

*Beyond discrimination,
beyond special treatment*

**TOWARDS A BETTER
UNDERSTANDING OF
STUDENTS WITH
ASPERGER'S SYNDROME**

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The cégep student with Asperger's Syndrome (AS)

This brochure is intended primarily for teachers, but also for anyone likely to work directly or indirectly with students diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome.

Our goal is to identify the potential challenges faced by students with AS and suggest the attitudes most likely to be helpful. **Resource persons**¹ can refer to this document for suggestions on how to best support these students as well as advice on adapting teaching strategies to this clientele.

We hope that the information presented here will assist teachers in their work and facilitate support for learning, and the integration and reintegration of cégep students with AS into the college community.

Finally, please note that students with AS are responsible for informing the cégep of their intention to study at the school and of their need for adapted services. The sooner the institution is notified, the better the chances of having the required services ready on time.

The person in charge of the **Special Needs Services**² must always consider how the limitation will affect the student's learning process. For that reason, a one-on-one interview will be held with students in order to get to know them, understand their needs and clarify with them the services they will need to compensate for the effects of their disability.

DEFINITIONS

Very little is known about Asperger's Syndrome. First described in 1944 by Austrian psychiatrist Hans Asperger, this syndrome is difficult to diagnose before the age of 3 or 4 and shares many similarities with autism.

People with AS are able to talk about their experiences, feelings and moods. In order to better understand them, here are the most common emotional, motor and intellectual aspects of this syndrome.

Students with AS generally function well in the community. However, since social contact makes them uncomfortable and they fail to see the importance of social reciprocity, they generally avoid interacting with others. They also have difficulty understanding social rules and conventions and, as a result, tend to isolate themselves. Decoding non-verbal communication also poses a number of challenges

¹ Translator's note: This generic term is being used throughout the text to designate the person who provides academic guidance to students with disabilities (French *intervenant*). If necessary, please change throughout text to suit your cégep's reality.

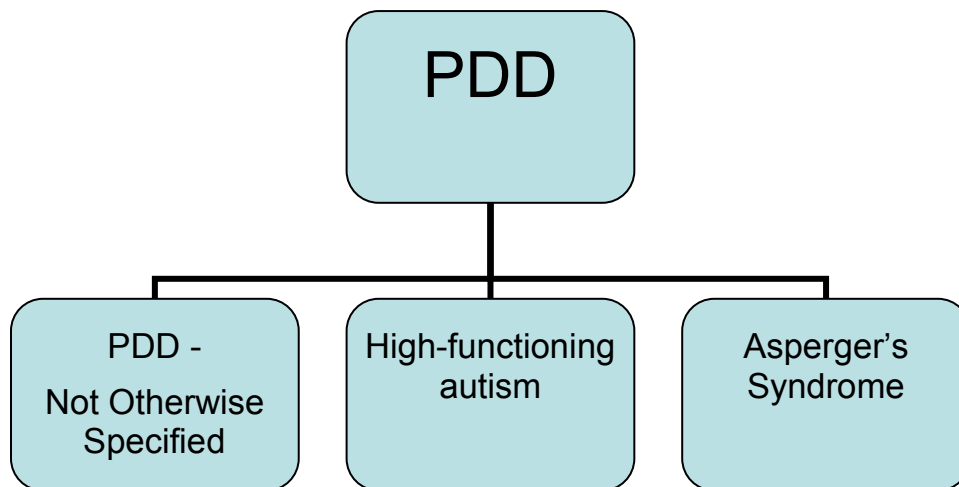
² Translator's note: This generic term is being used throughout the text to designate the cégep's service catering to students with Special Needs. If necessary, please change throughout text to suit your cégep's reality.

for them, making social interaction more problematic. They are, however, able to learn some of the basic tenets of social contact, and with practice they can internalize and use these, not because they want to but because they have to. Yet, they show very little or no initiative in this respect. For that reason, AS is sometimes referred to as “social blindness.” Despite good language skills, they have difficulty communicating with others, are resistant to change and prefer routine over the unexpected.

Students with AS generally have average to above average intelligence. They usually have good memorization skills, although their memory will often be photographic or visual. They also have normal cognitive abilities. These students will learn more and better with diagrams, grids and markers while following a structured schedule, which significantly helps them to get organized. They have an extensive vocabulary, but cannot always grasp puns, jokes, expressions with a double meaning, metaphors, sarcasm, etc. When interacting with others, they have difficulty interpreting facial expressions and body language and may therefore scrutinize another person’s face in search of the meaning they are missing. They may also lack tact, be unable to read social cues and have poor awareness of personal space. For example, students with AS may “invade” another person’s space, especially someone they love or like, without even realizing that this is bothersome.

