

## The Discovery of "Aspie" Criteria

By Tony Attwood and Carol Gray

Some of this century's best discoveries were creative and determined efforts to answer "What if...?" questions. What if people could fly? What if electrical energy could be harnessed to produce light? What if there was an easily accessible, international communication and information network? The answers have resulted in permanent changes: air travel, light bulbs, the Internet. These discoveries have rendered their less effective counterparts to relative extinction from use: gone is the stagecoach, gas lighting, and multi-volume hardbound encyclopedias. These improvements remind us of our option and ability to experiment, re-mold, re-think, and imagine. In that spirit, this article submits a new question: What if Asperger's Syndrome was defined by its strengths? What changes might occur?

### Moving from Diagnosis to Discovery

Making any diagnosis requires attention to weaknesses, the observation and interpretation of signs and symptoms that vary from typical development or health. Certainly it would be a little disarming to visit a doctor for a diagnosis, only to have her inquire, "So, what feels absolutely great?" The DSM IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) assists in the identification of a variety of disorders. It is used by psychiatrists and other mental health professionals to match observed weaknesses, symptoms and behaviours to text. In DSM IV Asperger's Syndrome is identified by specific diagnostic criteria, a constellation of observed social and communication delays and/or deviations. Once diagnosed, a child or adult with the diagnosis is referred to with politically correct "people first" terminology, i.e. a person with Asperger's Syndrome.

Unlike diagnosis, the term discovery often refers to the identification of a person's strengths or talents. Actors are discovered. Artists and musicians are discovered. A great friend is discovered. These people are identified by an informal combination of evaluation and awe that ultimately concludes that this person – more than most others – possesses admirable qualities, abilities, and/or talents. It's an acknowledgment that, "...you know, he's better than me at....". In referring to people with respect to their talents or abilities, politically correct "people first" terminology is not required; labels like musician, artist, or poet are welcomed and considered complimentary.

If Asperger's Syndrome was identified by observation of strengths and talents, it would no longer be in the DSM IV, nor would it be referred to as a syndrome. After all, a reference to someone with special strengths or talents does not use terms with negative connotations (it's artist and poet, not Artistically Arrogant or Poetically Preoccupied), nor does it attach someone's proper name to the word syndrome (it's vocalist or soloist, not Sinatra's Syndrome). Focusing on strengths requires shedding the former diagnostic term, Asperger's Syndrome, for a new term. The authors feel that Aspie, used in self-reference by Liane Holliday Wiley in her new book, Pretending to be Normal (1999), is a term that seems right at home among its talent-based counterparts: soloist, genius, aspie, dancer. With fading DSM potential, the authors submit a description of "aspie" for placement in a much needed but currently non-existent Manual of Discoveries About People (MDP I) (Figure 1).

New ways of thinking often lead to discoveries that consequently discard their outdated predecessors. Similarly, the change from Asperger's Syndrome to aspie holds interesting implications and opportunities. It could result in typical people rethinking their responses and rescuing a missed opportunity to take advantage of the contribution of aspies to culture and knowledge.

### Figure 1: Discovery criteria for aspie by Attwood and Gray

- A. *A qualitative advantage in social interaction, as manifested by a majority of the following:*
  1. peer relationships characterized by absolute loyalty and impeccable dependability
  2. free of sexist, "age-ist", or culturalist biases; ability to regard others at "face value"
  3. speaking one's mind irrespective of social context or adherence to personal beliefs
  4. ability to pursue personal theory or perspective despite conflicting evidence
  5. seeking an audience or friends capable of: enthusiasm for unique interests and topics; consideration of details; spending time discussing a topic that may not be of primary interest
  6. listening without continual judgement or assumption

