Breaking down barriers to learning

Practical strategies for achieving successful transition for students with Autism and Asperger Syndrome
Acknowledgments

This booklet is a result of a partnership project funded by the DfES. The organisations involved are:

- The National Autistic Society
- Surrey County Council’s Children’s Service
- Partnership with Parents
- South East Region SEN Partnership.

The aim of the project was to address the social and curriculum related difficulties faced by pupils with Asperger Syndrome during the period of transition from primary to secondary mainstream education.

Throughout the project we worked with 16 students who had a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome and a statement of special educational needs. We also worked with staff in the schools and parents.

Our thanks go to all of the students and their parents for everything they taught us about Asperger Syndrome. Thanks also to Ruth Buchan and Ronwen Smith, the Headteachers of Freemantles and Linden Bridge Schools, who agreed at the outset to release the ASD Outreach Teachers to participate in the project.

Diana Ennis & Cath Manns
June 2004
**Introduction**

Asperger Syndrome is a form of autism, a disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to others. It shares the key areas of difficulty that make up what is called the Triad of Impairments. Approximately one in 200 pupils has an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Most of these are educated in mainstream schools.

“In whatever area of education you work there is one thing of which you can be sure – in the future you will be providing for more children with autism”

Barry Carpenter – Equals Conference November 2000

We can describe the difficulties associated with Asperger Syndrome as the Triad of Impairments.
Asperger Syndrome – the Triad of Impairments

In addition to the core impairments of the triad, many students with Asperger Syndrome will have difficulties with fine and gross motor co-ordination and organisational skills. They can also be affected by underlying fears and phobias, often (but not always) related to sensory sensitivities. These can have a significant effect on their behaviour, and the impact of fears and phobias on daily life should not be underestimated.

Social and emotional
Difficulties with:
- Friendships
- Managing unstructured parts of the day
- Working co-operatively

Language and communication
Difficulty processing and retaining verbal information
Difficulty understanding:
- Jokes and sarcasm
- Social use of language
- Literal interpretation
- Body language, facial expression and gesture

Flexibility of thought (imagination)
Difficulty with:
- Coping with changes in routine
- Empathy
- Generalisation
Planning for transition

It is recognised that careful planning between the primary and secondary school is essential to ensure that the transition is as successful as possible. The following guidelines were collected during the project, and are suggested as good practice when planning to meet the needs of students with Asperger Syndrome during transition.

‘Throughout my life I’ve been reprimanded by teachers and students alike for being weird, uncooperative, stupid, weak, forgetful, slow – the list is endless… With the right teachers an Asperger student can flourish – I’m proof of that. OK, so I may not be the most intellectually gifted person on the planet, or have many qualifications, but I began school from below rock bottom. Those teachers provided a ladder for me to get through the manhole and to climb up into the average bracket… I sincerely hope I’m not the only Asperger student who was lucky like this – I really, really do.’

Nita Jackson ‘Standing Down Falling Up’

Primary school

Year 5

· Incorporate into the Individual Education Plan targets to address potential difficulties with transition.

· Consider staffing issues – has the student had the same Teaching Assistant for some time? If so, planning should start now for increased independence and experience of relating to different adults.

Year 6

· A transition meeting scheduled for early in the summer term to share information and plan strategies to address areas of concern. Parents, outside agencies and the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) of the primary and secondary school need to be invited.

· Arrangements should be made for information provided by all present at the transition meeting to be communicated to all staff within the secondary school. A suggested format for circulating this information can be found on page 22.

· Arrange extra visits in addition to those provided as standard induction. A Teaching Assistant could accompany, providing the secondary school agree. For some students, visiting the building after school hours may be helpful.
Secondary school

- Provide a visual guide of the school in booklet form to include photographs of key staff (e.g., form tutor, SENCo, headteacher, head of year, office staff) and areas in the secondary school, e.g., dining hall, toilets, office, tutor room.
- Provide a map of the school with key places highlighted.
- Plan how the student will be supported during unstructured times. Some students may need adult support to transfer from lesson to lesson for the first few weeks. Write down these arrangements so that the student will have a copy for reference.
- When there is to be a designated Teaching Assistant (TA), provide opportunities for them to observe or work with the pupil in the primary setting during the summer term.
- A video guide of the school for the student’s reference over the summer holiday would be very helpful. If not already available it could be produced by the media studies students as a project*.

