

LIVING WITH A CHILD DIAGNOSED WITH ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

A Helping Professional Parent's Perspective

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1

Who am I?

- * N. Gail Seemann, Licensed Professional Counselor
- * 12+ years working with children, adolescents & adults
 - * Last 6 years increasing focus on ASDs.
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2

Overview

- * Grief
- * Life Stages:
 - * Infancy through Elementary School
 - * Middle School / Adolescence
 - * High School
 - * College / Transition to Adulthood
- * A 'brain function' Perspective
 - * I. Executive Function – prefrontal cortex under-activation
 - * II. Emotional Regulation – amygdala enlarged / hypersensitive
 - * III. Social Cognition – mirror neurons in pre-motor cortex / Broca's area
 - * IV. Sensory Sensitivities – neurons do not terminate where expected?



3

GRIEF



- * As with any disability, no matter when the diagnosis is given there will typically be a grief response.
- * Often grief will hit anew each time a major life stage is encountered
- * The typical feelings of denial, anger, bargaining, acceptance will usually be experienced – but not in any particular order.
- * There may also be a sense of relief to finally have a label for what is wrong.

4

Infancy – Elementary School Years



- * Confusion
 - * Why does she DO that?
 - * Why isn't he more like?
 - * My doctor says everything is OK But I just KNOW something isn't right...
- * Exhaustion
 - * Will he/she EVER go to (or stay) asleep?
- * Frustration / Anger
 - * I can't even go to Walmart on a quick errand!!!
 - * Do I need to get a leash?!

5

Infancy – Elementary School Years

- * Worry / Fear
 - * What is wrong?
 - * I've GOT to get a break – but who can I trust to watch him/her?
 - * My parents just DON'T understand...
 - * He went outside in the middle of the night – unlocked the front door and just started walking?!
 - * He doesn't seem to have any friends....?
- * Guilt
 - * I shouldn't have gotten so angry
 - * I should have been paying attention
 - * Everyone seems to think it's my parenting – what could I be doing wrong?
 - * Why is he ALWAYS in trouble at school?

6

Infancy – Elementary School Years

- * Isolation
 - * I can't go over to my friend's homes
 - * Their children don't like my child
 - * I can't even find a babysitter who can watch my child!
- * We have this diagnosis – but the school says he doesn't qualify for services because he's not failing. What am I going to do? I can't work because they're always calling me to come get him!!!

7

Middle School



- * Bullying / Rejection
 - * May not be recognized by the individual with Asperger's
- * Hormones
 - * Thoughts of Suicide
 - * Differentiate between lack of language skills
 - * And lack of perspective skills
 - * Melt-Downs can resume
- * Grades can begin to drop
 - * Demands on problem-solving, inference increase dramatically
- * Self-esteem often begins to plummet

8

Parent of Middle Schooler

- * Fear for child
- * Frustration with school for not helping
 - * Executive function
 - * Lack of understanding by teachers
- * Don't know how to help
- * Exhaustion
- * Learned Helplessness

9

High School



- * Executive Function difficulties begin to show more dramatically
- * Difficulty with 'reading' the teacher – sarcasm, expectations
- * Doesn't necessarily recognize rejection
- * Social difficulties escalate
- * Drug use?

10

Parent of High Schooler

- * He's so smart – why is he doing so badly?
- * Can he do anything but play video games?
- * I can't get him to come out of his room!
- * Why doesn't he have any friends?
- * Frustration, exhaustion, learned helplessness

11

College / Transition to Adulthood



- * Executive Function difficulties become very evident
- * Gullible – vulnerable to those who would take advantage
- * Drug use?
- * Isolates in dorm
- * Cannot navigate basic living skills
- * Trouble with driving
- * Lack of motivation
- * When confused, or gets a bad grade – just stops.
- * In trouble with the law?

