

Blinded By Their Strengths: The Topsy-Turvy World of Asperger's Syndrome

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"I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom... As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous... In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or de-humanized." - Haim Ginott

Few could disagree with the sentiments expressed by Ginott, at least in theory. Unfortunately, theory doesn't always translate into practice, at least not for children with the enigmatic and complex disorder known as Asperger's Syndrome (AS). Thus, when a crisis occurs, or worse yet escalates, it is often the child who is held accountable, and the teacher who is exonerated!

Consultants are rarely asked to look at what the school staff needs to know and do to better understand and address the challenges that accompany Asperger's Syndrome. Rather, they are all too often directed to focus their efforts on "fixing" the child, as though his or her actions are the result of behavioral decisions, rather than the reflection of a neurological impairment.

Could it be that Ginott's words were intended only for teachers of typical children? That is most unlikely. Then what is there about AS that "invites" placing the burden of responsibility with respect to aberrant behavior on the children who manifest the disability, rather than on those who have the wherewithal to operate with far greater freedom and flexibility (i.e., their teachers or caregivers)?

One parent's search for answers to a particularly distressing school situation led her to characterize the plight of her 8 1/2 year old son with AS thusly: "The good news is he's bright, and the bad news is he's bright!" This revealing description makes a poignant, and sadly accurate statement about an educational system that not only fails to understand the child with Asperger's, it fails to recognize that such understanding is in fact necessary if positive change is to occur. An analysis of what this parent meant by her statement gives one a window on the topsy-turvy world of Asperger's syndrome.

In most disorders, descriptors such as "more able" and "high functioning" are excellent prognostic indicators - hence, the good news. How then can intelligence be considered bad news? The answer to this question lies in the paradoxical nature of Asperger's syndrome itself.

Individuals with Asperger's are cognitively intact. That is, they possess normal, if not above-average intelligence. This creates an expectation for success. Further, the pursuit of their restricted repertoires of interests and activities often results in the amassing of impressive facts, and in an expertise beyond their years. Therein lies the problem! Given their enormous strengths, and the expectation that they generate, and given the fact that intelligence is a highly-prized trait in our culture, intellectual prowess in the child with Asperger's syndrome virtually eclipses the social-emotional and other deficits that are at the heart of the unusual behavior and interests are often seen.

Stated more succinctly, unmindful of their neurologically-based weaknesses, teachers and/or clinicians get blinded by the strengths of these children. This situation inevitably leads to a mental set that can be summed up as follows: "If he/she is that smart, shouldn't he/she know better?" The answer to that question is a resounding "no". In fact, because of the social-emotional and communication deficits, as well as the presence of symptomatology unique to

Asperger's syndrome, these children can't "know better" until they are taught simply to know (i.e., to understand).

Consequently, in order to create an hospitable environment for children with Asperger's syndrome in a world that is often inhospitable to their needs, it s vital that teachers and other caregivers employ direct teaching strategies to address the following specific areas:

- * Perspective-taking
- * Sociocommunicative understanding and expression
- * Reading/language comprehension
- * Executive dysfunction (i.e., problems in organizational skills/planning)
- * Problem solving

Together, these target areas constitute a kind of life skills curriculum for the more able student. Their inclusion in the student's IEP can help to ensure that each of these important skill areas gets the attention it deserves. After all, life skills are far too important to be left to chance!