

Asperger Syndrome Strategies for Young Children



Teresa Bolick, Ph.D.
August 2008

Introduction



How does the DSM-IV define AS?

- “Qualitative impairment in social interaction”
- “Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviors, interests, and activities”
- Significant impairment in role functioning
- No significant delays in language acquisition, cognitive development, learning, or adaptive behavior



Practically speaking... Assets

- Normal (maybe precocious) vocabulary
- Intellectual curiosity
- Large fund of factual information
- Interest in words and books
- Conversations with adults and older children



Practically speaking... “Mixed Blessings”

- Strong interest in rules and regulations
- Preference for routine and predictability
- Social naiveté
- Little regard for “peer pressure”
- All-encompassing preoccupation with specific topics, objects or activities



Practically speaking... Challenges

- (Sometimes) Inefficient sensorimotor processing and integration
- Inefficient deployment of attention
- Inadequate “mental map” of body and mind
- Distress in the face of change or transition
- Poor regulation of emotions
- Behavioral routines or rituals
- Difficulties in seeing another person’s point of view and adjusting behavior accordingly
- Limited creativity in symbolic play



Possibly Related Conditions

- High functioning autism
- Right hemisphere dysfunction (nonverbal learning disability)
- Attentional problems
- Obsessive-compulsive tendencies (typically ego-syntonic)
- Anxiety
- Depression



Twice-Exceptional

- An unknown percentage of individuals with AS have overall intellectual abilities within the superior range
- Many others have exceptional talents in one or more areas
- Many are “over-excitable”



“Overexcitability is a higher than average capacity for experiencing internal and external stimuli, based on a higher than average responsiveness of the nervous system...”
(Dabrowski, 1964)



Take Home Message #1

The program must be based upon

STRENGTHS 
and
CHALLENGES $\begin{matrix} 259 \\ \times 917 \\ \hline \end{matrix}$

not upon diagnosis.

Take Home Message #2

Despite the challenges,
children with AS are
FIRST AND FOREMOST



children.

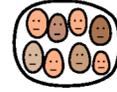
The Real World and the Hidden Curriculum



Group Activity

- Identify the sources of load that a child is likely to encounter at the mall.
- Then list strategies that a typical child uses to manage emotions and behavior in the face of such load.

How does everyone else “just” know?



Common Sense Interventions for Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Competence

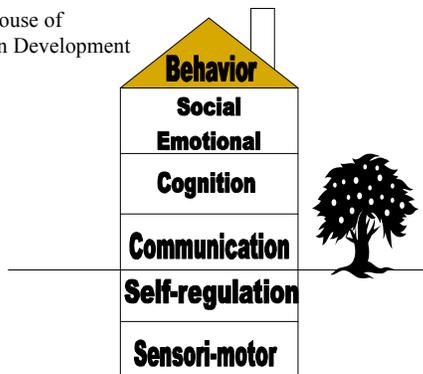


Four “Always” Elements of Common Sense Intervention

- Always determine the purpose of the activity for the individual child.
- Always provide previews, along with the caution that a zigger zagger may occur at any moment.
- Always convey that purpose to the child, along with what the purpose is not.
- Always provide visual supports that emphasize purpose and process and that fit the child’s “kind of mind”



The House of Human Development



Bolick, 2004

Building a Strong House

The Positive Behavioral Support and Intervention Plan



Functional Assessment of Environment

Functional Assessment of Behavior

Neurodevelopmental Evaluation of Individual Strengths and Challenges



Comprehensive Evaluation of Neurodevelopmental Strengths and Challenges

- Developmental and family histories
- Observation across environmental contexts
- Observation across interpersonal contexts
- Assessment of all neurodevelopmental domains (i.e., the “stories” of the House)—using a combination of evaluation strategies
- Identification of conditions that enhance or hinder functioning
- Medical assessment, as indicated



Functional Assessment of Behavior

- Define the target behavior(s)
- Identify load factors (antecedents) that increase/decrease the likelihood of the target behavior(s)
- Identify consequences that increase/decrease the likelihood of the target behavior
- Formulate a hypothesis about the function or purpose of the behavior
- Identify adaptive alternatives (or replacement behaviors) within the individual’s repertoire



Functional Assessment of the Environment

- Physical plant
- Visual characteristics
- Auditory characteristics (language and non-language)
- Spatial characteristics
- Other sensory characteristics (e.g., odor)
- Temporal characteristics (e.g., time of day, length of day, timing of activities)
- Routine and schedule
- Task parameters
- People factors



Take Home Message #3



“Small group conversations make my nerves feel like they are wearing stilts on an icy pavement.”