- 7. interested primarily in significant contributions to conversation; preferring to avoid "ritualistic small talk" or socially trivial statements and superficial conversation.
- 8. seeking sincere, positive, genuine friends with an unassuming sense of humour
- B. *Fluent in "Aspergerese", a social language characterized by at least three of the following:*
  - 1. a determination to seek the truth
  - 2. conversation free of hidden meaning or agenda
  - 3. advanced vocabulary and interest in words
  - 4. fascination with word-based humour, such as puns
  - 5. advanced use of pictorial metaphor
- C. *Cognitive skills characterized by at least four of the following:*
  - 1. strong preference for detail over gestalt
  - 2. original, often unique perspective in problem solving
  - 3. exceptional memory and/or recall of details often forgotten or disregarded by others, for example: names, dates, schedules, routines
  - 4. avid perseverance in gathering and cataloguing information on a topic of interest
  - 5. persistence of thought
  - 6. encyclopaedic or "CD ROM" knowledge of one or more topics
  - 7. knowledge of routines and a focused desire to maintain order and accuracy
  - 8. clarity of values/decision making unaltered by political or financial factors
- D. *Additional possible features:*
  - 1. acute sensitivity to specific sensory experiences and stimuli, for example: hearing, touch, vision, and/or smell
  - 2. strength in individual sports and games, particularly those involving
  - 3. endurance or visual accuracy, including rowing, swimming, bowling, chess
  - 4. "social unsung hero" with trusting optimism: frequent victim of social
  - 5. weaknesses of others, while steadfast in the belief of the possibility of genuine friendship
  - 6. increased probability over general population of attending university after high school
  - 7. often take care of others outside the range of typical development

### Rethinking Typical Responses

Many baby boomers may remember the early elementary reading workbook of years past titled, Think and Do. The title alone held great educational merit. It identified an important sequence of events that is occasionally forgotten or overlooked: think first and then do. Recently, the Indiana Resource Center distributed a flyer with a similar subtle reminder. It is titled "Rethinking our Responses" (Indiana Institute on Disability and Community, 1999). The title presents an implied challenge to parents and professionals to "think again and do differently". Armed with the positive criteria of aspie, rethinking reveals some new ideas and options for responses.

The diagnostic criteria for Asperger's Syndrome and the defining characteristics of aspie are markedly different, although they describe the same group of people. Ultimately, what distinguishes people with Asperger's Syndrome from aspie individuals is how others respond.

Three helpful re-thought responses are

1. a focus on potential;
2. meaningful affirmation; and
3. A discarding of social arrogance for accommodation and acceptance.

**A Focus on Potential.** There is no argument or doubt that aspie children and adults need support and assistance, just as those diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome do. They need to be informed and learn the secrets of typical social understanding, and require help negotiating through the social world that surrounds them. The challenge may be more comfortable for aspies than for those with Asperger's Syndrome as a direct result of the people who surround them. Consider this example:

At eight years old, Patrick is demonstrating exceptional artistic talent. He completes projects far beyond the abilities or products of typical elementary students. Of particular interest and fascination, in fact, are the statues and models that he creates. Patrick's work has been displayed in local libraries and county offices. His parents and teachers guess that in the future Patrick may be a renowned sculptor or commercial artist – and that his talent should be fostered and encouraged. Patrick is a fun child with many friends. In the classroom, he can work effectively in small groups or large, and lives for the rough and tumble social opportunities of recess. Patrick also struggles with math, requiring tutors and special help to keep afloat in the midst of numbers and their operations. The school year is beginning soon, and Patrick's new teacher, Mrs. Calder, is excited to be part of his educational career, appreciates his incredible gift, and is looking for ways to build his math skills. Mrs. Calder talks of Patrick's potential, never once referring to his weak area as his mathematical prognosis.

Miguel is also beginning in Mrs. Calder's classroom this year. Miguel is very aspie. Like Patrick, Miguel has incredible abilities. Above all else, Miguel is valued for his unique, seemingly three-dimensional visual thinking; knowledge of extinct South American rain forest insects and Sears home dehumidifiers; honesty that puts his peers to shame, and compliance with rules and routines. Unlike Patrick, however, Miguel's parents and Mrs. Calder admit they "can't even guess" where his unique talents and abilities may lead in the future. Still, they admit that Miguel, at age 8, can do things that they cannot. They also conclude that he possesses unique abilities with a future they cannot conceptualize or imagine, gifts that should be fostered and encouraged. Mrs. Calder is aware of the social struggles that surround Miguel on the playground and in small and large group activities, and is looking for strategies to build mutual understanding between Miguel and his classmates. Miguel is looking for genuine kindness in others – Mrs. Calder is determined he will find it in her classroom, on the playground, and at lunch. She wants him to maximize his gifts, just like Patrick.