Students with AS may have a monotone, impassive voice. Their facial expressions may also lack liveliness, except when they experience strong emotions, such as anger, pain and even joy; gestures can sometimes be excessive, clumsy or unrelated to the words being spoken. In highly emotional situations, they may not always be aware of the changes in their tone of voice.

Pervasive developmental disorders (PDD)



People with AS may experience sensory hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity, meaning that one or more of their five senses is extremely sensitive. Hyper-hearing and hyper-tactility are common and may be associated with a neurological disorder. For

instance, the slightest touch can cause pain akin to being cut by a knife. Background music can be perceived as loud and piercing, even when the volume is at the lowest setting. Students with AS may, however, not react to a fire drill. In fact, many of our students have reported that as children they were afraid of noises like the vacuum cleaner. Yet, as adults, these same noises did not seem to be as loud.

People with AS have highly diversified passions and obsessions, but many will share similar interests. For example, many young people with Asperger's will be passionate about computers, geology, biology, chess, art and languages. They will learn everything there is to know about their topic of interest, talk about it extensively and have difficulty talking about other subjects. Some students with AS pursue college or university studies and find employment. In 2004-2005, there were 12 students completing postsecondary studies: computer technology, geomatics, office technology, natural sciences, arts and literature, social studies, a BA in computer science and a master's degree in biology. Finally, we need to be aware that people with AS possess strengths, difficulties, values and interests, not to mention their own unique personality.

Causes of Asperger's Syndrome

Asperger's Syndrome is a genetically based neurobiochemical disorder that develops during the first years of life. The brain is unable to properly decipher the messages sent by the senses, resulting in a confused interpretation of reality and one's surroundings. In other words, information is processed differently. Asperger's syndrome is difficult to diagnose, because the traits of this syndrome are present at varying degrees among the so-called "normal" population. Here are a few examples:

- The level of ability of social interaction and the capacity to read non-verbal cues is different for each person;
- Motor skills vary from one person to the next;
- Many adults have excellent photographic memories;
- Many people use formal language and have a tendency to take things literally;
- A significant number of adults develop a passion for collecting objects, such as stamps, bottles, rare books, etc., and will isolate themselves in their "own little world."

As for this last point, it should be noted that a person with a rich, inner life normally also engages in interpersonal relationships. The same is true of people with AS, but to achieve this goal, they need help, cues and support. And even with support, their exchanges with others will remain somewhat mechanical.

Possible causes of unexpected behaviour from persons with PDD

Medical problems

- Do not know how to explain pain being experienced;

- Poor general health or unspecified problems (digestion, fatigue, etc.);
- Epilepsy;
- Depressed mood.

Related conditions:

Attention deficit disorder with or without hyperactivity;

Related mental illness;

Difficulty accepting their diagnosis, their limitations;

Suicidal thoughts (rejection).

Sensorial issues

- Too much stimulation or unpleasant sensations (sounds, lights, people, physical contact, etc.);
- Difficulty with body awareness.

Communication

- Have done what was asked and cannot understand our annoyance (literal understanding);
- Did not understand the instructions:
 - Do not know they *need to say* that they did not understand the instructions;
 - Do not know *how to say* they did not understand the instructions;
- Need help (do not know how to complete or organize a task):
 - Do not know *they need to ask* for help to get it;
 - Do not know *how to ask* for help;
- Must stop a task underway to do what is being asked;
- Poor understanding of a situation or incomplete information (we say we're going to the supermarket, but stop at the post office along the way);
- Did not understand that we are kidding;

Paying attention: We must ask students with AS their understanding of what was said. This must be done until what was said corresponds with what was heard and understood.

An overly wordy message will make them lose sight of the main idea being communicated.

To better understand and integrate information, these students need visual cues with as many concrete aids as possible (itineraries, graphs, etc.).

Predictability/Time

- Expecting something else (based on previous experience);

- Program was changed without prior notice and we think they know because they were told;
- Need more time (slow, stressed out by the request);
- Failure to understand the concept of time (we say “yes, this afternoon,” they hear “yes, right now”). Unspecified references to time generate anxiety among students with AS;
- Failure to respect the established schedule (we say “we’re leaving at 5:00 p.m.”, but it’s 5:01 p.m. and we’re still here).

