

Dr. Dinelle Faul

Clinical Psychologist



4 Ring Road, Three Rivers, Vereeniging. Cellphone: 082 686 7955

Autism or asperger syndome? How do I know the difference?

The causes of autism and asperger syndrome

Autism and Asperger syndrome do not develop because parents did something wrong, or because parents did not handle the education of their child correctly. Parents can not cause Autism or Asperger Syndrome in their children.

The exact causes of Autism and Asperger syndrome are still uncertain. However, it seems that different factors may play an important role, such as: being genetically more susceptible, brain development and biochemistry of the brain do not develop normally, brain injuries, brain diseases and metabolic disorders. Viral infections that the unborn baby may contract in the womb may also play a role. The role played by mercury poisoning is still uncertain.

When does autism or asperger syndrome start?

Autism is usually detected before the age of three, when it is noted that the child's early development does not occur as expected. Children with Asperger syndrome develop properly, and symptoms are often first noticed when the child goes to school and his or her different way of communicating, motor deficits, different behaviour and fascination with specific interests stand out more prominently among those of their peers. Asperger syndrome is already present during the pre-school years, and is not a syndrome that develops during adulthood.

Symptoms of autism and asperger syndrome

No two children with autism respond exactly the same, and this also applies to children with Asperger syndrome. The number of differences between children with autism and Asperger syndrome are legion. Here I share just a few of them:

Children with autism tend to be unaware of the coming and going of others as babies, and they appear to be in a world of their own. As infants they do not seek the attention of other people by making noises, crying, by making gestures or by trying to make eye contact. They tend to be extreme on their own, are not always aware of others and are not interested in socializing with people. They can become aggressive or withdrawn and they may scream or deliberately injure themselves in an effort to keep other people away from them.

Children with autism tend to use little to no single words before the age of two. They will not necessarily converse with other people and it may be that their speech is poorly developed or not developed at all.

Their self-help skills like brushing teeth, dressing, combing hair, etc. do not develop normally from the start. They become intensely upset and may even respond with anger or tantrums if their environment or routine changes. They want things to remain the same at all cost and to stick to their routine, which does not necessarily make sense for other people.

Children with autism are not necessarily interested in or curious about their environment. They find it very hard to adapt to new situations. Learning problems usually occur, but they may excel in some areas, although it is not necessarily always the case. Most children with autism can not function in mainstream schools and need special education. Up to 50% of these children may be mentally retarded.

The symptoms of children with Asperger syndrome are sometimes so subtle that the diagnosis is initially overlooked. Their self-help skills develop normally within the first three years of life, although it may sometimes seem to be eccentric and otherwise. They might, for example, get upset if their shoes laces are not tied in their own unique way.

Usually there are no drastic language handicaps in these children, and their language skills are in fact well developed. Many of them learned to speak before they could walk, or can say one-word sentences at the age of two. Some may even say long sentences and have a good vocabulary at the age of three; which is not the case in children with autism. It is when they talk to other people that problems occur; they might not allow

other people to talk or interrupt people when they talk. They do not respond to subtle cues that others give and will for example not realize that a look at the clock means the visit is over. They will also not always realize that a teacher's frown means she is getting angry. They do not always understand why it is important to change the topic of a conversation and will continue to talk about their own interests.

Children with Asperger syndrome tend to be withdrawn among friends and will often prefer to befriend older children or adults. Although they often prefer their own company, they do show interest in others, are aware of those around them and often experience an intense need for friendship. When they do reach out to other people, it is often in an odd or eccentric manner, and many of them usually make little or no eye contact.

Their friendships do not last, because they do not always consider or understand the feelings or needs of others. They can be trusted and are loyal friends to people with whom they build relationships. They tend to play on their own, away from their friends.

Children with Asperger syndrome usually have an average to above average intelligence. These children often experience learning difficulties, but it is not as serious as in the case of children with autism. Children with Asperger syndrome tend to get angry if they cannot finish what they started, and they are easily upset if their routine is changed or if their expectations are not met.

They usually have a limited number of interests, but will gather large amounts of factual knowledge and information about this interest. They often have very unusual knowledge about these topics that interest them. Children with Asperger syndrome can often be taught in mainstream schools. Some people with Asperger syndrome even follow professional careers as actors, doctors, scientists, public speakers, information technologists, politicians and artists. The occupations in which they excel will often involve their unique interests, strengths and talents.

Is there hope of a cure or improvement?

Autism and Asperger syndrome will be a part a person's life for life, but it does not mean that their quality of life and happiness cannot improve. Children with Asperger syndrome respond faster and slightly better to treatment than children with autism. The reason for this is that they usually have a higher level of intelligence and better language skills. The earlier children with Asperger syndrome can be identified, the better the chance to bring about change with the appropriate therapeutic assistance.

About 60% of children on the autistic spectrum remain dependent on others for care, and more or less 5% - 15% will be able to function on their own and follow a profession. With the right support many people with Asperger syndrome can live independent lives, while others will require lifelong support.