

Getting Inside the Heads of Students With Asperger Syndrome

In 1997, Dan Coulter's 14-year-old son Drew was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome (AS). Dan, himself, was diagnosed in 2009. From years of challenges—and triumphs—Dan Coulter has first-hand knowledge of what it's like to have Asperger's, and believes teachers are in a unique position to help AS kids break through the walls that hide their talent and potential.

by Dan Coulter

posted Feb 09, 2011



Drew and Dan at the U.S. Space Camp in Huntsville, AL, where Drew got the highest mission score in his group on his first try on the simulated space shuttle.

Photo courtesy of Dan Coulter

Understanding what's going on inside a student's head is gold for a teacher. I can help you see from the perspective of a child with Asperger Syndrome or "AS." I have AS and so does my son, Drew.

Early in elementary school, I dutifully passed my spelling test to another student. The teacher called out the answers and each student graded his neighbor's paper. When I got my test back, the little girl next to me had drawn a line across a "u" to make it an "a" so she could mark an answer wrong.

I was stunned. How could anyone do that? Would the teacher believe me if I told her? I sat frozen in my seat and said nothing.

I understand now that this was one of the ways Asperger Syndrome can affect children. They can be overwhelmed by emotional situations. Some become agitated. I froze. It took me years to overcome that reaction.

The atypical way Asperger-influenced brains work can cause teachers to misinterpret a child's intent.

More and more progressive school systems have programs to help teachers understand students with Asperger Syndrome and other Autism Spectrum Disorders. Others are leaving teachers to learn on their own. Mainstream classroom teachers are seeing more students with AS than other forms of autism, because kids with AS tend to have normal to superior intelligence and be placed with typical peers. They often emerge as some of the brightest kids in a class, coming up with innovative solutions others don't see.

But the atypical way Asperger-influenced brains work can cause teachers to misinterpret a child's intent. Long before his AS diagnosis at age 14, Drew demonstrated an exceptional memory in schoolwork. He'd learn his assigned lessons and more, but when the teacher called on him, he'd try to tell everything he knew. He was especially animated when he got to talk about one of his special interests, Greek mythology. Sometimes he'd blurt out an answer without being called on.

It can be like everyone else is speaking in secret code. You hear and think you understand, but people are upset by your attempts to respond.

It was easy to assume that he was being willfully disrespectful, but such Asperger-generated impulses are very hard to control. People with AS often have to work to learn social skills that others pick up by observing. It can be like everyone else is speaking in secret code. You hear and think you understand, but people are upset by your attempts to respond. So you get scolded by teachers and teased or ignored by classmates. When you try to make conversation, you drive away potential friends by lecturing when you should be listening. You're desperately using the only tools you know.

My wife and I started producing videos about Asperger Syndrome after Drew was diagnosed. We found his school situation improved dramatically when teachers and classmates were shown how Asperger Syndrome affected Drew and others.



Drew, pre-diagnosis, at a charity walk in Birmingham, Alabama.

Photo courtesy of Dan Coulter

Asperger Syndrome offers a smorgasbord of symptoms in different combinations too numerous to list in detail here. It's helpful to meet with a student's parents, learn how AS affects that student, and use what you learn to work out your strategies.

"Drew's teachers effectively used a strategy I call "teaching forward." You identify a challenging behavior and have the student practice replacing it with a desired behavior. Get the student's parents in on the practice. Drew didn't react well to having his behaviors corrected and criticized in

class. It could make him tune out, and repeat the mistake later. But having Drew think about a desired behavior and practice it ahead of time made it more likely he could remember in class. A teacher and student also can work out private cues to correct a behavior without interrupting the class. If a student's answer is too long, you can walk over and stand in front of his desk, signaling him to stop talking.

A teacher and student also can work out private cues to correct a behavior without interrupting the class.

Often special instruction outside of class is helpful. Just about every student with AS will benefit from some form of social skills training that helps him "rewire" his brain.

As you can imagine, if students with Asperger Syndrome don't learn to manage challenging tendencies in school, after graduation they have tremendous difficulty finding and keeping a job and maintaining relationships.

Teachers are in a unique position to help them break through the wall that hides their talent and potential. Thanks in no small part to great teachers, Drew has graduated from college, is working, owns his own condo, and has a circle of friends.



Drew meets with his boss at the library. He also takes on many different roles at Coulter Video and is currently writing a book.

Photo courtesy of Dan Coulter

I wasn't diagnosed until 2009. My teachers never knew I had Asperger Syndrome. But they believed in me and helped me overcome my Asperger tendencies, even without a label. I've had a great career in broadcasting and public relations and now run my own business with a wife I adore. We have two terrific adult children.

Drew recently observed to his mom, "Teachers were the best thing about school." They made the effort to see things as he saw them. If you do the same, you could be the teacher who gives a student with Asperger Syndrome what he absolutely needs to succeed.



Six Asperger Tips for Teachers

1. Discover the strengths of a student with Asperger Syndrome and incorporate them into his class work as motivation. If he loves astronomy, you could give him a math project about the distances between planets. A student with a special interest in geography might be allowed to teach part of a lesson that involves geography.
2. Take active steps to prevent bullying. Students with Asperger Syndrome tend to be easy targets and are frequently teased or harassed.
3. Offer clear instructions and assignments and check periodically to ensure a student with Asperger Syndrome understands them. Students with AS tend to take things literally, have difficulty with implied meanings, and have difficulty asking for help.
4. Establish a safe place and a safe person (such as a counselor) that a student can seek out to calm himself if he gets overwrought.
5. Accommodate a student's sensitivities. Some people with Asperger Syndrome are hyper-sensitive to touch or bright lights or loud noises. Take this into account in classroom seating and activities.
6. Help your student transition to the outside world. In everything you do, keep in mind how it will help him succeed on his own after graduation.

YES! ARCHIVE

- **"The Tough Questions"**

In this video, a boy with Asperger's interviews his mother about the challenges—and joys—of raising him.

- **People We Love: Lorraine Kerwood**

Diagnosed with autism in her youth, Kerwood taught herself how to fix computers in college.

- **Hands-On Research: The Science of Touch**

A study has found that when teachers pat students in a friendly way, those students are three times as likely to speak up in class.



Dan Coulter wrote this article for YES! Magazine, a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas with practical actions. Dan and his wife Julie, founders of Coulter Video, produce DVDs about autism, and present at autism conferences across the country. Dan is a former

broadcaster and public relations executive. He is the father of two grown children, and frequently writes about his family's experiences.

Visit Coulter Video for articles, links, DVDs, and more on understanding Asperger Syndrome and autism.