

ASPERGER SYNDROME

INCLUSIVENESS

“ As they grow up, the child needs to be seen as an individual personality in its own right. A person first — with special needs second. They need to be accepted for who and what they are. The greatest handicap is probably the label attached to the child, along with the prejudices that go with it.”

(Down Syndrome Association of Victoria Inc.)

The Aim of Scouting is to promote the development of individuals, enabling them to grow and take their place in society as active citizens. As we move forward with the Canadian Path we are much more aware of each individual's personal progression, inclusive of their varying abilities. This inclusiveness within Scouting uniquely positions us to play an important role in modifying community attitudes and behaviour towards individuals with disabilities; it starts with Scouts.

Please use this guide for a better understanding of youth with Asperger Syndrome; how as Scouters, we can make a difference through simple interventions and program modifications and where to get help when needed.

DESCRIPTION

Asperger Syndrome also called Asperger Disorder is defined as a developmental disorder characterized by impaired social and life skills, normal language and cognitive development, and by restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behaviour, interests, and activities, often with above average performance in a narrow field. It is a life-long developmental condition that affects the way the brain uses the information it receives and this results in difficulties with communication and relating to other people. There are varying degrees of the syndrome, it is not infectious and others cannot catch it by contact or association!

CHARACTERISTICS/BEHAVIORS

Social/Communication Traits

- Problems reading non-verbal or social cues or understanding/using social rules
- Despite a desire for friends, difficulty in initiating or maintaining close relationships
- Very socially naïve and as a result are often taken advantage of, rejected, or bullied
- Social contact may be directed by them (e.g., play is “on their terms” or not at all)
- Poor (or intense) eye contact, atypical use of gestures and flat or inappropriate facial expressions
- One-sided conversations, and little ability for “small talk”
- May appear overly shy or overly extroverted, but inappropriately so
- Unaware of others' thoughts, feelings or perceptions resulting in inadvertently appearing rude or inconsiderate
- Avoidant of social contact or events, and may experience heightened anxiety in social situations

Behavioural Traits

- May respond poorly to changes, transitions, lack of structure, and restrictions
- Repetitive movements (e.g., jumping, rocking, pacing) and speech (i.e., talking about favourite topics)
- Rigid, inflexible and rule-bound behaviour
- Inappropriate behaviour given the social situation (e.g., speaking too loud in place of worship)
- Superior ability to focus on favourite activity or area of interest (e.g., spends hours mastering video game)

Cognitive Traits

- Average to superior intelligence
- Detail oriented approach to tasks which may result in missing the “bigger picture”
- Prefer technical/factual information over abstract

Associated Challenges

- Attentional difficulties (e.g., shifting attention; attending to unimportant stimuli)
- Gross and fine motor deficits
- Poor organizational skills (e.g., time management and planning)



IN A SCOUTING SITUATION

- A youth in the group with Asperger Syndrome is often seen as the odd person standing out from the rest. It is the Scouter's role to provide close proximity support to the youth and help them understand that you are on their side and that you are not out to get them; to be perceived as an ally, not a critic.
- Youth with Asperger Syndrome have a tendency to repetitively focus on one specific topic or interest and share it often until others become somewhat frustrated with the behaviour. Usually, a simple and kind reminder that this topic has already been shared will lessen repetition.
- A tendency, as well, towards impulsivity and the making of "off the cuff", what might be perceived as odd remarks, can be slowed down by simply placing a gentle hand on the youth's shoulder and requesting that they try to slow down and catch their breath.
- Youth with Asperger Syndrome have a tendency to misplace items and may believe that another individual has taken their personal belongings (i.e., a scarf, a pair of gloves or the like). As a Scouter, simply offer support to the youth by encouraging them to look through their items or accompany them to assist in doing so. Frequently this will result in the misplaced item being retrieved.
- A prevalent behaviour that one will observe in youth with the syndrome is their inclination to adopt the belief that others are out to get them. This often manifests itself when the youth is eliminated in a wide competitive game where there are winners and losers. The skill required here is that of connecting with the youth and gently pointing out to them they are not alone in having been eliminated from the game.

PROGRAM MODIFICATION SUGGESTIONS

- Youth with Asperger Syndrome thrive in a structured, organized, routine-oriented environment.
- Make eye contact when addressing the youth member
- Wait for and expect a response to verbal greeting or questions
- Focus more on cooperative games and choose to play competitive ones on a lesser scale
- If the youth exhibits challenging behaviours find out from the parents how this is managed so that existing strategies can be reinforced and minimize confusion or anxiety for the youth member
- Small groups within the larger group may enable greater participation from the youth member and less stress
- Accompany instructions with visual demonstrations
- Keep instructions brief and clear — break down the activity/ instructions into small steps

- Be aware of the youth member's response to sounds, smells, touching, tastes, lights
- Explain any changes to routine or program before it takes place
- Give warning several minutes prior to the end of the Scouting event to let the youth mentally prepare for the transition to home environment
- For overnight activities it is helpful to consider pairing the youth with Asperger Syndrome with a well-known, supportive peer who he/she is comfortable with to lessen anxiety.
- Provide a breakdown of the itinerary and a detailed list of items to pack well in advance of overnight activities to help the youth prepare.
- Ensure all Scouters have a consistent team approach so that everyone interacts the same way with the youth member
- Don't be concerned about 'odd' behaviours unless they are socially inappropriate or dangerous
- Support verbal communication with gesture or signs if necessary
- Provide opportunities for the youth members to interact with other youth
- Use positive re-enforcement
- Recognise strengths and build on these to increase confidence

FURTHER ASSISTANCE

This Info Sheet is a resource guide only and is not intended to be therapeutic, diagnostic, medical, or legal advice. Our best source of assistance for youth with identified needs is the youth's parents or caregivers; the information provided is designed to support the relationship that exists between a youth and his/her parents or healthcare providers and the Scouters involved with the youth.

SOURCES

The Aspergers Society of Ontario and material adapted and used by permission of The Scout Association (UK), Scouts Australia, and Scouting Ireland

