

Working with a student with Aspergers

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Background Information

- Mental Health problems have some commonalities, but also have a degree of uniqueness to each individual. Be careful about applying broad strokes, each student, regardless of whether they have Aspergers or not, needs individual attention and adaptation.
- Students with Aspergers may ask odd or repetitive questions which derails the lecture and distracts the class. They do not do this to annoy, it is their natural way of communicating.
- Are often teased or laughed at by other students who pick on them or talk quietly behind their back.
- May have poor hygiene or manners in class. This is related to their ability to empathize and connect to the feelings and perceptions of others.
- May engage in odd dress or write on their clothes or arms. These may include gothic clothing (black or medieval looking) or speak with strange inflections or languages based on their reading or computer gaming.
- May have odd interests (car motors, Victorian door hinges and vintage toys) that interfere with them connecting with their peers and engaging in more social acceptable activities.
- Have difficulty reading social cues (standing to leave, subtle messages to stop talking, non-verbal signals). This becomes even more difficult when dealing with issues that are built open subtle social cues such as flirting or social networking sites like facebook.
- When trying to connect with peers, their attempts will often seem flat or slightly off. Caring students help these students connect and overcome this “quirks”. Students who are frustrated or stressed will often ignore or tease the student with Aspergers.

Recommendations for Addressing Behavior in Classroom

- Seek to minimize classroom disruptions by having a calm and consistent approach with all student behavior in the classroom.
- Avoid sarcasm or subtle social connections (for instance, pointing towards the door to ask a student to leave or asking “Are you sure you belong in this class?”). These kinds of comments and approaches will not work well with students with Aspergers.
- Identify and address negative behavior or teasing that may be occurring early and consistently. Avoid the temptation to join in or allow it to continue through a lack of intervention. It may be helpful to talk to students alone or in a smaller group after class in a private setting.
- Building a positive classroom environment with open communication and a caring, supportive atmosphere will help assist students improve their attitude and interactions with Aspergers students.
- When working with Aspergers students, it is essential to offer clear messages to them. Messages should avoid trying to address multiple issues at one time.

- Your messages should be concise. They should be short and focused on the desirable action.
- Messages should be consistent over time. Messages that repeat the same information through repetition will increase its “sinking in”.
- Take the time to understand the world and interests of the Aspergers student. This interest can build rapport and increase your success in working with them.

Recommendations for Referral to Disability/Counseling Services

- There may be times where a referral to disability services would be helpful to improve the academic progress of a student. There may be times with classroom behavior issues (unwanted touching, consistent talking out of turn, inappropriate sexual comments) should be referred to counseling. When referring a student:
 - Do it during a time when you are alone with the student. Be careful not to embarrass them or single them out.
 - Focus on positive goals. Make interaction clear and concise.
 - Understand the legal requirements of the ADA (accommodations must be approved through that office; if you offer an accommodation then you become required to offer it in the future).
 - If accommodations are needed, consider a referral early in the semester.

Case Study

Greg has been attending Dr. Taylor’s sociology class for a few weeks. The class is heavily discussion oriented and requires students to interact with each other on difficult social topics such as the war in Iraq, the state of the economy and politics. Dr. Taylor has talked to Greg about some of his inappropriate comments during class. Two other students approached Dr. Taylor after class and said “You need to talk to Greg. He asked me out on a date during the class break and then tried to kiss my hand! It’s ridiculous. He’s ridiculous!” Dr. Taylor asked Greg to stay after class to talk.

Taylor: I’m concerned about some of your behavior in class. We talked last week about your comments during our discussion of the war. You said some pretty graphic things about how someone can be killed by a roadside bomb and before the discussion began I told everyone to be sensitive since we have several students with parents in the military. A student said you asked her out on a date and tried to kiss her hand during class. These behaviors concern me Greg. It seems like you are having trouble reading what other people are thinking or feeling in a given situation.