(Willey, *Pretending to be Normal*, p. 37)

The Positive Behavioral Support and Intervention Plan

Returning to the image provided by Liane Holliday Willey...



- Dry up “icy pavement”
- Provide shorter stilts
- Teach stilt-walking

What Makes the Pavement Icy: Understanding Load

- The “press” of development
- Demands from the physical environment
- Demands from the interpersonal environment
- Pre-academic and academic demands
- Individual passions
- Individual challenges
- Change everywhere



Leveraging Strengths and Passions to Reduce Load

- Whenever possible, work initially within the context of strength and/or passion
- Use strengths as a way of leveraging challenges in managing load – the example of rote counting
- Use passions as starting points, tools, and reinforcers – the example of road maps



BEWARE...



Accommodations/modifications made without the input of your working partner (the child with AS) are often doomed.

Drying up Icy Pavement: Sample Modifications of the Physical Environment

- Reducing/masking background noise
- Reducing visual distractions
- Creating “home base” or “quiet spot”
- Classroom arrangement—to manage sensory load and to emphasize functional areas within the space
- Household arrangement – to manage sensory load and demands for motor control and to emphasize organization and routine



Drying up Icy Pavement: Sample Modifications of the Temporal Environment

- Provide a visual schedule and refer to it often
- Teach the concept of “zigger zagger” and then vary routine
- Be careful about using “clock time” as a reference
- When possible, schedule high demand activities earlier in the day
- Use visual supports to emphasize when the activity will be finished



Drying up Icy Pavement: Sample Modifications of the Interpersonal Environment

- Be aware of background language
- Be clear, concise, and concrete.
- Gear adult behavior to the child’s sensory and communicative profile.
- Listen to the child’s passions. If you can’t right then, let him know when you can.
- Provide clear-cut explanations of interpersonal behavior (especially of peers).
- Practice “Low and Slow.”



Providing Shorter Stilts: Accommodations

- After identifying the purpose of the activity for the child, “off-load” any task demand that is not essential—the example of spelling words
- Take advantage of errorless learning, successive approximations, and backward chaining strategies to ensure that the child is always working toward success.
- Utilize passions and preoccupation when necessary to get the child “over a hump”
- Allow flexibility re clothing, naps, eating, toileting (again, with purpose in mind)



Pavement and Stilts

- The Context: Full-day kindergarten
- The Activity: “Rest” Time
- The Rule: Everyone has to be on a cot, lying quietly.
- The Glitch: Joe can’t rest quietly on a cot.
- The Purposes for Joe: Respite from sensory, communicative, and social demands; learning not to disrupt his peers’ rest



Pavement and Stilts

(continued)

- Accommodations: cot behind teacher’s desk; headphones and tape recorder with book on tape
- Modifications of typical program: “clicker program” for target behavior (in this case, following direction of lying quietly during rest time)



Pavement and Stilts

II

- Context: First grade classroom
- Activity: Word wall journal
- Purposes for class: orienting students to sight words; writing from dictation; practicing handwriting
- Glitches for Mike: sight word vocabulary is a strength; graphomotor skills are weak; he thinks everyone else should know better



Pavement and Stilts

II

(continued)

- Purposes for Mike: following directions; inhibiting impulsive comments
- Accommodations: heavy work prior to activity; seating beside competent peer; Word Wall Journal task card; pencil grip and paper with raised lines



Take Home Message #4

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

Hanes Corp., 197?



Teaching Stilt-Walking

- Using information from the evaluation and FBA, identify what skills would allow the child to function more adaptively and efficiently.
- What approximations does the child already possess?
- Set priorities for skills to be developed.
- Identify the teaching strategies to be used to build those skills.
- Identify the reinforcement menu and delivery system to be used to support the skill development.



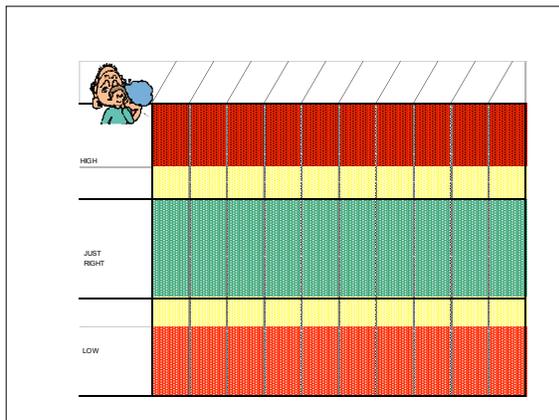
A Few Precautions

- Try to focus upon functional skills.
- Try to focus upon efficient skills.
- Try to focus upon “portable” skills—those that the child can take anywhere.
- Try to focus upon skills that have intrinsic motivation for the child.
- Try to avoid prompt dependence.