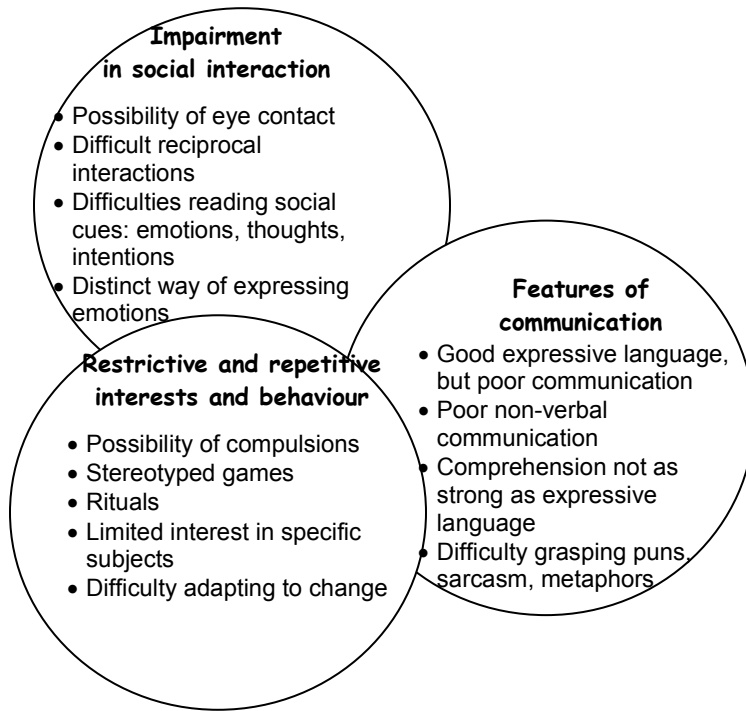
Social situations

- Too much pressure: they need to pay attention to too many things: too many people, too much stimulation;
- Failure to anticipate the consequences of their actions or words;
- Unaware of the unwritten social rules;
- Fearful of failure (experience); prefer to refuse opportunities (have experienced too many failures in the past);
- Difficulty mastering and recognizing emotions, even positive ones.

Motivation/interests

- The effort required does not lead to a satisfying result;
- Unexpected behaviour is reinforced by its consequence (attention, timeout, game, other benefit);
- “Obsessive” about a given area of interest;
- Unable to assess the force of criticism (a small comment is seen as something serious, leading to major feelings of failure).

Characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome



Consequences of Asperger's on learning

- Concentration problems (“spaced out”), most often when not talking about their passion;
- Spatial impairment (understanding notions of space, orientation and structure);
- Difficulty with cross-temporal organization and pace of learning;
- Difficulty with abstract thought (problem-solving);
- At times, difficulty expressing ideas;
- Difficulty with teamwork (understanding social situations);
- For some, difficulty with fine motor skills, which may prevent them from executing tasks requiring precision.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

Attitudes to adopt

We should always keep in mind that the goal of education is to promote student independence. Cégep is the place where students should be able to make use of this

skill. Generally speaking, when people with AS have access to **and use** the necessary resources, their performance will be similar to that of other students.

Support

Teachers who have students with AS in their class can expect to invest more time and energy in adapting their course and exams to meet the needs of these students, and to guide and support them, when needed. Support will mainly consist of organizing learning aids.

Finally, talking openly about students' limitations (with their consent) and what these entail for them is a sensitive task that can open the door to constructive suggestions on ways of dealing with these differences.

Additional details

- Support should never involve repeating a course;
- Support involves clarifying certain points, obtaining additional explanations or discussing special arrangements to make, such as adapting exams;
- In short, support should not be fundamentally different from what is offered to other students.

Role of resource persons

Academic support

- Assist in reviewing material presented in class (brief overview);
- Help plan assignments and exams and manage study time;
- Provide assistance in understanding instructions;
- Perform any other intervention, as required;
- Follow up with teachers and make them aware of the issues affecting their students with AS;
- Promote the optimal development of students through personalized activities;
- Establish services for students with AS and ensure that these are delivered appropriately.

GENERAL ADVICE, ACTIVITY PLANNING AND ACCOMMODATION STRATEGIES

Accommodating students with AS can require some additional planning when it comes to activities.

The role of the Special Needs Services **counsellor**³ is to support teachers and advise them in this respect.