Greg: I get that all the time. On world of warcraft my character is a twentieth level paladin dwarf that has the same problem. He solves it with his battle axe.

Taylor: Well, I’m more focused on how you are handling it here at school. This must be something that impacts you outside of my class as well?

Greg: [looks down] Yes. I miss being home sometimes. It was easier there.

Taylor: College isn't an easy transition. I had some problems getting connected when I first went to college as well. Lots of things change all at once. It can feel overwhelming. Did you have trouble understanding how other people felt about things growing up, or is this new at college?

Greg: It's always been a bit of a problem. Can I go now?

Taylor: Well, I want to make sure that you understand what I'm saying. There are two things I'm concerned about. The first is being careful about what you say during our discussions. Sometimes you say things that get other students upset like the roadside bomb talk and other times you talk at the same time other people are talking. Do you understand?

Greg: Yes. I understand.

Taylor: Can you feed it back to me so I can be sure?

Greg: You want me to be more careful about other people's feelings and what I say in class.

Taylor: That's it exactly. The other thing is you can't touch students in class. Even to kiss their hand. Does that make sense?

Greg: But I was trying to be polite. That's how it's done on World of Warcraft. We bow and courtesy and court the ladies by greeting them with a kiss.

Taylor: I wish it were that easy in the real world. It can be hard to tell someone you like them. Very hard to try to understand if they like you back. One thing to think about is talking to someone about how to figure out the best way to get a date or talk to women. Have you ever been to counseling before?

Greg: I used to go talk to the guidance counselor a lot in high school.

Taylor: It's similar. It's also free of charge and something you should give a try. Do you know where the counseling center is?

Greg: Yes, they showed me on the orientation tour.

Taylor: Can you try to get an appointment this week?

Greg: That's something I can do.

Taylor: Ok, well let's work on these two things, being more careful of other people's feelings and not touching other students in class. One way to work on them is to talk to someone in counseling. Does that sound like a plan?

Greg: Yes. I'll give it a try. It can't be any harder than the dungeon run at Finas Core.

Taylor: Good. Thank you for staying after to talk with me today.

Question for Reflections

1. How would you characterize the approach Dr. Taylor used to talk with Greg?
2. What are some examples of how Dr. Taylor used clear, concise and consistent language to communicate his concerns to Greg?
3. The class being offered is a discussion based one. How does this type of class impact the scenario?
4. What do you think about Dr. Taylor's referral to counseling?
5. Are there some other approaches or referrals that you may have made given the same situation?
6. How would the situation change if Greg was a female student? How does gender impact our decisions?
7. If Greg was reluctant to meet after class, what are some of the other approaches Dr. Taylor could have taken in this scenario?

Resources

Attwood, T. (2006). *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Jed Baker (2006). *Preparing for Life. The complete guide for transitioning to adulthood for those with Autism and Asperger's syndrome*. Future Horizons.

Harpur, J. (2004). *Succeeding in College With Asperger Syndrome*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Gray, C. (2000). *Social Stories*. Future Horizons. www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories

Grandin & Barron. *Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships. Decoding social mysteries through the unique perspectives of Autism*

Palmer, A. (2005). *Realizing the College Dream with Autism or Asperger Syndrome: A Parent's Guide to Student Success*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Robison, J. (2008). *Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's*. Three Rivers Press.

Shapiro & Holmes. (2008). *Let's be Friend. A workbook to help kids learn social skills & make great friends*. New Harbinger Publication.

Wolf, L. Thierfeld, B. & Bork, R. (2009). *Students with Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for College Personnel*. Autism Asperger Publishing. ISBN 9781934575390

“Understanding Asperger Syndrome: A Professor's Guide

OAR produced this DVD in cooperation with the Global and Regional Asperger Syndrome Project (GRASP) and Pace University in New York City thanks to a generous grant from the Schwallie Family Foundation. Please send an e-mail to oar@researchautism.org.

<http://www.researchautism.org/resources/AspergerDVDSeries.asp>