Year 7

- Provide additional information about how to read the timetable, including a written explanation of abbreviations. Some students will benefit from colour coding subject areas for easy reference.
- Ensure all adults working with the student are aware of their specific difficulties, and the strategies implemented to date (see suggested format on page 22). It is important that school policy is to make all staff aware exactly where such student profiles (including all SEN and other needs details) are kept.
- A class seating plan will help reduce the student’s anxiety and address their need for routine.
- Consider whether it is appropriate to inform the peer group about Asperger Syndrome. This will depend on the student’s awareness of their diagnosis. Parental and student consent must then be sought.
- Additional adult support may be necessary during the first few weeks for key times, such as moving between lessons, using the canteen, break times etc. This will enable the student to become familiar with the new environment and will reduce their anxiety.
- Be aware that using the school toilets can be a cause of anxiety, e.g., assuming an alternative toilet cannot be used when the designated one is out of action, or going to the toilet when others are present. The student will not necessarily communicate this to an adult and therefore go all day without using the toilet.

*Parental permission will need to be sought for any student appearing in a video.
Our experience shows that transition is most successful where there is good communication between parents and school. Parents usually have experience of successful strategies that have helped their children in the past. Their unique knowledge is a valuable resource.

Some successful examples of ways of sharing with parents include:

- Having a named adult for the student to approach when in difficulty. When appropriate this information should be shared with other members of staff. Parents can communicate with this adult via email or contact book.
- A book where the student can record daily personal worries and incidents (eg. bullying, friendships, likes and dislikes) would give instant feedback to SENCo and staff.
- Parents liaising directly with SENCo through email, contact book or telephone.
- Regular planned meetings with the SENCo during the first term to discuss progress and concerns.

In the primary school, parents are generally used to daily contact with staff, and will need time to adjust to the greater independence expected at secondary school.
Social

The social use of language and the ability to interact appropriately are the main areas of difficulty. Appropriate social skills, including modelling the language needed to interact successfully will need to be specifically taught for each new situation. Children with Asperger Syndrome do not pick up social skills incidentally.

### Difficulty

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<th>Difficulty</th>
<th>Suggested strategies</th>
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<td>Appearing rude, making inappropriate comments, interrupting or speaking inappropriately to staff and peers</td>
<td>· A short written explanation in the form of a social story™, including a conversation script about appropriate ways to speak to others will increase social understanding. Students with ASD are visual learners and will respond more positively to oral information if it is supported by the written word or drawings.</td>
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| Unstructured times and crowded areas – break and lunch, or arriving at and leaving school | · A designated quiet place for break and lunch times (eg. student support room).  
· Enter or leave school slightly before or after the other students.  
· Direct the student to clubs at lunchtimes if possible.  
· A help card that can be given to an adult, supported by a written explanation about what to do if they get into difficulties at unstructured times. |
| Working with a partner or cooperatively in a group | · Provide written rules for working cooperatively within a group and go through them at the beginning of the activity.  
· Role play and social stories.™  
· Alert the student at the beginning of the lesson if there will be group work involved or not. If there is to be group work, tell them who their partner or group will be.  
· Choose the partner/rest of the group sympathetically. |
| Team games | · Rules, individual roles and outcomes of the game all need to be specifically taught.  
· Explanations supported by drawings.  
· Role play/modelling by adults or peers.  
· Social stories.™ |
| Winning and losing | |
| Personal space | · Rules regarding personal space need to be specifically taught.  
· Clearly define the student’s work area within the classroom. |
| Being too close to others or needing a large area of personal space themselves | |

*Social stories were developed by Carol Gray. Further details and an example can be found on pages 18 and 19.*
Communication

Students with Asperger Syndrome will have difficulty processing and retaining oral information, even if they have good oral skills themselves. As a general rule, keep your instructions short and simple. When speaking individually, first gain the student’s attention by using his/her name, but remember that eye contact can be intimidating and therefore do not always insist on it.

Many students find it difficult to interpret facial expression and process oral language at the same time. This is particularly true when students with Asperger Syndrome are anxious.

