Valuing Neurodiversity:
Interns with Asperger’s Syndrome in a Museum Guide Program

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I. What is Asperger’s Syndrome (AS)?

• Asperger’s Syndrome is a developmental disorder. It impacts a person’s ability to
socialize and communicate effectively. Individuals diagnosed with AS may also
display behaviors that appear odd to others.
• Individuals diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome typically have average to above
average intelligence
• In 2013 Asperger’s Syndrome as a separate diagnostic label was removed from
the diagnostic manual. It is now considered an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).
• It is a Neurological Disorder NOT behavioral, language, or emotional
• 1:88 children are currently being diagnosed with an ASD, 1:56 boys (May, 2012)
• ASD knows no boundaries (SES, ethnicity etc), No 2 persons are alike
• Life Long disability but with the right supports and interventions changes and
improvements can dramatically impact an individual’s outcome positively.
• No one cause, but multiple causes linked to: genetics, brain-gut connection,
environment, viral
• Areas of deficits:
  • Perspective Taking/Theory of Mind (have difficulty recognizing that other
people have different thoughts, feelings and beliefs)
  • Socialization & Communication
    • using and understanding non-verbal behaviors – eye contact facial
expressions, awkward body language/gestures;
    • conversation skills – one-sided, not noticing conversational
partner's interest, voice tone/quality odd, social thinking

II. Challenges of Asperger’s Syndrome in the Work World and Some Helpful Hints

◆ Difficulties in Theory of Mind & Strategies to Assist
  ○ Valuing hierarchical relationships (Relating to & interacting with
supervisors)
    ■ Provide a hierarchical chart and individual roles/responsibilities
    ■ Increase knowledge of hidden curriculum (i.e. what each person
does and says to the others- colleague to colleague, colleague to
supervisor, volunteer to volunteer, volunteer to supervisor)
  ○ Working in teams/groups
    ■ Provide scaffolding of roles
    ■ Prompt interaction and expectations
    ■ Understanding what isn’t directly said and when tone/words don’t
match
    ■ Refrain from sarcasm
    ■ Explain if you are joking/teasing
- Provide peer mentors
- Stack the deck – provide caring, empathetic team members

- Poor interpretation of social relationships and interactions (Individual may look & sound rude, disrespectful or uncaring when they are stating the obvious. They are concrete/honest to a fault (without an understanding of the impact (We might think the same thing but not verbally state it)
  - State that some thoughts should remain unspoken
  - Teach the other person's perspective
  - Teach and provide a definition of a “white lie”
  - Provide your perspective in interactions
  - Provide social conventions and guidelines
  - Provide unwritten guidelines of work culture
  - Provide audience and context specific guidance and thinking (i.e. certain topics are best shared with same sex conversation partners)

- Difficulties with Flexibility (may be caused by impromptu changes – rooms, times, workers; confusion with directions/language
  - Preview that changes can occur and in what ways (people, rooms, tasks)
  - Provide coping and stress management cues/strategies for anxiety with change
  - Allow time to calm down and regroup

**Difficulties in Understanding the Social World & Strategies to Assist**

- Understanding and won’t “see” the “hidden culture”
- “reading between the lines”
  - Say out loud what you think everyone already knows (Verbally state common knowledge, common sense, common behaviors)
  - State the unspoken rules or behaviors that are typical for the environment or culture

- Overly sensitive to feedback
  - Provide concrete specific feedback both positive and constructive and add how it makes others feel and think
  - State what you are thinking with a statement like, When you _____ I thought ___ was that your intent? (e.g. “When you grabbed the stuffed animal out of the child’s hand I thought you were being rude was that your intent?”)
  - Provide feedback face to face and provide the thoughts you are thinking (this is not what we typically do. We are worried about the feelings of the other person; but these individuals need the direct feedback that is provided respectfully and compassionately)
  - Use a calm and neutral tone when providing feedback
  - Reassure that it is OK to be wrong or make mistakes sometimes

- Limited interest in performing tasks that are not inherently meaningful/motivating to him
  - Provide the rational for the activity and how it applies to his performance and job
  - Set concrete goals to address areas of challenge

- Attention wanders to interests and does not always prioritize attention to the salient topic/information
  - Get attention by saying name, tapping on shoulder (basically a way that works for the individual)
  - Get attention BEFORE presenting important information
  - State what you want him to attend to
- May get stuck on a preferred interest – set time limits, provide visual support
  - Heightened anxiety when in new situations/meeting new people or when things don’t go as anticipated
    - Provide relaxation strategies
    - Cue individual to use strategies
    - Accept anxiety as a fact of functioning for this population of individuals
    - Allow differences in performance while person is learning to cope with stress and stressors. (Address stressors after the fact when the person is calm. Make a plan.)
    - Provide an “out” - may have to leave the space/take a break

