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Five Survival Strategies To Help Children With Asperger's Syndrome Overcome *Inertia*

The Asperger's (AS) child may have a powerful predisposition to *inertia* especially when he is stressed or tired. This profound lack of energy or ability to initiate action is seen in the child's school, home, and social life.

- Inertia may prevent the AS child from being able to get out the door to school. If his parents do get him to school he freezes up when he has to make social contact with other kids sitting at a table in the lunchroom. He is stuck in the corner of the room and has to be gently guided out by a teacher. Feeling totally overwhelmed, he ends up staring straight ahead and cannot remember what he's supposed to do next. When his teacher addresses him he grunts out a reply but does not return to his work. He may have a very difficult time telling his teachers what he needs and he tends to be passive in the face of their criticism. He cringes at his PE teacher's verbal abuse and does not report it. In a social setting, he is rarely the first one to initiate a social contact and needs to see someone else doing it first.
- Inertia may interfere with the performance of ordinary tasks at home. One of my teenage AS clients has a great enjoyment of cooking, but he has great difficulty maintaining the sense of flow and sequences required to put together a recipe. He often totally "spaces out." At these times, he told me, his body slows almost to stopping and he will stare at the recipe as if he is waiting for it to somehow come to him.
- One Asperger's boy I worked with was badly beaten up by several teenage muggers at a bus stop at night because, though he was proficient in Karate, he was not able to initiate the attack and carry it through in a setting different from where he was trained. "Go ahead. You initiate," he said to one of his muggers who proceeded to beat the stuffing out of him. It did not occur to him that the only way he could prevail in the situation was to close in and attack aggressively once it was clear that he was gravely threatened. And it did not occur to him that he was not encountering the other kids in the safety of his dojo, under the supervision of his teacher. His inability to initiate action was complicated by his inability to have a practical or adaptive response to the kids threatening him.

This lack of ability to initiate activity probably relates to the fact that Asperger's kids may be deeply *apraxic* when it comes to affective, cognitive, and behavioral tasks. That is they do not automatically visualize what movements look like, what conversation with others might sound like, or generally what will happen in the future. Having no way of seeing the potential future, the child cannot plan his present action and so does nothing. Normal people continually feed themselves flashes of images of the next movement a split second before the movement happens. The child with Asperger's Syndrome may lack this awareness. As a result he is slowed in movement to the point of not moving at all.

He does not know why he cannot accomplish things and will seem bewildered when you ask him about it. Because of his learning differences everything in his life is frustrating to him and he is getting nothing but failure experience.

Five survival strategies for overcoming inertia.

This predilection for inertia is not a sentence of permanent institutionalization for the child but is an indication that his learning curve is different from normal children. For example, Asperger's children may become very proficient in the martial arts, but they usually have to be shown every move that is possible and have to physically rehearse every move. (Including their response to situations on the street—training which would have helped the child described above.) To learn how to play baseball, the child has to be taken physically through each position on the field and be coached through the movements of the player of that position much the way you would coach someone who is learning a dance. Once the child learns the feel of a movement, he may become splendid at its enactment, but the training process can take a long time.

Here are five survival strategies to help the Asperger's child realize his gifts and reduce the challenges posed by his attentional differences.

1. *Consult* with him to find ways to reduce the stress that he experiences. Talk to him about what is going on at school or on the job. Asperger's children tend to be very proud. If they cannot follow along in a class (because of the wrong teaching methods), they may attempt to resolve the issue by just refusing to get on the bus in the morning. It's easier to say "Hell no I won't go," then to say "I feel stupid not being able to do the work. Help me!" If they cannot keep up the pace in a job that requires tight teamwork, they are apt to throw down their apron and leave in a fit of anger and frustration.
2. *Use a prearranged touch prompt.* In the example above of the boy who had the debilitating "space outs" while cooking, I suggested that his parents help him keep on track by touching him firmly on the shoulder (a place where he could tolerate strong touch) while suggesting the next step he needs to accomplish in the recipe. A good prompt should provide just the right amount of verbal and tactile stimulation along with a clear and concrete suggestion for the next step stated in visual terms: "O.K. Stephen, looks like you need to open the recipe box and look up the card for oatmeal cookies."
3. *Lead from behind.* To reduce inertia you have to get in the habit of following *behind* the child somewhat. You go at his speed. If he stops, you stop and get into a consulting role with him. "Jeremy, you're doing great work getting out the door. You looking for something right now?" Curb your own anger, take a breath, and bridge to his issue. Give him the time that he needs.
4. *Help him calm by pacing his breathing.* If he freezes up and can't get out the door to take the bus over to his friend's house for a birthday party, ask him what you can do to help. If he does not answer, assume that he is experiencing anxiety, and that though he seems serene and very still on the outside, his mind is racing at break-neck speed on the inside. Just sit next to him calmly and let your relaxed pace of breathing relax his. Tell him whatever you think he needs to hear to be more relaxed and then get back to helping him

to the next step when he is in a better place to hear.

5. *Teach him binary decision-making.* One of the most powerful causes for inertia is the feeling of the Asperger's child that some task is so vast and complex that he can't possibly accomplish it. To overcome this barrier, teach him how to factor any problem into *two* decisions. He makes one of those decisions and then factors the next part of the issue into two more decisions, and makes one of these decisions until the job is done.

If you want to get him to clean up his room, have him first make two piles. One pile is for things that stay. One pile is for throwaways. When he's down to the pile for things that stay, divide it into one pile for clothes and one pile for electronic parts. When this is done, take each pile in turn. In the electronic parts pile, put all parts that pertain to current projects on one shelf and all parts from past projects on another, and so forth. He needs a very concrete way to work from the whole to the parts. It's easier to get going on things if he deliberately uses the "yes/no," "zero/one," language of binary code to break the problem into manageable chunks.

Children with Asperger's Syndrome will often show powerful gifts in the scientific, technical, or artistic fields. Their gifts are essential to the growth and development of our culture. Luminaries in recent history who have shown Asperger's-like traits include Albert Einstein, the great Bach interpreter, Glenn Gould, and many of the modern inventive geniuses in the computer industry. It is hard to measure the contributions of people with this perceptual style because they are often very self-effacing and publicity shy.

But the anxiety and inertia that kids with AS experience can stifle their lives and give them only a mediocre return on their potential. Helping them overcome inertia may take many years, but each little step forward strengthens the child's ability across the board.