Those who genuinely understand aspies see their strengths clearly and regard their struggles with patience and support. Describing her closest friends, Liane Holliday Willey writes: "...They simply illuminate that which is made better by my AS, my straight forwardness and assertiveness and creativity and tenacity and loyalty. Because they see me first as someone who possesses many good qualities, and only then as someone who is just a tiny bit different, they give me the notion to begin to see myself in that light as well." (p. 73)

**Meaningful affirmation.** Affirmation is an important social process. A child is praised as valued traits are recognized and acknowledged by others, "Sam, what a great helper you are!" or "Angie, what you did is very thoughtful!" Children have the ability to perceive even the most indirect "plus" or praise. For example, John helps a classmate find the correct page, and notices an approving glance from his teacher. In an instant, her approval is noticed and may encourage John to assist others in the future. John receives several similarly subtle but important "pluses" throughout the day, enough to help him weather correction from the lunch assistant for failing to toss his trash. A child readily understands the meaning of verbal and non-verbal praise, important messages that influence self esteem. If self esteem is the personal belief that it's "a.o.k. to be who you are", affirmation is the demonstration, and understanding, that others agree.

In contrast, missed opportunities and misunderstanding can derail the efforts of parents and professionals to affirm aspie children. The traits an aspie child values in himself (logic, memory, intelligence, accuracy and honesty) may be different from the traits typically valued by parents and professionals (sensitivity, generosity, helpfulness). This can make others amiss in responding positively to qualities the aspie child views as very important. From the child's point of view, "No one ever notices or appreciates me." Supportive, caring parents and professionals may praise an aspie child as they would a child who is typical, using phrases like "Good job!" or "How nice of you to share...". These statements may hold little meaning to an aspie child who thinks in visual, tangible terms. The child's lack of interest in such praise can be misinterpreted, with typical people assuming, "He just doesn't respond to praise". By the end of the day, an aspie child may feel overwhelmed and unsupported; his parents and teachers may feel equally at a loss to discover something to motivate him. Even though affirming "blocks to the bridge" do exist on both sides of the social equation, the blueprints are sometimes different. To meaningfully affirm an aspie child, an understanding of his strengths and social perspective is helpful. Recognizing and praising the traits the child values in himself, in addition to those skills and achievements that demonstrate social growth, can build a child's self esteem while he tackles an often

challenging social world. Figure 2 describes five specific strategies to add meaning to praise, affirmation, and social gains.

Ultimately, the aspie criteria could return confidence to a deserving population of people. Knowing that others recognize and acknowledge personal strengths, could provide needed confidence to build and explore personal talents and tackle challenges. In a description of her friends, Liane Holliday Willey indicates "...they are so loyal in their affirmations that I am fine just the way I am. Through their eyes I am perfectly fine. Each of them dismisses my idiosyncratic ways with a smile and a wave of the arm... They rein me in when I travel too far, they protect me from obvious blunders, and they applaud me when I stumble over some part of me that is particularly worthwhile." (p. 72)

**Moving from arrogance to accommodation and acceptance.** No fault or finger-pointing intended, typical people are socially arrogant. It seems to be their nature, something they really can't help. Proof in point: typical people are fascinated by – and concerned about - anyone who isn't totally thrilled or enamored by their invitations to converse or play. How could this be? Typical people regard themselves as golden social opportunities; of course anyone should be delighted to be their partner in interaction. That is, if they are "normal".

