



Homeschooling a struggling learner

Homeschooling a Child with Asperger's Syndrome

By Dianne Craft, HSLDA Special Needs Coordinator

In the United States, it is estimated that one family out of 150 has a child who is struggling with Asperger's syndrome, or autism (CDC report, www.medicalnews.today.com). This represents a 500% increase in the past 10 years. Homeschooling families are not immune to this phenomenon.

Many experts on Asperger's syndrome encourage three approaches to help these children overcome many of the challenges they face: biological interventions, educational interventions, and social interventions.

Before we get to interventions, let's focus on the characteristics and why homeschooling is best in helping a child with Asperger's syndrome to succeed.

CHARACTERISTICS

What does the homeschooling day look like for a family who has a child with Asperger-like symptoms? Let's follow a day in the life of Steve.

1. Mom finds that she cannot change the "routine" for the day or Steve tends to become very upset. The need to have things the same is a very strong drive for him. New settings and noises in particular bother him.

2. Helping him learn a "balanced" curriculum also takes much effort from Mom because Steve tends to have very narrowed interests, wanting only to learn about World War II planes, or studying only spiders in the animal kingdom. He is very fact-oriented, memorizing an amazing array of information about a subject that he is interested in. In fact, he often only talks about one subject to others, even if they are not interested in it.

3. While the other siblings enjoy youth group at church, or the social interactions with other homeschoolers, Steve very often is aloof, not participating in the interactions, appearing to be a loner. When he does interact, his behavior frequently is inappropriate, because he has difficulty reading social cues, and nonverbal signs that people give to one another. Sometimes his behavior can be loud and aggressive. At times it looks like he is detached from the feelings of others. He seems to exhibit little ability to form friendships.

4. When teaching him, Mom finds that he easily seems to go into his own world, being fascinated by thoughts that have nothing to do with the task at hand. In fact, he can entertain himself for a long time with nothing more than a simple piece of string.

If these characteristics resonate with you regarding one of your children, please don't despair. Homeschooling is a wonderful tool for helping such children become successful.

WHY HOMESCHOOLING IS BEST

Many parents have found that the very best educational setting for these wonderful children is at home. Since these children are often very curious, even gifted learners, at home they are free to explore the topics of interest to them, without needing to do the mundane chores that are needed in the more formal school setting. Also, since peer relationships aren't their strength, they are not distracted from their learning by the constant need to interact with their peers. Their siblings and parents can be their friends. They learn appropriate social interaction in the home setting. And since many of these children suffer with "SI" symptoms (Sensory Integration Dysfunction), it is better for them to be educated in a setting free from the unsettling atmosphere of a crowded school room, with its accompanying noises, movement, and demands.

The one thing that all of these children have in common is that they easily experience sensory overload. Whether the label is Sensory Integration Dysfunction or Sensory Processing

Problems, these children would be what Lendon B. Smith, MD, describes as “goosey, touchy kids,” meaning that everything bothers them. Their sensory system shouts “red alert” when something as insignificant as a label on a shirt, a lump in the yogurt, a loud noise, a sock with a seam, stiffer jeans, foods touching on the plate, a change in routine, or an unexpected touch occurs. They are not comfortable in their own skin. Anxiety rules much of their day (*Asperger’s Syndrome*, Tony Attwood).

At home, you can give your child a set schedule for the day, so he knows what to expect, which will give him a good level of comfort. It is also the best setting in which to pinpoint dietary issues that may be contributing to the child’s behavior. Several parents have homeschooled their children with Asperger’s syndrome and written books about the methods that they found to work well with these wonderful children. These books provide step-by-step instructions and advice on creating a curriculum for a child with Asperger’s syndrome and are listed in the resource section at the end of the article.

What are some common roadblocks to homeschooling your child with Asperger’s syndrome? It is not uncommon for your doctor to discourage you from homeschooling your child with Asperger’s syndrome. Your child’s doctor may be very familiar with Aspergers, but not familiar with homeschooling. Thus, he may feel that keeping this child home all the time doesn’t sound right (as if homeschoolers do that). Dr. Tony Attwood, a clinical psychologist, well-known expert on Asperger’s syndrome and author of *Asperger’s Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals*, is on record as being an advocate of homeschooling. He states, “I have always found homeschooling to be a positive option that has literally saved the lives of many children.”

Now let’s look at three approaches that may help a child with Asperger’s syndrome overcome challenges.

INTERVENTIONS

Biological Interventions

Some physicians, who have children of their own with Asperger’s syndrome, have developed a “metabolic” theory of Aspergers. They have seen their own children overcome many of these unsettling symptoms by balancing their child’s body chemistry.