Direct Teaching

- Sensory-motor processing and self-regulation
 - ✓ “How does your engine run?” (the Alert program)
 - ✓ Relaxation/meditation strategies
 - ✓ Exercise, music, and other self-management strategies
 - ✓ Passions that facilitate adaptive levels of arousal



Observable Behaviors

Yellow

- Looking out window
- Fidgeting
- Wiggling
- Humming
- Muttering
- Chewing on paper, clothes
- Yawning

Red

- Jumping out of chair
- Running out of room
- Swearing
- Yelling
- Hitting or kicking
- Falling off chair

Sample Remedies

Yellow

- Sensory tools in class
- Drawing
- Reading
- Listening to books on tape
- Listening to music
- Water bottle
- Crunchy snack
- Mentos

Red

- Going for a walk
- OT room
- Home base
- Chewing ice
- Clay in art room
- Shooting hoops

Direct Teaching

- Communication
 - ✓ Visual supports, including video modeling
 - ✓ Turn-taking and topic shift/maintenance
 - ✓ Scripts and topic cards
 - ✓ Manners and Little White Lies
 - ✓ Skits and video productions
 - ✓ Floor time (DIR; Greenspan & Wieder)
 - ✓ Relational Development Intervention (RDI; Gutstein)



Direct Teaching

- Cognition and Academics
 - ✓ The “hidden curriculum”
 - ✓ Input controls (“frames”)
 - ✓ Understanding and abstraction
 - ✓ Output
 - ✓ Self-monitoring and self-reinforcement (“turtle”)
 - ✓ Seeing the forest (“zoom in, zoom out”)



Morning Meeting



Sit on rug



Look at teacher



Listen to his words



Raise my hand before I talk

Direct Teaching

- Social Competence
 - ✓ Nonverbal and situational clues about emotion—yours and mine (Theory of Mind)
 - ✓ Personal fact files
 - ✓ The Rules of the Social Road
 - ✓ Social stories and Power Cards
 - ✓ Literature and media
 - ✓ Embedded social opportunities
 - ✓ Seeing the forest



Personal Fact File Ian



- Favorite food—pepperoni pizza
- Favorite drink—vanilla Coke
- Favorite TV show—Meerkat Manor
- Favorite movie—Cars
- Favorite toy-Wii
- Pet’s name—Gus (hamster)
- Peeves—Sponge Bob, broccoli

Scratching A Social Story™

Sometimes I have an itch in my private parts. It happens sometimes when I’m alone. It happens sometimes when I’m in public. Like most people, I really want to scratch my itches.

If I’m in a private place, it’s okay to scratch an itch.

If other people are around, it’s not a good idea to scratch. Scratching makes other people uncomfortable.

If I have an itch when I’m around others, I’ll wait to scratch until I’m in a private place.



The Beast says:

1. Use a quiet voice.
2. Avoid growling.
3. Follow directions

Direct Teaching

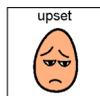
- Emotional Competence
 - ✓ The power of the relationship
 - ✓ Understanding emotion-event connections
 - ✓ Affect management and coping
 - ✓ Floor time
 - ✓ Cognitive re-framing
 - ✓ Individual and family therapy



Thomas reminds you:

1. Even important engines like me make mistakes.
2. Mistakes help us learn.
3. When you make a mistake, say “Oh darn” and then go back to work.

When I feel



I can



Direct Teaching

- Overt behavior
 - ✓ Effective social skills training
 - ✓ Effective use of paraprofessionals
 - ✓ Coaching the peer coaches
 - ✓ Effective management of the Four A's (including rituals and rages)
 - ✓ Activities of daily living
 - ✓ Exposure/response prevention



Write Your Own Social Story

- Pick an aspect of a trip to the mall
- Identify the information you want to highlight (start with the positive)
- Describe the situation and/or relevant feelings and actions
- Write a story that follows the formula:
 - 0 – 1 directive statements
 - _____
 - 2 – 5 descriptive statements

Applied Behavior Analysis and AS

- Remember that ABA is not just discrete trials.
- Common sense intervention relies upon ABA tools such as functional assessment, incidental teaching, shaping, backward chaining, and task analysis (and many more).
- Discrete trials may be used at times—especially when a skill has not emerged using more “naturalistic” interventions.



