

A Different Approach for a Different Brain
Guiding Students with Asperger's Syndrome towards Achievable Goals

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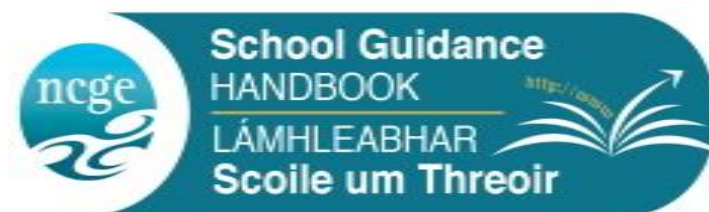


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Summary

This article is intended to aid Guidance counsellors working with students with Asperger's Syndrome/ASD Level 1. The first step is to understand the condition. One also needs to bear in mind Professor Stephen Shore's observation in an interview with Merely Me (a contributor to the Health Central website) that "once you've met one person with autism you've met one person with autism". This article looks at the various stages and choices involved in the journey through second-level education with a view to laying the groundwork for successful participation in third-level education or work.

Keywords

Transition, work, support

Introduction

Statistics provided by the National Autistic Society in the U.K. paint a bleak picture with regard to employment prospects for people with Asperger's Syndrome. They show that only 16% of autistic adults are in full time paid employment. We have no equivalent statistics for the Republic of Ireland. In the U.K. for every five students who leave school with a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome, only one has any real prospect of gaining full-time paid employment. It is hard to imagine that the Irish situation differs greatly from that of the U.K.

Research has shown that, where people with Asperger's Syndrome make a career of their passion, the likelihood of a successful long term outcome increases greatly. Guidance counsellors have an opportunity to help shape the choices of students with regard to subjects studied, courses applied for and preparation for the transition from second-level to third-level and/or the workplace. The work of guidance counsellors which leads to successful outcomes for the majority of students simply needs to be more informed with regard to students with Asperger's Syndrome. Education professionals who have not secured additional qualifications in special education cite the lack of material with regard to special needs students as a barrier to optimal engagement with these students. It is a great credit to the National Centre for Guidance in Education that they have taken the initiative to provide additional information.

Asperger's Syndrome

The medical definition of Asperger's Syndrome below is taken from [medicinenet.com](http://www.medicinenet.com).

“Asperger's Syndrome: An autistic disorder most notable for the often great discrepancy between the intellectual and social abilities of those who have it.”

Asperger's Syndrome is a pervasive developmental disorder that is characterized by an inability to understand how to interact socially. Typical features of the syndrome also may include clumsy and uncoordinated motor movements, social impairment with extreme egocentricity, limited interests and unusual preoccupations, repetitive routines or rituals, speech and language peculiarities, and non-verbal communication problems.

People with Asperger's Syndrome ("Aspies" as many call themselves) generally have few facial expressions apart from anger or misery. Most have excellent rote memory and musical ability, and become intensely interested in one or two subjects (sometimes to the exclusion of other topics). They may talk at length about a favourite subject or repeat a word or phrase many times. People with Asperger's Syndrome tend to be "in their own world" and preoccupied with their own agenda.

The onset of Asperger's Syndrome commonly occurs after the age of 3. Some individuals who exhibit features of autism (a developmental brain disorder characterized by impaired social interaction and communication skills) but who have well-developed language skills may be diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome.

There is no specific course of treatment or cure for Asperger's Syndrome. Treatment, which is symptomatic and rehabilitative, may include both psychosocial and psychopharmacological interventions such as psychotherapy, parent education and training, behavioural modification, social skills training, educational interventions, and/or medications including psychostimulants, mood stabilizers, beta blockers, and tricyclic-type antidepressants.

Children with Asperger's Syndrome have a better outlook than those with other forms of pervasive developmental disorders and are much more likely to grow up to be independently functioning adults. Nonetheless, in most cases, these individuals will continue to demonstrate, to some extent, subtle disturbances in social interactions. There is also an increased risk for development of psychosis (a mental disorder) and/or mood problems such as depression and anxiety in the later years.

The syndrome is named for Hans Asperger who in 1944 published a paper that described a pattern of behaviour in several young boys who had normal intelligence and language development but who had autistic-like behaviour. Hans Asperger (1906-1980) was a pioneering paediatrician in Austria. He headed the play-pedagogic station at the university children's clinic in Vienna in 1932 and became director of the children's clinic in 1946. His special interest was in "psychically abnormal children".

