

Autism Spectrum Disorders

*A Not Comprehensive But Quite Handy
Resource.*

Rabbi Rhonda Shapiro-Rieser, B.S. M.A. D.Min.

More and more children have been diagnosed as being on the Autism spectrum. This may be due to any number of genetic or environmental causative factors, or it may be that these children are finally getting the correct diagnoses.

Recent studies have yet to be done, but studies in the 1970s and the 1980s noted a disproportionate number of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in Jewish Ashkenazi populations. I speculate that the Talmud might be the brilliant result of men with Asperger thinking. In any case, religious schools are beginning to have to deal with student populations that are made up of as much as 20 to 30 percent of children with special needs, with many of those students being on the Autism spectrum.

This small handbook is designed to help teachers and staff get started on the path of understanding ASD students. It is, as the title suggests, by no means complete. It is my hope that it will be useful.



Part One: Alphabet Soup: Knowing the Categories

ASD—Autism Spectrum Disorder

To a greater or lesser degree, children and adults with Autism have similarities. They have difficulties with non-verbal communication. They have difficulty in social relationships. They have sensory issues that may interfere with their ability to focus on a task or regulate themselves emotionally.

Internal Characteristics of students with ASD: (Ely Center 2005 Power Point handout)

Socially:

- Difficulty reading non-verbal behavior
- Difficulty developing peer relationships
- Lack of social/emotional reciprocity
- Difficulty modifying social behaviors

Behaviorally:

- Restricted range of interests, with an obsessive quality demonstrated in interests they do have
- Sensory integration issues
- Poor Executive Functioning skills
- Rigidity in matters of routine/rituals
- Stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms
- Ego bound and self-centered
- Rule bound

Students with ASD also are very concrete in their thinking. They have a pedantic style of language and difficulty with social language.

AS—Asperger Syndrome

People with Asperger Syndrome do not have delays in their acquisition of language. They are often bright but may have difficulty with intelligence testing. While they do have language skills, they have deficits in social language and, hence, the ability to interact with peers. They have circumscribed interests, which often become obsessive. One can frequently find educational assessments that describe a child with AS as “bright

and inquisitive,” “a good student when he focuses,” with “serious problems socially” but sometimes with few serious behavioral issues.

HFA—High Functioning Autism

In truth there is little difference between HFA and AS. The next DSM, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, (DSM V) may eliminate them as separate categories. Generally, distinguishing factors between AS and HFA are the lack of language before three years old or a significant language delay and intellectual impairment. However, there are children with HFA who do not have a language delay. It is of note that the empirical studies that distinguish between HFA and AS in regard to language development do not use consistent criteria. (Meyer & Minshew, 2002, p. 152) Differences are based on severity of symptoms and intellectual ability, rather than qualitative differences.

NVLD, NLD—Non-verbal Learning Disorder

This is not yet in the DSM. It has the characteristics of Asperger syndrome, though perhaps not as severe.

PDD-NOS—Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified

This diagnosis occurs when an individual meets significant criteria for an ASD diagnosis but not enough criteria for a specific diagnosis.

ADHD—Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

While this disorder is not currently included as on the Autism Spectrum, some of the latest research is inclined to see ADHD as a Spectrum disorder. What this means practically is that many of the issues noted in this handbook will apply to those students with ADHD as well as ASD.



PART 2: Who are these kids?

Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, was so obsessed with computers and programming as a child that he would climb out of the window of his bedroom at 2:00 in the morning to sneak over to the computer lab at the local university. The wee hours of the morning were when there were few people in the lab and he could play. He would stay there for hours and then sneak back, with his parents none the wiser. Individuals with ASD have restricted obsessive interests, and they are very resourceful.

Most of the children who come to our religious schools will be in the category of HFA, High Functioning Autism or AS, Asperger syndrome. There are three very important things to know about them and how they function. They are the concepts of *Theory of Mind*, *Executive Function*, and *Central Coherence*.

Additionally, educators need to know about *Sensory Integration* issues.



Theory of Mind

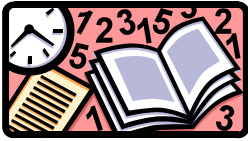
Theory of Mind is the awareness that you have your own unique mind and that others have unique minds that differ from yours. People with a strong theory of mind know that others do not necessarily experience and know what they do. (Paxton & Estay, 2007, p.59) People on the ASD Spectrum experience “mindblindness.” They do not understand another individual’s thought, emotions or intent. Because they cannot understand another person’s thought or emotional processes, they often appear oblivious and self-centered. They cannot predict or understand the consequences of their actions (Paxton & Estay, 2007, p. 59). This occurs on a continuum. Individuals with AS have a logic-based learned Theory of Mind. Higher functioning individuals with AS want to have other people in their lives; lower functioning people with no Theory of Mind may not care at all about having others in their lives.