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| Processing and following instructions and information given to the whole class | · Use student’s name to refocus their attention when they are losing concentration.  
· Check understanding and when necessary, repeat instructions one to one. Try to use the same words.  
· Allow extra time for processing and try to speak more slowly.  
· List key instructions on an individual whiteboard or laminated paper. The student can then check off each step as they complete it (see page 19).  
· On the large whiteboard use written words or pictures to accompany oral information wherever possible. |
| Answering open-ended questions | · Structure the questions to reduce choices. |
| Reluctant to ask for help | · Provide a help card as a visual reminder to approach an adult when assistance is required. |
| Literal interpretation that can lead to misunderstandings and confusion | · Explain the use of irony, sarcasm, figurative language, rhetorical questions, idioms etc. When discussing it with the whole class, this can be a useful learning experience for the student, but should be avoided when speaking to them individually. |
Organisation

Some students are meticulously organised, while others have great difficulty in this area. Visual prompts will help students to organise themselves and their equipment independently. Some will need longer to organise themselves at the beginning and ending of lessons.

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<td>Having the appropriate equipment for each lesson</td>
<td>· Itemised list of equipment for different subjects.</td>
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<td>· Keeping two sets of stationery – one for home and one for school.</td>
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<td>· Colour coding books for each subject.</td>
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<td>· Storing materials and books for different subjects in transparent zip folders.</td>
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<td>· Some students may need a designated area in their form room or student support room to store their belongings rather than a locker to begin with.</td>
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<td>Starting and setting out work (an example can be found on page 19)</td>
<td>· Break down the task into achievable steps.</td>
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<td>· A template or model to show how the page should be laid out.</td>
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<td>· Show a clear indication of start and finish, how much work is to be completed and what to do next.</td>
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<td>Coordinating the thinking of content, spelling and handwriting simultaneously</td>
<td>· Use adult support to scribe the student’s thoughts for them to copy.</td>
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<td>· Use a laptop or computer if available.</td>
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Many students with Asperger Syndrome may have particular difficulties with co-ordination and therefore will find sports lessons particularly difficult.
Students with Asperger Syndrome often have sensory processing difficulties. Noise, crowded places and being in close proximity to others may cause extreme anxiety. Certain smells and textures can also be overwhelming.

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</table>
| Transition between one lesson and another due to the crowded and noisy corridors | • For the first few weeks of term, make the transition a few minutes before the end of the lesson to avoid the busiest times.  
  • Provide a ‘help’ card that can be handed to a member of staff should difficulties arise at this time.                  |
| Leaving lessons without permission                                          | • Provide a ‘time out’ card (with clear rules regarding its use) to enable the student to leave the lesson for a short time to reduce their anxiety levels. |
| Some students reach sensory overload due to classroom noise, fear of failure, lack of understanding of work etc             |                                                                                      |
| Managing to wait in the playground before school begins                    | • Provide a designated area where the student can wait until school begins. This time could be used to check the timetable, note any changes and organise equipment. |
| Refusing to go into certain rooms such as Science lab, art room or Design Technology room                                | • Be aware that this may be due to smells, such as chemicals, paint or cooking, in these rooms. Consider seating the student near a door or window. |
Bullying

Due to their difficulties with social understanding and literal interpretation, students with Asperger Syndrome often have difficulties differentiating between teasing and bullying, and believe all incidents to be of equal severity.

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<td>Student is not able to determine severity of incidents, and reports every minor event Peers often interpret this behaviour as ‘telling tales'</td>
<td>· Using a scale can be a useful visual way of teaching what incidents should be reported. On a scale from 1 to 10 incidents are rated according to their severity. Those above an agreed point should be reported in line with the school’s bullying policy. See example on page 21.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A student over-reacts to every minor incident They may also find it hard to distinguish between accidental physical contact and deliberate actions</td>
<td>· Explaining the incident through comic strip cartoon characters to include the thoughts of the others involved can help to increase understanding. A simple drawing using pin men will be sufficient.</td>
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Behaviour – the Iceberg Analysis

Challenging behaviours are usually caused by anxiety that occurs as a result of an underlying difficulty related to the triad of impairment. Even physically aggressive behaviour, when analysed, usually serves a purpose rather than being deliberately manipulative.

The following is a useful way to identify and analyse behaviour. This information will help determine strategies to encourage positive change.