Amongst the areas which may be problematic for people with Asperger's Syndrome are:

- Communication (verbal and non-verbal)
- Social interaction
- Flexibility of thought and behaviour
- Inhibition
- Emotional control
- Multi-tasking
- Transitions
- Self-monitoring
- Sensory processing.

Transition

Transitions are problematic for people with Asperger's Syndrome and indeed for many students. Consequently, the move from primary to second-level school needs to be planned for very carefully. Appendix 1 contains a document on transition designed for parents of students with Asperger's Syndrome but could equally be used for all students. It is desirable that all staff dealing with students be aware of the strategies to be employed for smooth transition. Many schools have carefully prepared induction sessions for new students. The differences identified with regard to students with Asperger's Syndrome should be borne in mind when preparing induction material. The focus is often on the big transitions when in fact the small transitions that form the basis of the big transition may be most problematic. Getting from one class to another, dressing or undressing for P.E. and having the appropriate equipment for practical subjects (are examples of difficulties which may arise for students). Visual aids, such as maps of the school, colour coding books and timetables and other techniques as outlined in research by David Cihak, proved valuable in assisting with transitions.

The State Examinations

The preparation for the State Examinations needs to start from the beginning of second-level. If a student is going to access reasonable accommodations these should be implemented/put in place from the first end-of-term examinations. It cannot be assumed that a student will want accommodations or understand the reason for them and this will need to be explained. It could be explained, for example, that the extra time is to allow for movement breaks, the laptop is used so that hands do not get sore, the separate centre is provided so that the student will not be distracted by lighting, sounds or smells in the main centre.

Subject Choices

Students with Asperger's Syndrome will need to understand the full content of a subject. It cannot be assumed that they are aware that studying a language may involve an oral examination. All requirements of each subject should be talked through to ensure that the student realises the full breadth of study required to do well in a subject.

Visual aids will help with both subject content and deadlines. Mind maps for subject content could be developed using an app such as popplet (<http://popplet.com/>). Popplet can be downloaded for free but for a small fee an enhanced version can be sourced giving access to other people's popplets so that the student does not have to start from scratch for every subject. YouTube videos demonstrating aspects of the science subjects using Prentice Hall models may prove useful.

Transition Year

Transition Year is a unique opportunity for all students to gain life skills through the medium of work experience. In the case of students with Asperger's Syndrome for whom many aspects of social convention are a mystery careful preparation of both the student and the employer will be required to ensure that the placement is successful. Appendix 2 contains a Guide for Employers. Temple Grandin has written extensively regarding the value of suitable work for people with Autism. Dr Grandin is of the opinion that "society loses out if individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders are not involved in the world of work". She

espouses this opinion and other observations on the Irish education system in an article published on the IMPACT website in 2017.¹

Extra preparation may be required for the student with Asperger's Syndrome. The student may need to be guided as to appropriate dress for a particular work environment, it will be necessary to ascertain their level of independent travel skills and parents might need to practise both the route and the time keeping element of travel to and from the work location. Lunch time can be problematic as the student may not have the social skills necessary to simply ask what the lunch arrangements are at the location. If students with no prepared lunch are placed in a work environment with no option other than to bring their own food they are not likely to return after the first day. They will conclude that going to that work place means they get no lunch. This may sound ridiculous. However, extensive research on "Theory of Mind" and "Context Blindness" has been conducted by Baron-Cohen (2000) and Vermeulen (2013) respectively and this ties into the inflexibility of thought and behaviour inherent in the condition. Theory of Mind relates to the ability to appreciate that people experience situations differently. Context blindness is best explained by an example. A person with Asperger's Syndrome brushes his hair whilst looking in a mirror. He only brushes the front of his hair because that is all he sees in the mirror. It does not occur to him that people are viewed from all angles.

