

ASPERGER SYNDROME

Pocketbook



By Ronnie Young

Cartoons:
Phil Hailstone

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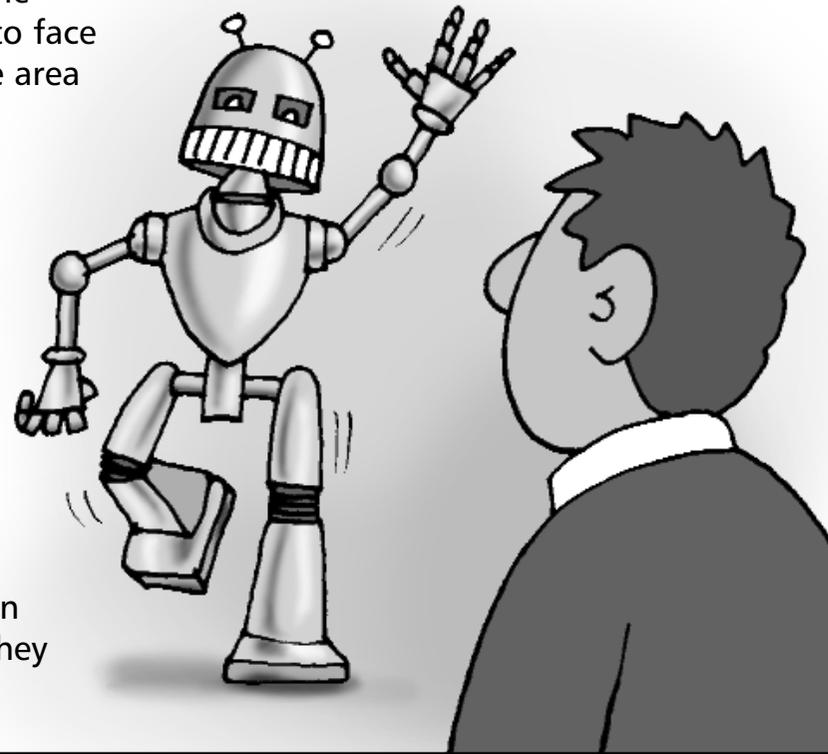
People interactions



Of all the challenges people with Asperger syndrome have to face, **social interaction** is probably the greatest. Of all the challenges teachers have to face with an Asperger pupil in the class, this is the area that causes the most problems.

People with Asperger syndrome see other people as machines. Every machine works differently from every other machine and none has a manual.

To complicate matters, each machine tends to operate differently from the way it worked a few minutes ago and how it will work in a few minutes time. This is why it is so important for you to **be consistent** when working with your Asperger pupils. Only when they have figured out how you operate can they actually work with you.



Inappropriate behaviour



The fact that the rules governing the behaviour of one machine do not necessarily apply to all the others is often what lies behind an Asperger pupil's **socially and emotionally inappropriate** behaviour.

If one teacher thinks it's fine for students to talk during activities, or is comfortable with them texting under the table, for example, it is bewildering – and sometimes distressing – for your Asperger pupil when other teachers have different (often unvoiced) expectations.

Furthermore, as you know, circumstances alter cases. Why is it OK to say things in a drama lesson or read out loud from a work of literature that you can't normally do or say in the classroom? Why is the rule never to run in a corridor when teachers do it in an emergency?

School is full of inconsistencies. The unwritten rules have to be explained to pupils with Asperger and contingencies put in place for when the rule does not apply.

Two unwritten codes of conduct

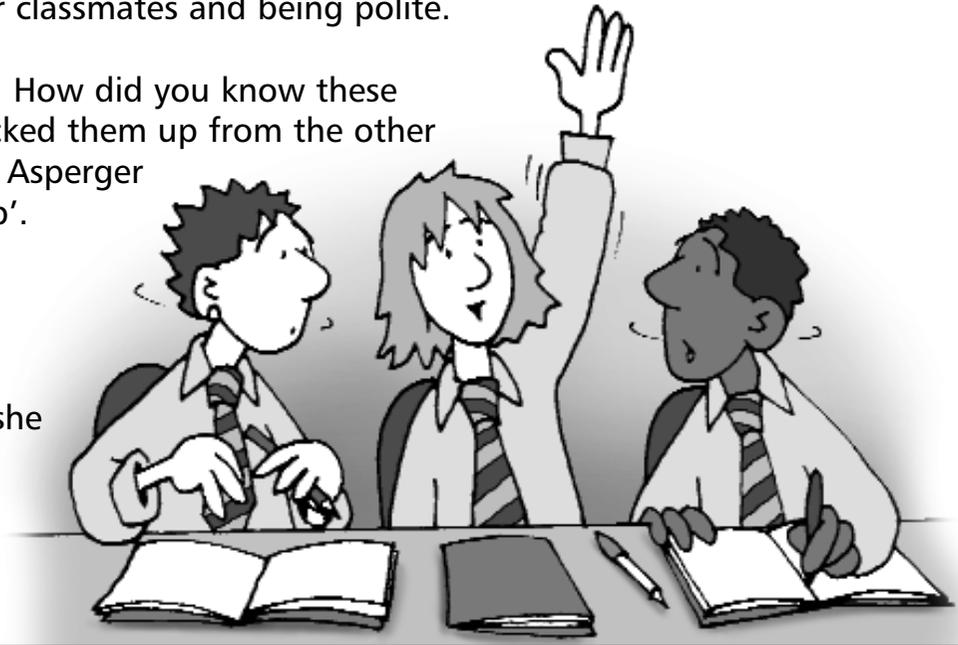


The lack of voiced expectations has all kinds of repercussions for pupils with Asperger syndrome because, in fact, there are **two** unwritten codes of social conduct in school. The first is the one the teachers know and assume their students know, ie the one about how to behave. It includes sharing, taking turns, lining up in the playground, not telling tales on your classmates and being polite.