Example of an Iceberg Analysis*

*The Iceberg metaphor is from Division TEACCH – Schopler 1995
**Behaviour strategies**

<table>
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<tr>
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| Running away and not coming back when called                               | · Use a social story™ to explain the social rules.  
· Providing a ‘safe haven’ where the student can go if they are not able to manage.                                                                                                                                  |
| Inability to get started on work or appearing to be absorbed in their own world | · Divide the task into achievable parts and list on a white board. The student can then cross off each step as they complete it.  
· Reward finished work with a special interest activity.  
· Avoid open-ended questions and be directive.                                                                                                                                 |
| Calling out and making inappropriate noises and remarks                      | · Social story™ explaining behaviour expectations in class.                                                                                                                                                            |
| Frustration                                                                  | · Strategies will depend on determining the trigger for the behaviour (see example – Iceberg Analysis). However, access to a ‘safe haven’ will help to minimise disruption to the lesson. |
| Extreme distress                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Fears and phobias                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| These will often result in angry outbursts and overreaction to seemingly trivial incidents |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Frustration                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Extreme distress                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Fears and phobias                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| These will often result in angry outbursts and overreaction to seemingly trivial incidents |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Obsessive behaviour                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| This behaviour is usually anxiety driven and trying to stop it altogether will cause a new obsession to emerge                                                                                                           |
| Preventing all access to a special interest will often result in deterioration of behaviour | · Work with the obsession wherever possible. Provide clear visual information to show when, where and for how long it is acceptable.                                                                       |
**Homework**

Students will often have difficulty starting and completing homework when they do not understand the instructions or the purpose of the work set. This may be interpreted as deliberate refusal. It is essential to explain visually why homework is important. The ability to transfer skills from school to home can also be a problem.

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty starting and completing homework</td>
<td>· A social story™ to explain why homework needs to be done.</td>
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<td>· More detailed instructions may be necessary, particularly when it is an open-ended task.</td>
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<td>· To establish the homework routine, consider reducing the amount of work expected, particularly in the first few weeks.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not getting information into the homework diary</td>
<td>· When possible, write up homework on the whiteboard at the beginning of the lesson rather than the end.</td>
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<td>· TA or peer to check that the homework is entered correctly, including when, where and to whom it should be given when finished.</td>
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<td>· Some schools enter homework details on their website.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not completing homework correctly</td>
<td>· Be aware of difficulties with literal interpretation. Some students when asked to ‘find out about’ a topic will not naturally assume that they have to record the information. An instruction in the homework diary such as ‘copy out the questions’ may also be taken literally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organising their own time, eg. spending too long on homework in order to get it finished or being unable to pace themselves for long-term projects</td>
<td>· As students with Asperger Syndrome often have poor forward planning skills, long-term homework may need to be structured into smaller steps.</td>
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<td>· Ensure that the student understands that they only have to work for the given amount of time on homework. It is important to make it clear that it is not always necessary to finish the task, provided the required amount of time has been spent on it.</td>
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<td>· Problems with flexibility of thought mean that students will find it hard to accept if homework is not given on the correct day.</td>
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*see page 18 to find out where to get more information about social stories.*
Resources and further information

The National Autistic Society  www.nas.org.uk

- Asperger Syndrome: a guide for parents and professionals
  Tony Attwood
  ISBN 1 853025 77 1

- Addressing the challenging behaviour of children with high functioning autism/AS in the classroom: a guide for teachers and parents
  Rebecca Moyes
  ISBN 1 84310 719 8

- Freaks, geeks and Asperger Syndrome
  Luke Jackson
  ISBN 1 84310 098 3

- Standing Down, Falling Up
  Nita Jackson
  ISBN 1 873942 98 2

- Access and Inclusion for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders
  ‘Let Me In’
  Matthew Hesmondhalgh & Christine Breakey
  ISBN 1 85302 986 6

Social Stories  www.thegraycenter.org

- Writing and Developing Social Stories
  Caroline Smith
  ISBN 0 86388 432 6
Examples

Starting and setting out work

English

☐ Listen to the teacher for approximately 20 minutes

☐ Write date

☐ Write title

☐ Answer questions 1 & 2

☐ Answer questions 3 & 4

☐ Answer questions 5 & 6

☐ Read through and check work

☐ Finish

Sample social story™

When people are talking…

- Sometimes I want to talk to adults when they are having a conversation.
- I can do this by saying ‘excuse me’ and waiting.
- If the adults ask me to wait until they have finished, I will try to wait quietly until they tell me it is my turn to speak.
- I will try not to interrupt when people are already having a conversation.
- Everyone will be pleased with me if I can remember to do this.
The iceberg metaphor is from Division TEACCH (Schopler, 1995)

*Iceberg Analysis* master

- Specific behaviour
- Underlying impairments
Guidelines for reporting incidents in school

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10
Student profile

Name

Photograph

General information

Strengths

Difficulties

Strategies that may help