❖ Difficulties in Executive Functioning & Strategies to Assist
  - Getting started/initiating work
    - Prompting
    - Teaching what initiation looks like, sounds like and feels like to others around the person
    - Outline and plan how to complete a multi-step task
  - May not initiate doing another task when one is completed
    - Review procedure/protocols for what to do when a task is completed
    - Provide lists of other tasks (that other workers would automatically know to do)
    - Provide who to approach when completed and what to say
  - Poor self regulation/pacing, may not recognize how much time a task takes to complete
    - Provide timers, watches with alarms/beepers
    - Provide verbal reminders/cuing
    - Provide transitional prompts regarding minutes left to complete a task
    - Have him estimate the time allotted to complete an assignment and then track actual start and end times (Do they match?)
    - Use written reminders/schedules/planers/calendars
    - Find the means for the person to comply to task demands based on learning preference/style
    - Show an example of outcome
    - Visual cues/color code projects
    - Provide think time

❖ Difficulties in Sensory-Motor & Strategies to Assist
  - Sensory Defensiveness - May not like to be touched
    - Provide cue before touching
    - Provide knowledge that accidental bumping in crowded spaces may happen
    - Allow weight bearing and weight carrying activities (wear a backpack)
  - Sensory sensitivities may disrupt performance
    - Noisy or chaotic environments or intense smells may cause distress
    - Allow oddities such as needing to wear a baseball hat/heavy jacket
    - Provide alternative environments
    - Allow person to use their own tools/supports
III. Resources & References

Books
- Tony Atwood, The Complete Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome
- Temple Grandin, The Autistic Brain: Thinking Across the Spectrum
  Temple Grandin and Kate Duffy, Developing Talents, Careers for Individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome and High Functioning Autism [www.templegrandin.com](http://www.templegrandin.com)
- Rudy Simone and Temple Grandin, Asperger’s on the Job: Must have advice for people with asperger’s syndrome or high functioning autism and their employers
- Norm Ledgin and Temple Grandin, Asperger’s and Self-Esteem: Insight and Hope through Famous Role Models
- Barbara Bissonnette, Asperger’s Syndrome Workplace Survival Guide: A neurotypical’s secrets for success
- Gail Hawkins, How to Find work that works for people with Asperger syndrome
- Yvona Fast, Employment for Individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome and Non-Verbal Learning Disabilities: Stories and Strategies
- Michelle Garcia Winner Social Thinking at Work: Why Should I care [www.socialthinking.com](http://www.socialthinking.com)

Webpages
- [www.autismspeaks.org](http://www.autismspeaks.org)
- [www.wrongplanet.net](http://www.wrongplanet.net)
- [www.aspergersyndrome.org](http://www.aspergersyndrome.org)
- [www.asperger-employment.org](http://www.asperger-employment.org)

IV. New England Agencies and Resources

MA

**AANE (Asperger’s Association of New England)** [www.aane.org](http://www.aane.org)
51 Water St
Suite 206
Watertown, MA 02472
617-393-3824
info@aane.org

**Aspire/MGH**
Charlestown/Wellesley/Lexington/Westwood
617-726-0060
[www.massgeneral.org/children/aspire](http://www.massgeneral.org/children/aspire)

**Forward Motion Coaching** [www.forwardmotion.info](http://www.forwardmotion.info)
Barbara Bissonnette
119 Adams Dr
Stow, MA 01775
978-298-5186

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Aspire/MGH
[http://www2.massgeneral.org/youthcare](http://www2.massgeneral.org/youthcare)
MA Rehabilitation Commission  http://www.mass.gov.mrc
TILL Toward Independent Living and Learning  www.tillinc.org
Autism Alliance of Metrowest  www.autismalliance.org
Autism Resource Center of Central MA  www.autismresourcecentral.org
Autism Support Center – Northeast ARC  www.ne-arcautismsupportcenter.org
Community Autism Resources  www.community-autism-resources.com
Community Resources for People with Autism  www.communityresourcesforautism.org
Family Autism Center  www.snarc.org

New Hampshire

Antioch New England  http://www.antiochne.edu/applied-psychology/center-for-autism-spectrum-disorders/links/
AANE NH Chapter
GRASP  http://www.grasp.org
UNH  www.iod.unh.edu

Rhode Island

AANE RI chapter
Groden Center  http://grodennetwork.org/children/AspergersCenter.asp
GRASP
Autism Project  http://www.theautismproject.org/

Vermont

AANE VT Chapter  www.vermont.gov
Voc Rehab Vermont  www.dail.vermont.gov
Disabilities Rights VT  www.disabilityrightsvt.org

Maine

AANE ME Chapter
Bureau of Rehabilitation Services  www.maine.gov
Disability Rights Center  www.drcme.org
Career Center  www.mainecareercenter.com
www.asmonline.org
www.abilitymaine.org
www.maineautism.org
www.autismconsortium.org
www.amhc.org
www.ccids.umaine.edu

Connecticut

AANE CT Chpater
State of CT Dept of Labor  www.ctdol.state.ct.us
DSS  www.ct.gov/dss
www.ct-asrc.org
www.chapelhaven.org
www.cccdinc.org
www.iser.com
www.connecticut.networkofcare.org
www.ciboakhill.org

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http://www2.massgeneral.org/youthcare