Think back to your own school days. How did you know these things? My guess is that you just picked them up from the other children. Unfortunately, people with Asperger syndrome do not just 'pick things up'.

Example 1.

When the teacher went out of the classroom for a few minutes, she warned the class not to talk. When she came back she asked '*Did anyone talk?*' Sarah put her hand up and reeled off a list of the guilty parties.



The first unwritten code – two more examples



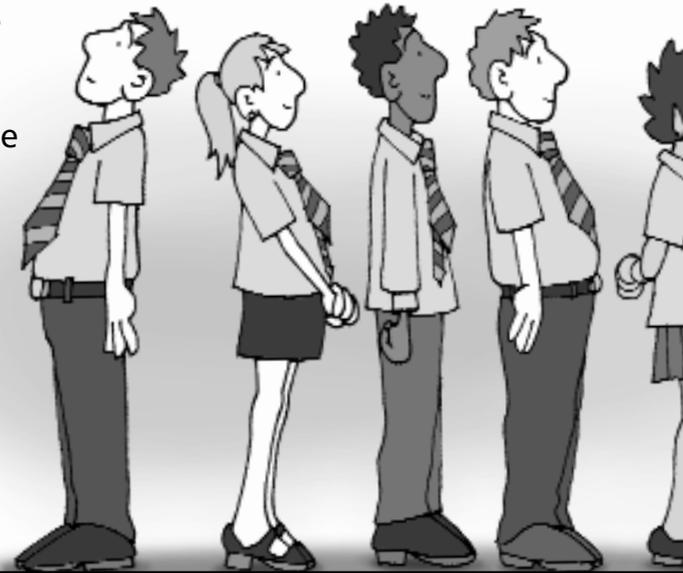
Example 2.

At the beginning of the swimming lesson, Andrew had got undressed before realising his mum had forgotten to pack his trunks. He panicked because he knew he would be in trouble and did not know what to do – so he rushed out to ask his teacher, completely oblivious to the fact that he was naked.

Example 3.

Zac's class was told to line up in the playground. He knew what a line was, but had no idea where he was supposed to stand in it – so he placed himself at the front of it after the line had formed.

Just as they see people as machines, pupils with Asperger operate as machines. Everything that you want them to do, you have to tell them explicitly – a form of manual programming, if you like. Input the rule, wind them up and off they go.



The second unwritten code



The second unwritten code is the one the pupils share. It may be to do with the latest street language; or the correct designer labels; or which are the coolest bands or cartoon characters; or even which football team to support.

What is certain is that whilst the other kids will have picked up what is OK and what isn't, no-one will have thought to tell your Asperger student, especially if the pupil has few friends in the first place. This means s/he will be even more isolated, maybe even a figure of fun, out of step with the others.



Cracking the code – strategy



Encourage discussion about what is 'in' and what is 'out'. PHSE lessons, circle time and tutor group sessions are ideal for this. Discuss with all your pupils the differences between popular, transient culture and traditions and explain why, for example, football supporters are partisan. This will stand them in good stead for their general curriculum – English, history or geography, for example, where it is good to be able to put forward a case and to look at differences.

Pupils with Asperger will have their own views, though. They may think the local football team is rubbish and this can cause some problems – so teach how to argue and discuss. The further up the school you go, the more this skill is necessary.

As a teacher, you may welcome the idea of a student who is skilled in argument and rhetoric, but a word of warning: your student with Asperger syndrome, being totally logical, will always win an argument. Battles of wills are always to be avoided.

Following ‘the rules’



Once Asperger pupils learn and understand ‘the rules’, life should get easier. After all, planet Asperger is governed by rules. As long as your pupils know what they should be doing at any given time, they will feel secure and confident.

Problems can arise, though, if Asperger pupils see other pupils breaking the rules and getting away with it. You can lessen Asperger stress (and improve behaviour generally) by checking your whole school behaviour management policy:

- Is what is OK and what is not OK clear and unambiguous?
- Are the sanctions for inappropriate behaviour clear?
- Are they applied consistently no matter who the student and who the teacher?

You need to be able to answer ‘yes’ to all of the above.

About the author



Ronnie Young



Ronnie Young has been a teacher all her working life, in settings as diverse as schools, pupil referral units, offender institutions and further education. She is now a consultant and trainer specialising in behaviour management and neuro-diversity, most notably autistic spectrum disorder. She is a practising Ofsted inspector in both mainstream and specialist education.

Her son was not identified as having Asperger syndrome until he was 18, so Ronnie understands at first hand the difficulties people with the condition experience in school. She knows the difference a proper diagnosis and appropriate support can make. Ronnie works for The National Autistic Society as a trainer and consultant and is a regular contributor to national conferences. She spends much of her time training and supporting staff in schools and colleges here and in the US. She is happy to be contacted by any organisation seeking tailor-made training: ronnie.young@blueyonder.co.uk