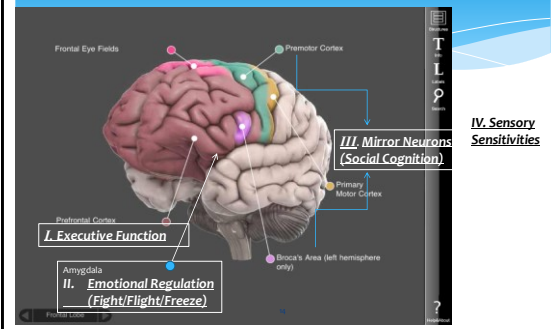
12

Parent of Young Adult

- * Can't he remember to take a shower?
- * Is he EVER going to be independent?
- * I'm getting older – I won't be around forever – who will take care of him?
- * He's SO SMART – why can't he pass his classes?
- * Why won't he ask for HELP?
- * Doesn't the college help with a 504 plan?

13

The Brain



I. Executive Function

- * Deciding what is important
- * Prioritizing order of importance
- * Doing what is important even when you don't want to
- * Following rules
- * Screening out things that are unimportant
- * Remembering consequences

15

I. Executive Function (cont)

- * Similar difficulties seen in those with ADHD
- * The older your child, the more significant the problem can seem.
- * Sometimes problems don't become debilitating until college / independent living

16

II. Emotional Regulation

- * DEFINITION:
Emotional dysregulation refers to an emotional response that is poorly modulated, and does not fall within the conventionally accepted range of emotive response.
- * Hypersensitive Amygdala - means over-developed fight/flight/freeze response

17

II. Emotional Regulation

- * We learn Emotional Regulation through social learning.
 - * Self-talk
 - * How to react to given circumstances

18

III. Social Cognition

- * **Social Cognition:** Our ability to gather information about and understand the rules and concepts that govern our social interactions—the ways in which we understand social rules of etiquette, proximity, gestures, inferences, etc. At its essence, social cognition includes the processes we use to understand the world around us.

* Read more: <http://www.alltopdog.com/glossary/definition.php?term=Social+Cognition&size=16&1>

- * **Mirror Neurons** – at the center of Social Cognition.
 - * activated while action is being taken,
 - * AND when an action is **observed**.

19

III. Social Cognition - cont

- * **EXAMPLE:** Baby smiling back at mother, mother smiling wider, baby smiling bigger.
- * **DIFFERENT** mirror neurons activate when the intent of the action is different
 - * Monkey picks up a piece of food to put it in a jar,
 - * vs.
 - * monkey picking up a piece of food to eat it.

20

III. Social Cognition - cont

- * In humans, mirror neurons are in
 - * pre-motor cortex
 - * Broca's Area – associated with language development
- * Thus, facial muscles, tone of voice, language generalization, gestures, etc. – are all not learned, and not replicated.
 - * **REMEMBER** this is a **SPECTRUM**

21

Resources

- * Kowalski, Timothy. Social-Pragmatic Success for Asperger Syndrome and Other Related Disorders. 2010. Professional Communication Services Inc.
- * SLP – Social Pragmatic focus
 - * Jennifer Wilson, Speech & Language Center, Huntsville
- * Social Skills groups
 - * Angela Collier
 - * AACSCG

22

IV: Sensory Sensitivity

- * Current research has demonstrated sensory sensitivity in mice with Autism, including heat and touch.
- * Some research has indicated that genetic code telling neurons where to end in the brain may not work correctly for those with Autism.
- * Possible that combinations of executive function problems along with these extra neurons in certain sensory areas lead to sensitivities?

23

IV: Sensory Sensitivity (cont)

- * Current reviews of research have suggested that Sensory Integration studies have not sufficiently scientific to demonstrate a positive impact from Sensory Integration treatments.
- * However, practice suggests that using these treatments in the moment help reduce emotional reactivity, and improve ability to acclimate to new situations.

24

CONCLUSION

- * In each of these areas (Executive Function, Emotional Regulation, Social Cognition, Sensory Sensitivity) – recognize your child's difficulties as not willful.
- * But stretch your child to use his linear cognitive abilities, and desire for habits, to help him/her compensate.

25

CONCLUSION

- * The challenge for us all is balancing
 - * understanding typical childhood behaviors, with an understanding of how your child's environment is confusing and overwhelming –
 - * and providing just the right amount of nurturance vs. challenge.
- * Not easy, but very rewarding!

26