Evaluations: exams and assignments

Exam period is a stressful time for all students, and stress (fear of failure, fear of not finishing on time, etc.) has a direct impact on the emotional state of students with AS, which may amplify their issues.

Some students experience difficulty with syntax, grammar and vocabulary, which significantly hinders their performance on written exams. Strategies for such situations include:

- allowing students to use a computer;
- permitting students to use a dictionary for exams with essay questions;
- favouring short-answer exams, which may be more suitable than long essays. However, this type of exam must be offered to the rest of the class as well.

Students with AS may experience difficulty with exams featuring multiple choice questions when these have long, complex and convoluted sentences.

To promote formative evaluation, it is best to comment on the exams and assignments of students with AS.

Your feedback and comments are important to help them progress. This is also an excellent way to communicate with shyer students and invite them to ask for additional explanations, if need be.

Students with a functional limitation have the same right as all other students to experience failure as a driver of personal growth.

Time factor

Given that students with AS sometimes require more time to complete exams, it has become standard practice to offer:

- from 33 to 50 per cent more time for essay writing in class or during an exam (lengthy text or lengthy reading beforehand). No additional time is required for written assignments with long deadlines.

In certain particular cases, the additional time given can be further extended. Teachers are **advised** to talk to students about exams and possible accommodations before the start of a course.

³ Translator's note: This generic term is being used throughout the text to designate the person at the Special Needs Services who is responsible for welcoming and integrating students with disabilities (including arranging for services to facilitate their studies) (French *répondant*). If necessary, please change throughout text to suit your cégep's reality.

Where to hold exams

In order to reduce stress and promote better concentration, students with AS should have the opportunity to take their exams in a room reserved for this purpose, under supervision.

Teamwork

Certain disciplines often require teamwork. In this respect, teachers can play a fundamental role:

- They can gradually encourage students to participate and find a suitable role or responsibility for them.
- They can serve as a link between students and a team of open-minded classmates, who agree to work with them. However, students with AS will be required to work and to abide by the same rules as the other students, without being carried by the team. Overprotecting them must be avoided.
- Teams working with students with AS should understand that the pace of the work may be slower. Deadlines therefore need to be adjusted.
- In some cases, it is best to avoid teamwork, since the anxiety experienced by students with AS in social situations may lead to a setback that could compromise their academic performance. If this is the case, the resource person will inform the teacher.

Finally, it should be noted that some students, with or without a limitation, will find it more difficult than others to function in a group.

Laboratory work

In most cases, students work in the lab with another student or in small groups. It is therefore important to try to choose a lab partner or group open to the student with AS, rather than using a random selection process. A match with an empathic person will help the student with AS both academically and socially.

Internships and field trips

Internships are excellent opportunities for students to experience their chosen careers. Teachers should consult the person in charge of the Special Needs Services and those responsible for the internship sites and field trips to obtain information about available resources and note any obstacles that students with AS may encounter.

Accommodation and services

To serve this clientele, a medical certificate is required.

Various accommodations and services will allow students to compensate for the effects of their limitations.

We can offer:

- a letter of explanation to teachers;
- a note-taking service;
- additional time for exams;
- access to an adapted classroom;
- an adapted schedule (depending on medication being taken);
- use of a computer and correction software ([Translator's note: please add examples of English correction software]);
- workshops on preparing for the Ministerial Examination of College English;
- access to a resource person to point out errors (when recommended by a physician);
- adapted teaching aids (homework help service, supervision of assignments, etc.);
- academic support (work methods, organizational skills, time management with an agenda, etc.);
- adapted evaluations;
- use of an electronic dictionary;
- use of a digital recorder;
- use of an electronic agenda (i.e. Palm Pilot);
- mentoring (a peer mentor serving as a resource person in classes);
- regular meetings with the teachers;
- support from a **CRDI** worker [Translator's note: insert name of service used by your cégep here, if applicable];
- any other accommodation suggested by the **CRDI** that could help support learning and promote student integration.

