



Dyslexia Assessment & Consultancy

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AUTISM / ASPERGER SYNDROME:

SEEING THE WORLD DIFFERENTLY

Melanie Jameson & Sally Anne Davies

Questioning or interviewing someone with Asperger Syndrome is very problematic due to the nature of the condition. Key aspects are highlighted below and good practice recommended.

Key Characteristics of Asperger Syndrome

- Living with a continual high level of stress and anxiety – they therefore reach ‘overload’ very quickly
- Having their own idiosyncratic understanding of the world around them
- Lacking life skills. All social interaction/ contact is very challenging
- Being very inflexible in their thinking. Difficulty with abstract thought, a VISUAL thinker.
- Showing a marked difference between high level intellectual functioning and poor social/emotional intelligence
- Lacking insight into their condition
- Lacking awareness of consequences of their actions
- Living by the rules they have learned so may be unaware that they have transgressed
- Showing limited empathy – even to close members of the family
- Poor communication skills, great difficulty answering questions – frequently give a literal response which can appear ‘cheeky’ and insolent

- If they cannot work out the answer to the first question, they become overloaded and stop
- Difficulty sustaining eye contact. May show strange 'comfort behaviours'
- Inability to cope with unplanned change. May have acute sensory sensitivity
- Limited grasp of body language, verbal cues, unwritten social rules
- The more intelligent they are, the more aware they will be that they are getting the interaction wrong but have little idea how to 'do it right'
- Usually have a small range of obsessive interests that may (unwittingly) include a criminal element e.g. a fascination with fire
- Stress reaction when unable to cope may include verbal or physical abuse undertaken to bring a stop to stop the situation

The challenge is: how can you extract the necessary information without a face-to-face Question and Answer session which people with Asperger Syndrome find almost impossible.
"Answering questions is the most stressful thing of all", Student with Asperger Syndrome

Recommendations for Good Practice: Assume nothing, start at the most basic level

People with Asperger Syndrome ideally need an interpreter to assist them; compare a deaf person using sign language. The National Autistic Society trains mentors who could fulfil this role.

Since people with Asperger Syndrome will take everything literally, avoid metaphor. Speak simply, taking care that nothing you say is ambiguous, allow processing time: '6 second rule'!

People with Asperger Syndrome need 'time out' to recover – at least 15 minutes every hour.

A session with court/parole/legal representatives would be much easier to cope with if questions are written and submitted in advance. Answers can then be considered and written. Ideally these should be shown to an Asperger specialist for comments.

Since open questions are hard to manage, one option is a multiple choice format that requires ticking one of several alternatives.

There is a better chance of success on licence if people with Asperger Syndrome are given a set of rules, which are carefully explained and which they can then follow.

Further Reading:

Autism: A Guide for Criminal Justice Professionals (rev 2008) National Autistic Society

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