



# Responding to the Needs of Gifted Students With Asperger's Syndrome

*A Position Statement of the Minnesota Educators of the Gifted and Talented (MEGT)*

## Purpose

Asperger's Syndrome (AS) is a developmental disorder where children have pronounced and persistent difficulty with social relationships, poor communication skills, difficulty with motor coordination and sensory integration, and problems with some aspects of cognition (Lovecky, 2004). The number of gifted learners with AS is growing; educators are challenged to address the needs of these twice-exceptional students. The purpose of this position statement is to acknowledge the unique characteristics of gifted students with AS and to provide recommendations that will promote further understanding of how best to meet their academic and social needs.

## Characteristics of Gifted Students with Asperger's Syndrome (AS)

The literature identifies common characteristics associated with AS:

- ❧ Absence of social and emotional reciprocity
- ❧ Obsessive interest in a particular subject matter
- ❧ Verbal fluency
- ❧ Keen memory
- ❧ Hyper-sensitivity
- ❧ Asynchronous development
- ❧ Emotional aloofness
- ❧ Rigid adherence to routines or rituals
- ❧ Difficulty with peer relationships
- ❧ Lack of shared interests with others
- ❧ Difficulty interpreting non-verbal cues

There are several similarities between the AS characteristics listed above and gifted behaviors.

- ❧ Excellent memory for events and facts
- ❧ Verbal fluency
- ❧ Hyper-sensitivity
- ❧ Concern with fairness and justice
- ❧ Uneven development
- ❧ Absorbed in a special interest

The above characteristics provide a picture of the complex set of behaviors that combine and collide to produce a gifted student identified with AS.

## Issues and Challenges

Meeting the needs of gifted students with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) presents unique challenges for schools. The main areas of concern are described below.

- ❧ Asynchronous development and its impact on learning for AS students is not well understood.
- ❧ The research literature on the understanding of twice-exceptional students (gifted and AS) has had little impact on the practices of the educational community.
- ❧ District services rarely collaborate and share responsibility for the identification and education of gifted AS students.
- ❧ There exists a recurring issue with misdiagnosis of AS and giftedness. A thorough evaluation is not often implemented to distinguish gifted children's unique association with AS.
- ❧ The present curriculum and/or the delivery system of the curriculum may not be appropriate.



- ✿ There is a lack of awareness of strategies and services that will allow an AS student to succeed.
- ✿ Students with AS may be taking medications, the effects of which may not be understood by those working with them due to a lack of training.
- ✿ The basic construct of the school experience with its schedules, routines, and expectations for conformity is not well matched with the nature of an AS student.

### **Recommendations**

- ✿ Provide opportunities for staff development for understanding asynchronous development with twice-exceptional gifted students with AS.
- ✿ Require training in AS to help educate professionals about the characteristics and social emotional needs of AS.
- ✿ Ensure that the school nurse is a resource for teachers in recognizing the effects of medications being administered.
- ✿ Provide differential diagnosis from the special education, counseling, and gifted departments who will team together, as it is an essential part of our work as professionals.
- ✿ Differentiate the curriculum for the needs of AS students. This includes compacting curriculum, breaking assignments into small parts, testing out, or changing the pace.
- ✿ Find strategies that will fit the child, such as preferential seating, providing concrete rules, spending extended time on assignments and working closely together with the special education teacher, classroom teacher, and gifted education teacher.
- ✿ Teach self-advocacy skills to the AS students to help them become successful, Provide a mentor to assist them in learning these skills.
- ✿ Identify and modify school practices that prevent a gifted student with AS from being successful. This will have to happen case by case, as one AS students' challenges will be different from another's.

### **Resources**

Lovecky, D. (2004). *Different minds-Gifted children with ADHD, asperger's syndrome and other learning deficits*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Wiley, L. (2004). *Pretending to be normal: Living with asperger's syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Grandin, T (1995). *Thinking in pictures and other reports from my life with autism*. New York: First Vintage Books.

Tammatt, D. (2006) *Born on a blue day: inside the extraordinary mind of an autistic savant*. New York: Free Press,

Webb, J. (2005). *Misdiagnosis and dual diagnosis*. Scotsdale,: Great Potential Press.

“Misdiagnosis of Asperger’s Disorder.” [www.SENGIFTED.org](http://www.SENGIFTED.org). Web. 14 Sep 2009.