Attitudes to adopt

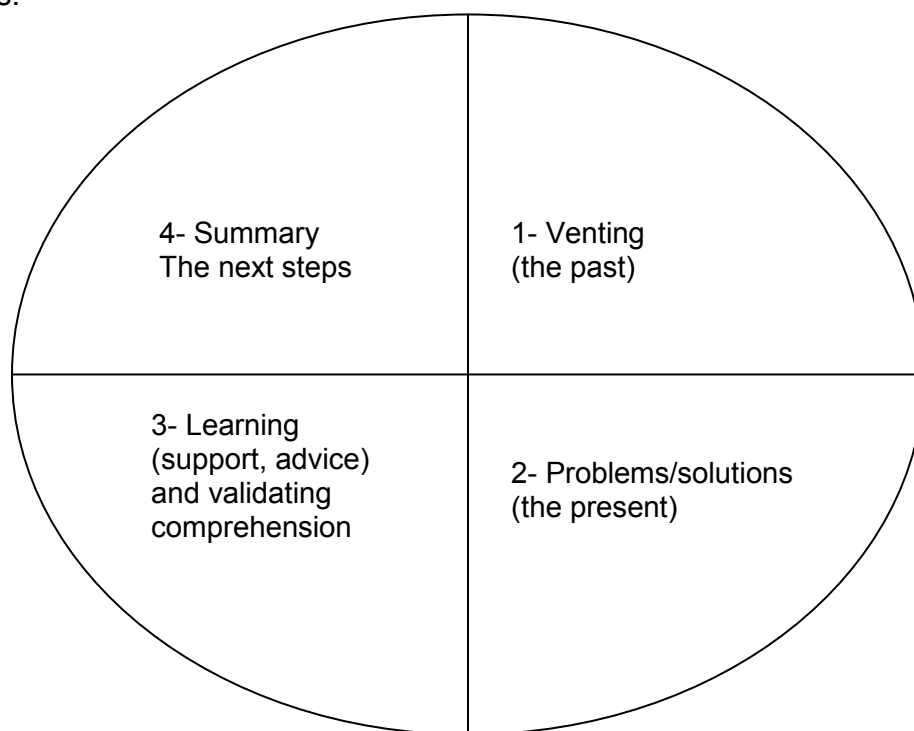
- Clearly set out the expectations of each party at the beginning of the semester and repeat them as needed (time allocated for meetings, content of meetings, respect, attitude in class, etc.).

Solving a problem situation involving students with PDD

Intervention model for persons with AS

By Brigitte Harrisson

Regardless of the length of the meeting, time should be allocated equally among these four phases:



- Treat students with AS the same as other students and expect the same of them, while taking into account their difficulties.
- Openly discuss their experience and difficulties to foster positive exchanges that can lead to truly helpful solutions. Use the diagram above for problem solving.
- Respect students' rate of progress and their ability to adapt slowly to new situations.

- See if students with AS feel included when they hear terms like “everyone” or “the class.” At times, they do not react simply because they do not believe the message is meant for them.

Technical support

- Re-evaluate their level of functioning as needed.
- Establish with them realistic objectives and short-term priorities.
- Through encouragement and personal support, promote the pursuit of their academic efforts.
- Carry out multi-sensory activities by making associations between written symbols and spoken language.
- Be sure to have attracted and caught their attention before giving instructions. When needed, follow a verbal request with a demonstration using gestures or a written message.
- Help students make connections and associations to make memorization easier (visual component).
- Try to link new learning to previously acquired knowledge. Explain how the new knowledge will be useful.
- Progress from the most basic to the more complex, from concrete to abstract, and from one element to many.
- Ask students to use an agenda or a journal. The Special Needs Services resource person will show them how to use it. Ask students how they plan on making use of it.
- Encourage students to express themselves through words or another means. Do not interrupt them and give them time to finish what they want to communicate. Do not pretend to understand if you did not. This will lead to frustration and a tendency to withdraw.
- Give important information in a clear manner. For example, cancellation of a class, details of an assignment, etc. should be communicated in writing or written on the board, preferably in advance.
- Repeat and emphasize important information and instructions.
- Allow students to use various appropriate technical devices, such as a variable speed recorder, laptop computer, etc.
- Ask students what would be helpful before attempting to find a solution, which may not be suitable.

CONCLUSION

Understanding students with AS means, first and foremost, grasping the complex nature of the relationship between them and their environment.

We hope this brochure has helped you gain insight into the multi-faceted and sometimes difficult reality of students with AS and that the information it contains will guide and facilitate the assistance you will provide them. We are convinced that the most important factor in the successful integration of these students is the compassion shown by their teachers.

If your job entails contact with students with AS and you have identified certain needs as a result of this interaction, please do not hesitate to use our services.

Thank you. We look forward to working with you.

Hélène Savard
For the Special Needs Services Team
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