A poor Theory of Mind also means that the individual may not understand that others don’t necessarily relate to their interests and experiences. Theory of Mind is necessary for understanding metaphor, irony, hidden meaning. Children with ASD miss all of the hidden rules in any given situation.

Theory of Mind is developed by the age of six in neurotypical children. In children with ASD there is significant delay. Theory of Mind, if it develops at all, develops somewhere around nine to fifteen years old. (Moran power point, 2008) As a consequence, a child with AS **cannot be willful**, at least not in the sense we know the term. In order to be willful an individual has to know what another person desires, and then decide to thwart that desire. That is not to say that a child with ASD cannot be defiant and stubborn. The child’s defiance, stubbornness and anger are complicated by the fact that they cannot understand **why** people are not letting them do what they want, or they believe that not letting them do what they want is wrong in the moral sense. A poor Theory of Mind also translates to a certain lack of empathy.

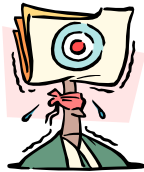
Children with ASD are vulnerable to anxiety disorders precisely because they cannot figure out what other people want. They are often frustrated because they cannot figure

out why other people cannot figure out what they want. A deficient Theory of Mind also makes it very difficult for children with ASD to shift attention and deal with change.



Executive Function

Executive Function is the ability to plan, organize and monitor one's own progress. (Paxton & Estay, 2007, p.65) Having weak executive function makes it almost impossible to independently do homework, school projects, plan for the next class period, remember what the assignment was, or when it was due. Weak Executive Function makes it very difficult for a child to follow a daily schedule or even understand one. As with Theory of Mind, it is important to realize that a child with Weak Executive function is not being willful, oppositional, or lazy.



Central Coherence

Central Coherence is the ability to see the whole. It is the way we can remember the gist of a story, grasp a common theme or thread to a narrative. Our sense of Central Coherence allows us to understand broad concepts without knowing all the details. (Paxton & Estay, 2007, p.65)

Children with ASD have weak Central Coherence. They cannot take in global meaning. They remember things in disjointed details. And all details have equal weight; there is no beginning or end. In language this means that a child would have difficulty using sentences in context but would have excellent verbatim recall (Paxton & Estay, 2007, p.65) and so would appear to know the material in a way that they really do not.



Sensory issues

We start with two big sensory issues:

Proprioception

Proprioception is one's ability to sense the relative position in space of the body and parts of the body. It also helps us to know the appropriate strength needed to accomplish a task. It helps us sense when our voice is too loud or too soft. A good proprioceptive sense is needed to learn new skills. Difficulties with proprioception are common in people with ASD. It means the child will perhaps stand too close to other children or too far away. They may bump into other children frequently. The child may grab a hand too hard, or crush the paper cup filled with paint. It means they will often be too loud in class without realizing it. And they will have a hard time learning any new task.

Vestibular Sense

The vestibular sense is the way we stay upright and balanced. It gives us our spatial orientation and directionality. It tells us when we are moving quickly or slowly. The child with vestibular sense difficulties may stumble frequently. The child may rush in class, not necessarily out of excitement but because she/he doesn't realize they are going fast.

Vestibular difficulties can make it much harder for children with ASD to learn physical activities like Israeli dancing. Even the Hakafot at Simchat Torah might be overwhelming for them.

Other Sensory issues

We are learning more and more about the sensory issues that all individuals have, which hopefully will make it easier for children with ASD. It is important to mention some of these sensory issues, but understand that the subject is too vast to mention them all.

Tactile: For some children with ASD, types of clothing, and clothing in general can be almost painful to wear. It is not unusual for a child on the Spectrum to make it through school and then to take off school clothing as soon as they get home, often switching into very loose clothing like sweatpants and sweat shirts. One child described socks as "strangling" his feet and would go without socks well into winter. It would be helpful for teachers to understand that the child fidgeting in the chair may be suffering just because of the clothing they are wearing. This tactile difficulty may also relate to types of food textures, various kinds of art supplies, even the feeling of the desk.

Visual: Some children can hear the sound of a fluorescent light. Some children can see the flickering of a fluorescent light. Some children will have a great deal of difficulty in the bright colorful classroom that is so highly recommended in educational methods texts. Children with ASD have difficulty filtering out extraneous movement around them, making it doubly hard to focus on a task.

Auditory: For some children lots of sound is way too much. The synagogue youth service has literally driven children with ASD out of the sanctuary, especially when there are microphones. These children can have exquisitely sensitive hearing, so much so that, for example, a child may be distracted by what is going on in the next classroom.

Fidgeting: This is actually related to sensory integration. Children with ASD often have a difficult time sitting. We know from Jewish tradition that activities that deal with fidgeting help learning—just look at any Yeshiva where boys have to spend long hours in chairs studying. They all are rocking back and forth the entire time. A child or their parents will likely know of things that help the child stay focused and still. Sometimes they may be objects that can be squeezed or fiddled with in the hand. Teachers need to be prepared that for some children, the best antidote to fidgeting is gum. A parent once proudly declared that they located kosher for Passover gum, so their child would be able to attend religious school during the holiday.

