What is Asperger syndrome?

Children with Asperger syndrome can think well and learn about lots of things as easily as other children, but they have problems:

- when they try to communicate with others
- with social skills
- with their behaviour.

Asperger syndrome is sometimes called an ‘Autism spectrum disorder’ because in some ways it is a bit like autism.

Communicating with others

Children with Asperger syndrome can hear what others say to them, and they know what the words mean, but they don't pick up the 'non-verbal' part of communication, so they often don't get the full message.

Kids with Asperger syndrome can talk well but they get confused a lot because they do not understand the feelings that other people have.

Kids who have Asperger syndrome may have problems understanding that they have to listen as well as talk.

Social skills

- They may have problems making friends. They often want to have friends, and they can feel very lonely, but they don’t know how to be a friend.
- They may choose to play alone and stay away from other kids, or talk to adults because being with other kids confuses them.
- They may like to be playing with a computer rather than with other kids, as they don’t have to communicate socially with the computer.
- They may find it hard to understand the feeling behind a facial expression. They may think that if someone smiles at them in a friendly way, that person wants to be their best friend. They can then be very disappointed when the person wants to play with someone else.
- They may take a long time to understand the ‘rules’ about not interrupting when someone is talking, or how to take turns, or how to share.
- They may be surprised when people do something they haven’t expected. For example, if someone laughed because of something amusing, they might not know it was funny.
- They may think that other kids have done something deliberately to hurt them when they have accidentally bumped into them. They can even believe that a chair tried to bump into them!
- They can be targeted by bullies because they can easily be upset.
Some may do the wrong thing to try and make friends and this can get them into trouble. They might take something that belongs to another kid because they have been told to by someone who enjoys seeing them get into trouble.

They may need a lot of understanding and kindness.

Their behaviour

They are often really interested in some things, like computers, reading and making things.

They can be obsessive about something they are interested in and don't understand that others are not as interested.

Their behaviour can seem a bit 'different or unusual', or it can be really difficult and sometimes they get very upset and aggressive. They might be called 'eccentric', which means a bit odd, and different to other people.

They may be upset by some noises or smells, or by what some things feel like or look like. For example they might hate the feel of shoes on their feet, how sand feels or refuse to wear anything that is red.

They like things to happen the same way all of the time, so they may get upset when lesson times are changed, or they have to move to a new desk in the classroom.

How do you get it?

Asperger syndrome is not a disease and you can't catch it from anyone. The person's genes have something to do with it, and maybe something happened before the child was born.

Children have Asperger syndrome from the time they are born, but often they are at school before it is worked out that the difficulties they are having are due to Asperger syndrome.

There appears to be an increase in the number of people who are diagnosed with Asperger syndrome. This is probably because more is known about it nowadays and people who used to be thought of as strange and antisocial are now being diagnosed as having Asperger syndrome.

Asperger syndrome is named after the children's doctor, Dr Hans Asperger of Vienna who published his research into autism in 1944.

It is thought that Sir Isaac Newton, a genius who lived many years ago, possibly had Asperger Syndrome. It has been said that he hardly spoke, had few friends and was often bad-tempered around them. He often became so involved in his work (the science of physics) that he forgot to eat. Not everyone agrees that he had Asperger syndrome.

Can it be cured?

Asperger syndrome is not a disease so it can't be cured, but people with Asperger syndrome do learn more about other people as they get older.

Some become experts in their area of interest.

Some marry and have families of their own but some always have problems with relationships.
Some always need things to be done exactly their way, and get very upset if someone
does something ‘wrong’ such as putting things in the ‘wrong’ place.

Many people who have Asperger syndrome belong to groups with others who also have it and
they are able to understand and support each other.

How you can help

If someone in your family or in your class at school has Asperger Syndrome then you can
help by:

- Being friendly.
- Helping him when he has trouble understanding.
- Including him in your group, but not being upset if he doesn’t want to join in.
- Not bullying him or setting him up.
- Standing up for him if others are being unkind.
- Helping him to understand the rules by being firm and saying things like, "It's my turn now,
then it will be yours."
- Understanding that unfamiliar things and unfamiliar noises can be upsetting for him.
- Helping him to practise skills like talking to the class.
- Praising him when he does well.
- Letting him know that you like him.
- Ignoring ‘bad’ behaviour.
- Understanding that he is not trying to be difficult, but also helping him to learn that he must
be kind to other people.

What kids say

- “I have been in the same class with a boy who has AS. We all know that he doesn’t want to
do things like sport but he’s really good on computers and can help us sometimes.”
- “My friend has AS. Sometimes he wants to be alone or wants to talk all the time about fish,
so I just leave him and play with someone else. I understand.”
- “Some people are mean and like to tease kids who are different. In our class if you are
mean to someone you have to write an apology to that person and say sorry in front of the
class. Sometimes kids are mean out on the oval and some teachers don’t notice.”
- “I have AS. It's hard to make friends so it’s good that I have always been to the same
school and every year I know most of the kids in my class. I think it will be hard at High
School though.”
- “Sometimes I don’t understand what I have to do in class. My teacher helps me and
sometimes she writes things down for me. I can do the work when I know what it is I have
to do.”
- “I have been to some schools but it is really hard. When I was little I tried to hide all the
time. My mum home schools me now. I still play with some other kids and I do horse riding.
I love horses.”
Dr Kate says

Many kids with Asperger syndrome go to main-stream schools. This can be scary for them. Having to cope with changes all the time when you feel more comfortable with the same things happening in the same place can be really upsetting.

Some kids cannot cope with school and stay at home where they are home schooled.

All kids want friends so if you know someone at school or at home who has Asperger syndrome try to be patient and kind. After all, it could easily have been you who was born with the problem. None of us can choose our genes, our parents or the place where we are born.

We all have feelings and we all live in the same world. Let’s make it a kind and friendly place for everyone.