An Excerpt from a Functional Assessment of Behavior



- Target behaviors—surly tone of voice; swearing
- Frequency—10-15 times/day at school; 20+ times/day at home
- Where/when—all classes, at home
- Setting events—illness, fatigue, changes in schedule, sensory/language/academic load
- Immediate antecedents—questions or directions, perceived task difficulty; offers of assistance by paraprofessional

An Excerpt from a Functional Assessment of Behavior (continued)



- Consequences—immediate relief from situational demands, adult sympathy, adult assistance, growing social distance, insufficient progress academically and socially
- Hypothesized functions of target behavior—regulation of arousal, affective discharge, communication; escape from aversive situation
- Adaptive alternatives—going to the bathroom or nurse

An Excerpt from a Functional Assessment of the Environment



- Physical environment—classroom in an “open concept” pod
- Language load—highly verbal teacher, lots of background language
- Spatial characteristics—little space due to class size; tables rather than desks
- Task parameters—2nd half of 2nd grade >>>increasingly abstract curriculum

Excerpts from a Positive Behavior Support Plan



- Adaptive behaviors to be strengthened—recognizing the need for a break and choosing an effective remedy
- Modifications/accommodations—visual schedules; “zigger zagger”; quiet space; sound absorbing materials to classroom; sensory program designed; previewing of new skills and concepts; “Low and Slow”
- Strategies to teach adaptive alternatives—social story; reinforcement of use of yellow card

Using My Yellow Card



I like school most of the time. I usually like to see my friends and teachers. It's fun to do art and music.

Sometimes I don't like school. There's too much talking. I don't understand when too many people talk. I don't understand when my teacher asks a lot of questions. When that happens I get upset.

Using My Yellow Card (continued)



When I get upset, I might talk in a mean voice or swear. Sometimes I run to the bathroom without asking.

Those things make me feel better. But then I get in trouble. I don't like to get in trouble.

But now I have a yellow card. The yellow card tells my teacher that I need a break. Next time I get upset, I can show my yellow card. Then I can go to the quiet space or to the bathroom.

Then I'll feel better and I won't get in trouble.

When Prevention doesn't Prevent

When child...	Adult should...
Presents yellow card	Nod and say "OK"
Uses a surly tone	Stay low & slow. Ignore tone. Redirect with appropriate visual. Reinforce compliance.
Swears	Stay low & slow. Ignore swear. Redirect with appropriate visual. Reinforce compliance.
Fails to comply with directive	Wait 10 sec. Redirect with visual/verbal prompt.
Still does not comply	Wait 10 sec. Give 2-3 compliance tasks. Reinforce compliance. Repeat original directive.

In the Midst of the Crisis



- Stay "Low and Slow"
- Follow the lead of the person in charge
- Don't talk unless you're in charge or unless you're asked
- Minimize nonverbal communication
- Be prepared to take charge, if the person in charge asks
- Maintain a cooperative stance (not adversarial stance) with the child and others
- Create a "circle of safety"

After the Crisis



- Make sure everyone is settled down
- Record data
- Debrief
- Consider the effectiveness of the protocol and any changes that need to be made
- Consider what could be done to prevent future occurrences of similar difficulties
- Praise everyone for following the protocol
- Do something to take care of yourself

Pesky Problems



Passions and Preoccupations

- Need not be "obsessions" or "compulsions"
- Can be used as "fuel" to power other changes
- Are problematic only when they interfere with adaptive functioning
- Even if problematic, must be understood within the context of function and availability of adaptive alternatives
- Should NEVER be taken away until you know its purpose and the child has an adaptive alternative readily available!



Some Tips about Passions and Preoccupations

- When passions interfere with other activities, use a "First _____, then <passion>" contingency to ensure that the child accomplishes the purpose of the situation at hand
- When preoccupations turn to worry and interfere with other activities, consider a "Talk About It Later" box
- When p & p lead to monologues, cue "It's not time to talk about _____. It is time to talk about <current topic>".
- Use visual supports for all of this.



In Response to “School Policy” and “Accountability”

- “Negative consequences” will not change future behavior unless the student has an adaptive alternative in his/her repertoire
- It’s worth the trouble to create a positive behavioral support plan and include it in the student’s IEP or 504 Plan



Discrepancies between Home and School

- Many do better at school.
- Remember “It’s only a matter of time...”
- Work as a team to reduce load at school
- Establish positive behavior supports across contexts



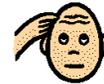
Take Home Message #5



“Children do well if they can.”

(R. Greene, 2005)

Closing Thoughts



A Few “Random” Tips



- Try to establish a long-term relationship with a psychotherapist and/or physician
- Maintain regular communication among adults in the child’s life
- Never forget the working partnership with the child
- Never lose your sense of humor
- Never lose your appreciation of the magic of the child

For More Information...

- Teresa Bolick, Ph.D.
154 Broad Street
Suite 1522
Nashua, NH 03063
- (603) 595-2570
- thebolickhouse@verizon.net
- www.thebolickhouse.com