



About Autism

What is Asperger's Disorder?

Asperger's Disorder was first described in the 1940s by Viennese pediatrician Hans Asperger who observed autistic-like behaviors and difficulties with social and communication skills in boys who had normal intelligence and language development. Many professionals felt Asperger's Disorder was simply a milder form of autism and used the term "high-functioning autism" to describe these individuals. Professor Uta Frith, with the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience of University College London and author of *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*, describes individuals with Asperger's Disorder as "having a dash of Autism." Asperger's Disorder was added to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) in 1994 as a separate disorder from autism. However, there are still many professionals who consider Asperger's Disorder a less severe form of autism.

What distinguishes Asperger's Disorder from autism is the severity of the symptoms and the absence of language delays. Those with Asperger's Disorder may be only mildly affected and frequently have good language and cognitive skills. To the untrained observer, someone with Asperger's Disorder may just seem like a normal person behaving differently.

People with autism are frequently seen as aloof and uninterested in others. This is not the case with Asperger's Disorder. Individuals with Asperger's Disorder usually want to fit in and have interaction with others; they simply don't know how to do it. They may be socially awkward, not understanding of conventional social rules, or may show a lack of empathy. They may have limited eye contact, seem to be unengaged in a conversation, and not understand the use of gestures.

Interests in a particular subject may border on the obsessive. Those with Asperger's Disorder frequently like to collect categories of things, such as rocks or bottle caps. They may be proficient in knowing categories of information, such as baseball statistics or Latin names of flowers. While they may have good rote memory skills, they have difficulty with abstract concepts.

One of the major differences between Asperger's Disorder and autism is that, by definition, there is no speech delay in Asperger's. In fact, those with Asperger's Disorder frequently have good language skills; they simply use language in different ways. Speech patterns may be unusual, lack inflection or have a rhythmic nature or it may be formal, but too loud or high pitched. Many with Asperger's Disorder may not understand the subtleties of language, such as irony and humour, or they may not understand the give and take nature of a conversation.

Another distinction between Asperger's Disorder and autism concerns cognitive ability. While some individuals with Autism experience mental retardation, by definition a person with Asperger's Disorder cannot possess a "clinically significant" cognitive delay and most possess an average to above average intelligence.

While motor difficulties are not a specific criteria for Asperger's, people with Asperger's Disorder frequently have motor skill delays and may appear clumsy or awkward.