I’ll probably feel better.

Early Warning Signs

- Seek mental health consultation for:
 - ✓ Continuous sad or anxious mood
 - ✓ Increased irritability or sudden mood changes
 - ✓ Hopeless or helpless attitude
 - ✓ Loss of interest in previous pleasures
 - ✓ Self-injurious thoughts or actions
 - ✓ Obsessions or compulsions
 - ✓ Overly suspicious thoughts
 - ✓ Increased fearfulness or avoidance



Early Warning Signs (continued)

- Seek mental health consultation for:
 - ✓ “Tantrums” or raging behavior
 - ✓ Increased frequency or intensity of conflicts with others
 - ✓ School refusal or drop in academic productivity
 - ✓ Increased forgetfulness or inattention
 - ✓ Physical complaints (headache, stomachache, body aches and pains)
 - ✓ Changes in everyday functioning



Take Home Message



**“Children do well
if they can.”**

(Ross Greene, 2005, p.11)

“...true friendships are built on shared interests, or shared ideas, or shared principles that you both hold meaningful; there’s always some common thread that binds you together.”

(Grandin & Barron, 2005, p. 239)

“Chums”

- Same-sex friendships
- Appear in primary grades for typical children, but often much later for children with AS
- For girls—communal and “face to face”
- For boys—agentic and “side by side”

You can be best friends even if...



- Your friend doesn’t like WOW
- Your friend goes to the Spiderman 3 with someone else
- Your friend says “Not today” if you ask her to come over after school
- Your friend accidentally hurts you
- You and your friend have an argument



10 Tips about Relationships and Sexuality



- Listening-the most important skill for friendship and romance
- Good hygiene-a close second
- Talk-about events and feelings
- “Agree to disagree”
- “Friend”-the most important part of “girlfriend” or “boyfriend”



10 Tips about Relationships and Sexuality (continued)



- Showing interest-a terrific way to flirt
- Being “revved”-an obstacle to closeness
- Never touch unless you ask first
- Tell a trusted adult when you feel uncomfortable about feelings or actions (yours or someone else’s)
- MOST IMPORTANTLY, “Stop” means “Stop” and “No” means “No.”





5 Premises about Sexuality (adapted from Henault, 2005, p. 19)

- Knowing about sexuality does not make one more interested
- Curiosity and exploration are healthy aspects of adolescence
- Information reduces anxiety, facilitates good judgment, and reduces the risk of problematic events
- Forbidding increases the risk of excess
- Sexual desire cannot be repressed but can be directed toward appropriate expression



As we near the finish...

Remember Hanes.



Tips for Therapists

- Work within the context of the adolescent's goals, even if you have other ideas.
- Be direct. Don't assume.
- Act as a translator, when necessary.
- Don't under-estimate the importance of the relationship to the adolescent.
- Help the adolescent self-advocate, even when he/she does it awkwardly.

Tips for the Whole Team (including parents)

- Transition to the real world begins at birth, for all of us.
- Teach life skills.
- Model and reinforce direct communication.
- Nurture social capital.
- Remember that they are, after all, adolescents. They should make mistakes.
- Stay "low and slow" (even with each other).

The Last Take Home Message

"What is a weed?
A plant whose virtues have
not yet been discovered."

Ralph Waldo Emerson
1878



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