While the sensory issues may seem overwhelming educationally, the response to them can be simple. The better a teacher knows the child with ASD, the better communication the teacher has with the child, the more able the two of them will be able to plan for and head off a sensory overload. Think about what kind of classroom environment will meet the needs of *all* the children in the class. Children with ASD desperately want someone to “get” them. If they feel the teacher “gets” them, it lessens their sense of frustration and alienation and improves behavior and performance.



Some Observations for the Religious School

We are unique in our dealings with the child with ASD. We are required by community, by Torah and by the Holy One of Being to include and educate our children with special needs. We are also unique in that we are expected to do this with very little training and not many resources.

This handbook is not one to give specific curriculum suggestions. There are more and more curriculum resources being published every year. However, the issues around inclusion have become a priority in the community, so it is not something we can ignore.

Some suggestions:

- As part of **any** child's entry into religious school, have parents fill out a survey of what the child's educational style is, and what educational needs the child may have. This does not single out children with special needs, and it is a way to get parents to be more open.
- Parents of children with special needs have been fighting for their children's educational rights for years before they ever enter religious school. They have been fighting a public school system that, frankly, has been resistant to meeting their children's needs. They will often come to the synagogue assuming resistance and already feeling alienated. It is important to really listen to what they are saying and help them become partners. It is important to be patient. A person who was leading a synagogue support group reported that it took almost a year before the parents trusted that there wasn't a hidden agenda behind the support group.

One way to gain trust is to have a parent support group led by a knowledgeable professional who is not connected to the religious school but may have ties in the community. An excellent way to help parents of children with special needs feel included is to have a place on the synagogue's education committee for a parent with a child with special needs representative.

- Understand the sensory needs of children with ASD. While Purim may be fun for some children, the noise and the chaos can be terrifying to a child with sensory issues. Having a quiet room, for crafts or soft singing around the theme of a holiday, for example, creates a safer environment for the child. A child with ASD may need a kippah that is knit and large enough to stay comfortably on his/her head. Institutional kippot may be too light and distracting. Bar/Bat mitzvah children may need a heavier and larger tallit than the small silk tallit. Both the pressure of a heavier tallit and a knit kippah can be very calming for some children. These are a few examples. Work with parents to find out how to make their children more comfortable.

Plan for the occasional melt down. Have a quiet place and a volunteer or staff member available to help a child get back in control if s/he has been overwhelmed. Use the local college or university school of education to find volunteers, so there are enough staff to do one-on-one time with a child who is having educational or emotional issues. Many parents are also willing to volunteer in this capacity.

- Smile a lot. Children with ASD get their cues from the mouth, not the eyes. They often do not get sarcasm at all, and they can miss a lot of humor. This increases difficulty with peers. This handbook talks in generalities, but no two children with ASD are exactly alike. Having stated that, generally these children will be very honest--this can also increase difficulty with peers.
- Remember not to identify students as “special needs” or “Aspergers” or “autistic” students. Rather, they are students with special needs, Aspergers or Autism. This reminds us that they are not their learning challenge, but rather that they are human beings who may love spaghetti, hate classical music and devour books, for example, as well as have a learning challenge.
- These children often love ritual and their Jewish identity is very important to them, but they feel acutely their alienation from the group. For many children this alienation from peers in religious school is the main reason they drop out of school and their families subsequently drop out of synagogue membership. The current Jewish community must make a huge effort at educating itself. This can be done through “inclusion Shabbats” that should occur at least once a year. Some elements of an inclusion Shabbat:
 - Shorter, quieter services with gentle singing and music.
 - Activities that help neurotypical parents and students understand disabilities. For example:
 - Sight workshop: Glasses spread with Vaseline so the person has to experience impaired vision during a “class.”
 - Attention workshop: Blinking lights, periodic loud noises, multiple tasks, all going on while the students have to complete an “assignment” for “class.”
 - Small group discussions about difference and the learning difficulties each person has.

(Some of the above suggestions come from the work of Jody Rosenblum, Lifelong Learning Director at the Jewish community of Amherst)

- Synagogues have been successful with Scholar-in-Residence weekends devoted to issues of disability and inclusion. There are a number of very good teachers and resources for serious text study, particularly in the Conservative movement.



Children on the ASD spectrum have tremendous potential. Chances are the computer with which you do your work would not exist had there not been a cadre of creative ASD minds. A case can be made that Einstein and Hawking, Nobel and Oppenheimer were all on the spectrum. It is our job to see to it that this generation of ASD students does not have to struggle to share their gifts with the world and that their Jewish identity is a source of health and pride for them.

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