DARE

DARE ([Disability Access Route to Education](#)) may be difficult for a student to understand. The concept of Autism as a disability may be hard for a person to accept since Asperger's Syndrome is an integral part of who they are. If a student does not view themselves as disabled why would they seek accommodations? The way in which the DARE process is presented can be key to getting the student to complete the application. A student who has an amazing talent for sport may get a sports scholarship to cover their third level fees. Those students are leveraging a talent they were born with. In a similar way, the DARE scheme assists students born with Autism to make the most of their talents by taking some obstacles out of their way. DARE gives students with disabilities the opportunity to access courses at lower points than those indicated by the CAO. If a student does not require the reduced

¹<http://www.impact.ie/inspirational-temple-grandin-points-to-need-for-investment-in-irish-special-needs-education/>

points DARE will identify them to the third-level institution as a student who may need accommodations. There is funding available for students from the HEA (Higher Education Authority) which can be used for assistive technology e.g. a laptop computer and this can be accessed through the Disability Service in the third-level institution.

CAO/College Applications

Prior to making any choice of course, a number of things need to be taken into consideration. These include the student's level of independent travel skills and availability of support in the third-level institutions. Appendix 3 contains a checklist which could be used to gather information. The checklist should help identify suitable third-level institutions. A suitable environment may be key to success in third-level.

The selection of course choices for third-level needs to be done at a forensic level. This is the approach which most professionals would take with all pupils but a very small area of study can be a stumbling block for someone with Asperger's Syndrome. It is not enough to look at entry requirements and the likelihood of the student achieving same. The course content may be considerably broader and involve work placement and assignments which the student has not considered.

The ultimate aim is for the student to enter the workforce. It may therefore be prudent to consider the career choices which will be on offer for graduates of particular courses. Lorenz et al (2016) identified three main categories of barriers to employment "social, formality and job demand". They concluded the solution to these barriers to be two fold "self-solution and external help". The student will need to look at the areas identified above and their chosen workplace and see where they can come up with a solution and where they may need support. If they require significant external help then they will need to ascertain if that can be obtained. Specialisterne Ireland place people with Asperger Syndrome in companies where they are supported both by the employer and by Specialisterne. AHEAD work with graduates who have a disability to help them gain employment.

Discussion and Conclusion.

Asperger's Syndrome is a lifelong pervasive developmental disorder. Lifelong conditions require lifelong support. The amount of support required varies from person to person and situation to situation. Having identified that transitions are one of the big challenges for people with Asperger's Syndrome, it is imperative that additional and appropriate support be offered when major change occurs. This might involve a peer mentor, support of a teacher with whom the student has a good relationship as well as more formal support from Guidance, Special Education and Resource Teachers.

Further information

For more information on autism and transitions:

<http://www.autism.org.uk/about/transition.aspx>

Article on successful transition to college:

https://journals.lww.com/topicsinlanguagedisorders/Abstract/2011/07000/Perspectives_on_Support_Needs_of_Individuals_With.8.aspx

Article on success in secondary school:

<http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2139&context=edupapers>

<http://www.specialisterne.ie/>

<https://www.ahead.ie/>

Biography

Veronica Leaney is Education and Training Officer with Aspire (Asperger's Syndrome Association of Ireland). She has worked with the Association for 8 years in a variety of roles.

Veronica delivers training to parents and professionals around the condition and has spoken at national and international conferences. She has a Master of Science from Dublin City University and, prior to joining Aspire, had 10 years training experience in the corporate environment.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Tips for Transition to Secondary School

1. Choose the school carefully. This might sound obvious but your child may not have had a diagnosis when they started primary school. The second level school you would have chosen before the diagnosis may not be the most suitable for young person they have become. Do some research and try to narrow down your choices.

2. Approach the school with your child's diagnosis, school reports and any other information you feel is relevant well ahead of time. It is never too early, but the start of 5th class is a reasonable time. The way you are received by the school during an initial approach will give you a good indication of how the young person will be welcomed and provided for during their time in second level.

3. If your chosen school has had other students with Asperger's Syndrome, ask them to outline their general approach. This meeting should involve the resource co-ordinator, a guidance counsellor and the principal and, if possible, an existing SNA. You should also seek to speak to the parents of those students to get their feedback. They have the benefit of hindsight and familiarity with the culture of the particular school. 4. Once you have agreed that the young person will attend a particular school you should ask them to arrange a meeting with the SENO. At this meeting parents and the school should outline the student's needs and seek all available help. Try to have some idea which subjects will be taken in first year as the practical subjects such as science, woodwork, home economics (anything involving tools or heat) tend to strengthen your hand with regard to SNA hours. If the student has problems with their handwriting, the subject of a laptop should be raised at this time. You will need written confirmation that this is necessary for the student - not desirable but necessary. If the young person attends an Occupational Therapist they are the perfect person to attest to this need.