The “Gut” Connection

It has been found that there is a strong connection between gut health and symptoms of Sensory Processing Problems and Asperger’s syndrome. Early, or prolonged antibiotic use, or intero exposure to antibiotics or steroids appears to be the dominant factor in this approach. The early or prolonged antibiotic use often creates the overgrowth of yeast and fungus in the child’s system. These yeast/fungus toxins cause many behavioral upsets, including spaciness, mood swings, aggression, hyperactivity, inappropriate behavior, depression, anxiety and in general an upset nervous system. This upset also tends to be the catalyst for

food allergies. Thousands of parents report very positive changes in their child’s behavior and learning when they take natural steps to rebalance their child’s gut ecology.

The “Food Allergy” Connection

In his book, *Cerebral Allergies*, Dr. Philpott describes the many behavioral manifestations of an allergy. Dr. Doris Rapp, in her book, *Is This Your Child?* describes videos that she made of the dramatic change in a child’s behavior after the child was exposed to a food allergen. It has been well established that children with ADD, ADHD, dyslexia, SI, autism and Asperger’s syndrome tend to have a compromised immune system, resulting in many hidden allergies. These children often have food allergies and, as a result, many parents have seen dramatic changes when they not only reduce sugar and simple carbohydrates, but also when they begin an allergy elimination diet. To read instructions on how to start an elimination diet to determine the effect of a food on your child’s behavior, and for parent testimonials, go to www.gfcfdiet.com, www.scdiet.com, www.pecanbread.com and www.blockcenter.com. Many parents find that by adding a targeted enzyme to each of the child’s meals, that the child can tolerate a much wider range of foods without behavioral reactions. You can read about the enzymes that parents have found to be most effective, at the parent website, www.enzymestuff.com.

Benefiting from those who have gone before

The exciting news is that parents are finding ways to greatly reduce the symptoms of Asperger’s syndrome in their child by following the paths that other parents have created. To find some of these paths, visit the websites listed under our “Resources” below. To find an “integrative” physician in your area, you can go to www.acamnet.com or www.autism.about.com. The Carl Pfeiffer Treatment Center (www.hriptc.org) located in the Chicago area is a clinic run by physicians who look for the metabolic “cause” of Asperger symptoms and create a very thorough nutritional intervention plan for parents to follow to reduce the symptoms that the child is experiencing.

God has shown us many ways to help our children who have Asperger-like behaviors to feel more comfortable. The implementation of these changes is not as difficult as it seems. If you choose to make a change to diet or supplementation, first check with your health care professional. Make only one change at a time, so you will know what is helping. As you do your own research, you will find there are many ways to make your child more comfortable in his own skin, resulting in behaviors that are so much improved.

Educational Interventions

Parents who have successfully homeschooled their children with Asperger’s syndrome have found the strengths and weaknesses in various educational approaches:

Computer-based instruction

Children with Asperger’s syndrome tend to like structure and predictability. They are also very easily self-taught, in many

cases. For that reason, parents have found that computer-based instruction works well for these children. If a child is working close to grade level in most subjects, then using computer-based instruction for all, or part of the child's education, has been found to be quite successful ([Time 4 Learning](#) is one example).

Unit studies

Unit studies examine a topic in depth. Since this is exactly what children with Asperger's syndrome tend to want, it suits their style of learning. Unit studies often work very well for kids who resist learning about anything but their very special topic. Parents start with the topic of interest and then branch out into other topics. The children like the absence of abrupt transitions, since all subjects generally are connected to the central study topic (i.e. trees, mammals, electricity, etc.) Parents often recommend doing this four days per week, allowing one day of the week for the child to pursue his own interests entirely (with the exception of TV and video games).

Traditional curriculum

Traditional curriculum tends to overwhelm a child with Asperger's syndrome with details. The need to write in workbooks frequently becomes a big point of dispute between child and parent if this type of curriculum is used exclusively. Video classes offer instruction done by a teacher. However, children with Asperger's syndrome are often language or auditorally challenged, and too much of the information is given verbally. This type of learning needs to be carefully monitored by the parent.

Social Interventions

Real-life social training

Social situations are often an enigma for these kids, because they have difficulty reading non-verbal cues, and knowing the proper social response to various situations. There are many good resources for parents to learn how to teach these important social skills to their child at home. Some parents use books. Other parents use CD sets and DVDs that demonstrate various social settings and give methods for the child to interact appropriately. As you watch these DVDs together, you can stop them, and practice with your Aspergers child the conversational models that are provided. This gives the child, particularly the teen, confidence, when done in the privacy of his or her own home. As with all videos, the parent should watch it first, to approve all content.

Group work social training

Good social skills groups designed specifically for children affected by Asperger's syndrome can be helpful because the leaders really understand the issues. These groups of like-minded children generally meet once a week and under the direction of the leader practice different social scenarios and rehearse proper responses. However, one needs to be careful in selecting a social group to make sure that it is made up of like-minded children, and not a mixture of children with other behavior challenges. Parents would not want a social skills group whose original purpose was to rehabilitate bullies. Parents have found that good social skills groups are hard to find. Thus, many of them take on this education of social skills as part of their homeschooling

curriculum.

