

## **Parenting with Asperger's Syndrome**

**by Carol Grigg**

August 2008

These days much is being written about Asperger's Syndrome in children. We look on Asperger's Syndrome as though it has only recently appeared, when in fact what is recent is just the identification of Asperger's Syndrome.

Where has Asperger's Syndrome been up until its recent discovery? The fact is, many people around us have been manifesting characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome for generations and we just haven't known what it is.

Asperger's Syndrome in a child is fairly readily recognisable, but in an adult it is much more difficult to recognise. Early intervention is making a lifetime of difference to those children who are diagnosed but for those who are already adults, lack of intervention and support will have made growing up difficult indeed.

Most adults with traits of Asperger's Syndrome will have developed a complex system of coping mechanisms and defence strategies in order to navigate through the aspects of life they find challenging, particularly in relational and social settings.

People with Asperger's Syndrome are typically highly intelligent and gifted. They have the capacity to think "outside the box" and come up with interesting and amazing solutions and approaches to problems where other more "typically thinking" people hit brick walls. Some can decorate and colour all the grey ordinary parts of life and bring wonder and celebration. There are many prominent names in Hollywood, IT, Art and in History who display Asperger characteristics. Our world has so many more dimensions and advancements because of people with Asperger characteristics who've been able to follow their dreams and realise their potential.

It is a concern however, and this leads me to the point of this article, that people with Asperger's Syndrome have difficulty in relationships and social situations and unfortunately this can unintentionally create conflict, confusion and stress for those close to them. In most situations the family won't have the knowledge to be able to identify that it is the characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome they are observing and experiencing.

Every parent who has Asperger's Syndrome has wonderful characteristics that can benefit and colour a child's world. There are however some worrying inconsistencies in the skills of a parent with Asperger's Syndrome. Of course, every parent has some inadequacies, but most parents who think "typically" in contrast to thinking "Asperger" have inbuilt instincts and intuition that are an extremely important component of parenting and enable us to blunder through and still raise reasonably well-adjusted children.

Asperger's Syndrome involves difficulty in reading facial expression, body language, motives and intentions. It also involves difficulty in knowing what is appropriate in terms of comment, disclosure, behaviour, physical distance and intimacy. The person with Asperger's Syndrome will display lack of awareness of the emotional state or needs of those around them resulting in a failure to respond empathically. They will also be unaware of the impact of their own behaviour and comments on those around them. These difficulties can lead to behaviours that are experienced by a spouse or child as neglectful, hurtful or abusive.

Another characteristic of people with Asperger's Syndrome is the tendency to be obsessively focused on a field or topic of particular interest to them. This tendency can lead to excessive

spending of family funds on the area of interest, while other needs more basic to the well-being and welfare of the family may be neglected.

People with Asperger's Syndrome can also be very fixed in how they do things and how they expect their family to do things. This can include an inability to attempt or complete a task unless a correct routine or ritual is followed. If the routine is interrupted or not followed, the Asperger person can become distressed and angry leading to a sense that the routine or task is more important than the feelings or needs of the child. An Asperger parent may find it easier to point out a child's failure or shortcoming than notice and commend a child's best effort.

It is not hard to recognise that if a child experiences this style of parenting on a daily basis they could easily become confused and anxious and have trouble with self-esteem and confidence. As Asperger's Syndrome can often run in families, the Asperger parenting style could also strengthen Asperger characteristics if they are present in one of the children. It is my suspicion that parenting of more "typical", less rigid style could assist with easing some Asperger characteristics present in a child.

Role modelling is also an area of concern. Adults with Asperger's Syndrome may model a harsh disciplinarian style of parenting in keeping with the parenting style of their own parents. It is my belief that Asperger's Syndrome combined with a harsh disciplinarian style of parenting will create an extremely emotionally dangerous environment for a child to be raised within. The parent without Asperger's Syndrome would typically find themselves prevented from influencing the situation if this is the case.

Upon suspecting that their situation is being affected by Asperger's Syndrome, what is a parent to do? This is where a huge problem lies. To confront an adult with the possibility they have Asperger's syndrome is a risky move unless professional guidance is sought and carefully followed. Yet our professional and community services are still operating for the most part without adequate awareness of Asperger's Syndrome. Support groups for parents and partners are springing up, but as yet very little professional help is available for family members of adults with Asperger's Syndrome.

It is my hope that as awareness in the community increases, a ground-swell of families seeking help can build and place pressure on our practitioners to pursue professional development in the area of Asperger's syndrome in adults and the impact on families.

Whilst we wish to embrace and promote respect for people with differences and disabilities, we still have a responsibility towards our children to ensure they enjoy a safe and nurturing environment throughout their developing years. If this article provides validation for your experience, please pass it on or take it to your local GP, family counsellor or other service and raise the matter.

*Carol has been the co-ordinator of a support group for partners of adults with Asperger's Syndrome for the past five years. Her personal experience includes a 20 year marriage to a man diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, who is the father of Carol's five children. Although Carol's passion is to inform, validate and support partners, the experiences of the children are of vital importance as well. It is hoped that this article may act as an advocate for children presently experiencing Asperger parenting and who need intervention for the sake of their emotional safety. Carol can be contacted through the website [www.aspia.org.au](http://www.aspia.org.au).*