

AS or ADHD? Alphabet Soup

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ADHD typically involves symptoms of inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity. There are three types:

- those with primarily inattention,
- those with primarily impulsivity and hyperactivity,
- and those with all three symptom areas.

All these symptoms may occur in Aspergers Syndrome (AS). If they do occur, they could represent a genuine ADHD disorder or they could simply mimic ADHD but be part of AS. So what's the difference between AS and ADHD?

1. In ADHD, the difficulty is typically with sustaining attention to any one thing for a prolonged period and becoming distracted by extraneous noises or sights. In AS, the inattention may in fact be due to excessive attention to a particular subject, idea, or thing. In other words, the individual may be overly focused or obsessed on something (perseverating) and thus appear distracted and inattentive. This is one of the hallmarks of AS, a preoccupation with a circumscribed area of interest. In ADHD, the individual is not overly focused, but distracted. Note this exception: some folks with AS may also have ADHD problems where they are having difficulty sustaining attention and concentration. Also, if an AS individual does not always understand what is going on socially, he may become bored and distracted. That's not ADHD, that is inattention due to lack of comprehension of the social situation.
2. Individuals with AS have more difficulty understanding what to do and what to say in social situations. They have many more problems with language pragmatics (i.e., the social use of language). Individuals with ADHD may understand what to say and do, but because of their impulsivity, they may not do it.
3. Individuals with AS often have odd motor mannerisms (e.g., hand flapping or awkward body movements). This is more typical of the autistic spectrum and not typical of ADHD.
4. From an intellectual and educational point of view, AS individuals usually have a non-verbal learning disability with much higher verbal scores than performance scores on intelligence tests. Although individuals with ADHD may have this pattern, it is not characteristic of ADHD. Also, AS individuals usually have a great deal of information about their areas of interests and factual information is a strength. Factual information is sometimes lowered in ADHD because their inattention has caused them to miss some lessons in school.
5. In AS, language is often taken literally. Implied meanings, metaphors, sayings such as 'Don't let the cat out of the bag' are taken at face value and not always understood for their metaphorical or implied meaning. This is not typical of ADHD, but may be present if an individual has a learning disability along with ADHD."

A FINAL THOUGHT:

Until we really know the underlying pathology in ADHD and AS, we will not truly distinguish between them in a clear cut manner. We are not there yet. My guess is that there are multiple neurological problems that lead to both disorders and those problems may overlap. In the meantime, take a practical approach focusing on the specific behaviors rather than the diagnosis. If your child needs help with out of control behavior, seek help with behavior management. If your child needs social skills development, provide social skills training. If your child does not respond to stimulant medications for ADHD, try a different medication that has shown promise with AS and related disorders. Although the differences between AS and ADHD can be noted and may lead to some different initial treatment approaches, eventually you must focus on your individual child's behavior and not a diagnosis.