Homeschooling is hard work and not without challenges, but wonderful things can happen for our Asperger-affected kids that might not happen in any other way.

Therapies

Should your homeschool program include working with therapists? Survey results show that many parents feel comfortable enough to work on most of their child's issues at home. Others feel that much is gained by having their child work with therapists once or twice a week.

Occupational Therapy

This type of help has received the most favorable comments from parents. Most helpful is sensory integration therapy, which teaches parents the "brushing technique" to help an overly responsive child modulate his or her responses to outside stimuli.

Sensory Integration Issues: If your child's main need is in the sensory integration (SI) area, parents have found that there are many ways to incorporate SI therapy into the homeschooling day. They include a strong "sensory diet" into their child's day by using such methods as a spinning seat, trampoline, having the child sit under cushions while watching a video or being read to, having the child go barefoot in the grass, or, for more tactilely sensitive children, putting on lotion or giving back rubs.

Other parents have found that using home therapeutics such as [The Listening Program](#) helps modulate their child's sensory system.

Fine Motor: For fine motor issues, parents often have their child peel fruit, open small packets, peel off stickers, shell peanuts, or do needlecraft. To improve the spatial and writing issues of the child, many parent use the [Writing Eight Exercise](#) designed to cross the midline or [Handwriting Without Tears](#).

Gross Motor: A child with Asperger's syndrome that has gross motor issues often doesn't participate in gym classes in public school. At home, however, parents can do much to help a child in this area. Examples of gross motor therapies include biking, horseback riding, skateboarding, karate, swimming, and gymnastics.

Speech

Children with Asperger's syndrome often do not need the more traditional form of speech therapy, such as help with articulation errors, but they tend to need help with more pragmatic (practical, conversational) speech encouragement. A speech therapist, in this case, can help the child learn to take turns in conversation and understand idioms and more common expressions that are used in everyday conversational speech.

For parents who want to help their child at home in addition to,

ONE STEP AT A TIME!

or in place of, seeing a speech therapist, they can help them with these pragmatic social conversational skills using many of the very good resources available. There are some very popular books, CDs, and DVDs with excellent social conversational skills material.

How do I pay for special therapy and where do I go?

If a parent decides to do outside therapy with their child, HSLDA recommends that parents seek private therapy services for their child, whenever possible, to avoid the many entanglements that can occur when a homeschooled child receives services through the public school system. However, remember that the most important objective is meeting the needs of the child. If you are a member of HSLDA, then you can contact one of the special needs coordinators, and they will help you find a therapist in your area. For more information on outside therapies and how to pay for them, visit [HSLDA's Struggling Learner](#) website.

1. Many times a family's insurance will cover part of the speech or occupational therapy costs, especially when it has been recommended by the child's physician.
2. There are many charitable organizations that are happy to help parents provide services for their child with special needs. Look in your phone book for Shriners hospitals, Scottish Rite facilities, Easter Seals, and Elks organizations.
3. [The Home School Foundation](#) has a fund specifically to help families meet part of the cost of providing for their children's special needs.

Homeschooling is challenging, but it is also very rewarding. Many parents find that by supplementing their child's academic needs with specialized therapies, either on their own or through the help of a private professional therapist, wonderful strides can be made for their Asperger-affected kids. Remember that you are not alone in your decision to homeschool your child with Asperger's syndrome. HSLDA's special needs coordinators are here to come alongside you and make this a comfortable, successful trip. We observe, and parents report, remarkable changes in their child's demeanor, comfort level, learning, and social interactions when they take the step to homeschool their wonderful child.

There are many aspects in the process of working with children with Asperger's syndrome, and it can easily seem beyond your grasp to deal with it. But please be encouraged; you can make progress, as will your child, one step at a time!

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This material is a compilation of the April, July, and August 2009 *Homeschooling Your Struggling Learner e-Newsletter*.

Resources

General

Choosing Home: Deciding to Homeschool with Asperger's Syndrome by Martha Kennedy Hartnett
Homeschooling the Child with Asperger Syndrome: Real Help for Parents Anywhere and on Any Budget (paperback), by Lise Pyles
[OASIS](#) (Online Asperger Syndrome Information & Support (a very thorough website))

Biological intervention

The Gut and Psychology Syndrome by Natasha-Campbell McBride
Help for Your Hyperactive Child by William Crook, MD
Superimmunity for Kids by Leo Galland, MD
The Biology of Behavior CD set by Dianne Craft, MA, CNHP
[Autism Recovery Videos.org](#)
[Talk About Curing Autism](#)

Social intervention

Social Skills Activities for Special Children by Darlene Mannix
Navigating the Social World by Jeannie McAfee
The New Social Story Book by Carol Gray and her website for sample stories and guidelines
[Model Me Kids](#)
[SocialSkillsBuilder.com](#)
[Asperger Syndrome Information and Support](#) (a very thorough website)

Speech Therapy

Social Skills Activities for Special Children by Darlene Mannix
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