#### **Figure 1: Five strategies to add meaning to praise, affirmation, and social gains**

1. The best praise is when others notice a personally valued trait or strength. It's important for parents and professionals to take time to learn those traits that are the most important and/or valued by the aspie child or adult. In addition, discovering strengths via the new aspie criteria, parents and professionals may more readily identify and acknowledge them when they are demonstrated. Traits like loyalty, honesty, perseverance, logic, intelligence, and sincerity are worthy of frequent praise.
2. Meaningful affirmation relies on accurate attribution. For example, a child may doggedly persevere because he's related to nine family members who also demonstrate that trait. While aspie may be associated with certain strengths, it does not replace the influence of other important factors, like age, personality, character, or inherited personality and talent. Looking to those factors first when giving credit increases the meaning and accuracy of praise. If other factors do not explain a trait or talent, or its intensity, the aspie factor may deserve the credit, or at least "honourable mention" as one of a combination of factors.
3. The meaning of praise can be enhanced with access to interests (books, music, computers); someone taking time to show interest in a topic important to the child, or the use of visual materials to clarify abstract achievements ("blue ribbon effort", or "gold medal helpfulness")
4. Social Stories add meaning to social information, including praise. They are "right at home" praising the traits an aspie person values in herself. A Social Story can describe a child's use of logic and intelligence, applaud an achievement, or celebrate a talent. Placing the information – and related photos or work samples – in a story creates a tangible, positive record that may help a child understand his strengths and value
5. Some consideration of the words and phrasing parents and professionals use to express praise – especially for social achievements - may yield big results. Mentioning a talent when applauding social gains ("What a logically friendly thing to do!" or "What an intelligent idea to invite Amber to play!" or "It's smart to let Beth to play with the toy for a while!") may recruit a child's attention and add meaning to the acknowledged social skill.

In Figure 1, the list of social advantages of aspie individuals has its roots in the social challenges of people with Asperger's Syndrome. Regarding someone as socially "new" or "unique" has more potential than the negative counterparts of "awkward" or "inappropriate". This requires social creativity. In this case, it may be helpful for typical people to regard social interaction as a trip through Immigration and Customs. Anyone who travels between countries knows the anxiety of approaching a customs agent, that country's appointed keeper of the rules of entry and acceptability. Here the rules are rigid; the

questions straightforward and a little rude: "Why are you here and when are you leaving?" "Are you here for personal or business purposes?" (In other words, "Are you here to visit Los Angeles or buy it?") The process raises social anxiety - Do I look safe and kind enough to these people (who look dispassionately authoritarian and manner less to me) to be among them in their country? Or, do they need to rummage through my personal belongings to judge if I can be included? For aspie people, there is a daily Social Immigration and Customs process - a continual anxiety of doing it "right", saying it "right", having the necessary social "passport" that typical people constantly seek in others before befriending them.

What social criteria are absolutely necessary for typical people to admit aspies through Social Immigration and Customs - is it at all possible to widen the rules of acceptability? Can typical people show interest in an unusual topic? Is typical inflection and smooth coordination of facial expression – mastery of the sometimes-conflicting concert of intended and stated meaning - essential for someone to be considered a friend? Is it okay to show joy by moving your fingers and arms? Is it possible to patiently take time to explain a situation that seems as though it should be obvious? Is it okay for someone to have cognitive abilities that are not usually found in the typical population?

Replacing arrogance with acceptance is similar to the use of air masks on airplanes. Airline flight attendants begin each flight by reviewing a life saving rule regarding the use of air masks: "assist yourself before assisting others". It's a rule contrary to the natural inclination to assist those who seem most helpless first. Problem is, following the inclination could leave two people struggling for air and survival; those who assist others to an air mask first may forever lose the opportunity to be helpful in the long run. Social acceptance works on the same principal. It's worth the effort to explore the assumptions and biases of Social Customs and Immigration – to discover their influence and make corrections where necessary. Then assist others.

### **Rescuing a missed opportunity**

Typical people are quite sharp at identifying missed opportunities, and often clearly demonstrative when they do. The train leaves the station and those remaining can readily identify who wanted to be on that train, but isn't. A young man interviews for a desired position in a company, spends an eight-hour day waiting by a phone for the call that arrives at 5pm, telling him the position has been filled by another applicant. He disconnects the phone and refers to the company by a novel but unkind new name. Opportunities are not usually difficult to identify, nor are they unnoticed when they slip from grasp. The discovery of aspies brings into focus valuable, endangered opportunities that have repeatedly marched past without adequate notice of their potential. There is the opportunity to make new friends; a chance to consider those who may seem comparatively awkward, but decidedly more honest and genuine. In addition to discovering new friendships, there is the opportunity to utilize unique perspectives and talents to tackle problems. There's work to do in the following century – diseases to cure, environments to save, freedoms to preserve. Fortunately, there are people with minds capable of the challenge, with the ability to focus and persevere. They possess perspectives and talents unique enough to solve the biggest of problems, or enhance the most challenging projects. They are Aspies. They are living proof that the best places to play will always be those that are discovered.

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