5. Take any opportunity which presents itself to familiarise the young person with the new school. Attend plays; open days, Christmas fairs etc. This will also give them a chance to foster a sense of belonging in the new environment.

6. All staff; teaching and ancillary, should be made aware of the new student and their diagnosis. If this is the first Asperger's Syndrome student to attend, the school should be encouraged to make some time for inservice training. Speakers could include a teacher and/or SNA from another school, the student's most recent teacher and/or their existing SNA, a speaker from Aspire and a viewing of some or all of the Aspire DVD.

7. Prior to starting school, the student should be introduced to the principal, resource co-ordinator, year head, form teacher and SNA*. Most schools stagger the return of second level students therefore the school is open in advance of students returning to school. It may be possible for the student to get a tour of the school and be shown the various classrooms prior to the return of other students.

8. The student may have friends from primary school who are progressing to the same second level school. If so, request that at least one of these friends is placed in the same class grouping.

9. Request that the SNA colour code the various subjects, thus matching books to the students timetable and, if possible, to a map of classrooms. This may not be possible for all classrooms but will certainly work for specialist rooms e.g. science labs.

10. Provide the SNA with a pencil case and other similar items e.g. geometry set, spare locker keys to avoid situations where the student forgets "stuff". However, the SNA should try to wean the student off this over time.

11. Put a folder in the student's schoolbag just for communications from the school. Once again, the SNA should take initial responsibility for making sure this is used but the student should be weaned off this over time.

12. If the student does not like the schoolyard at break times, arrange that they may sit somewhere in the school. This will need to be a public area so that they do not need separate supervision.

13. Ask that the student be informed in advance of a definite cool down space for use if required. It is important that it be clearly stated that this is not to be a place of punishment but rather a refuge.

14. Make sure to keep in regular contact with the SNA and, if possible, to have a text number which may be used to contact the SNA.

15. If there is any change at home or in the student's routine *e.g.* new Occupational Therapy programme, the school should be informed. The school cannot make extra allowances if the full situation is not known.

16. Make an arrangement that, should the student forget their lunch, they will be facilitated by the canteen staff even if they do not have cash. If the school is reluctant a parent/guardian could "lodge" an amount with the canteen by way of a line of credit.

17. If the student has difficulty getting changed for P.E. in the allotted time, then arrange that they leave the previous class a little early and have the concession to arrive a little late to the next class.

18. Keep the lines of communication with the school open and calm at all times. If you come across additional information *e.g.* books, You Tube videos or other resources provide the school with recommendations.

19. Make sure that an IEP is prepared for the student and a copy provided to parents.

20. If the student has a laptop they do not need to take it to school it can be used just for the preparation and submission of homework. This will need to be agreed with the school and is at their discretion.

21. Should the student start to struggle with homework, talk to the school, particularly if it is likely to cause the young person to give up any extracurricular activity. For example, a request might be made to extend the deadline for submission of homework for a student attending Monday night Aspire drama. In the event that a student does not have access to an SNA creative supports will need to be put in place. For example, a sympathetic school secretary might be persuaded to be the keeper of the pencil case.

Appendix 2 - Practical Tips for Supporting Employees with Asperger's Syndrome

1. Provide a structure and routine.
2. Order and predictability should be maintained and, where possible, notice of change should be given.
3. Try to be clear-cut and decisive. People with Asperger's Syndrome appreciate straight talk.
4. If, for example, staff organise their own breaks, encourage the individual to agree times and durations, otherwise you may find that they do too much or too little work.
5. Be patient. People with Asperger's Syndrome may need to practice tasks more often but, once mastered, they are rarely forgotten.
6. Encourage supervisors to be patient and think of time spent with an employee with Asperger's Syndrome as an investment.
7. If you need to remind an employee how to do a task, written instructions, symbols or photos will reduce frustration all round.

Appendix 3 – Thinking about third level

1. Can the student live away from home?
2. Does the student have independent travel skills?
3. Can the student handle budgeting?
4. Is there a disability service in the third-level institution?
5. Is the campus difficult to navigate?
6. Does the student have sensory issues?
7. Clubs and societies provide opportunities for socialisation but the student can only avail of these if their timetable and travel skills allow for it.