

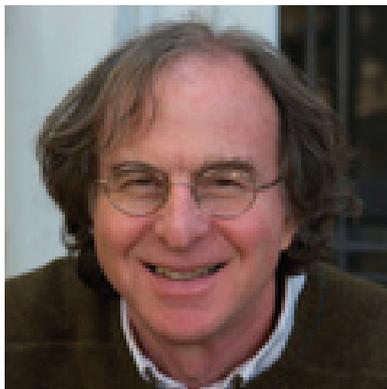
# Nurturing the child with Asperger's

**Richard Bromfield** addresses how parents and teachers can embrace the child with Asperger's in ways that deeply matter to the children themselves, helping to propel their development and learning.

Once thought to be a rarity, as many as one in 95 children are now diagnosed as having an Autistic Spectrum Disorder. Whether this apparent rise in incidence is mostly a function of improved detection or whether it reflects a true increase in the disorder remains uncertain. However, what is sure is that more parents are now raising such children, and that educators are more frequently

*Right: Richard Bromfield*

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processing and emotional communication, secondly, from psychological defenses against states experienced as a result of those deficits, and [thirdly from a] lack of crucial socializing experiences" (Bemporad, Rately and O'Driscoll, 1987).

What, in plain words does that say? It says that the child with Asperger's is endowed with a brain and neurology that is less able to deal with emotions, social experience, and certain kinds of communication. Given how essential

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encountering such pupils. Though a majority of these children are diagnosed on the higher and milder ends of the Autistic Spectrum – as having either Asperger Disorder or High-Functioning Autism – the potential for lifelong hardship is significant and the challenges to child, parent, and educator are profound

Children with Asperger's often experience difficulties in communication, social interaction, and emotional processing which, of course, can make them hard to reach. That disconnect can much unsettle, frustrate and break the hearts of the loving parents and caring educators who more

than anything wish to make meaningful contact with the child. And yet, it is that very connection which these children both crave and need to grow and thrive.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-I-TR, 2000), the diagnostic 'bible' of psychiatry, distinguishes Asperger Disorder as an "impairment in social interaction" along with "repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities" (pp. 63-64). I prefer this description: "Autism represents a syndrome or collection of symptoms originating primarily from a basic neurological deficit [...] in information

these things are to human existence, how can the child with Asperger's not have it harder than neurotypical peers, and how can such child not have a tougher road navigating the journeys of childhood and adolescence toward adulthood and self-identity?

But those primary deficits in language, feelings, and social interaction are not all that such children endure. These primary problems create secondary problems equally relevant and adverse. For children with Asperger's, life – including dealing with how the world, meaning other children and adults, reacts to them – can be a constant and

full frontal assault on their self-esteem and sense of self. I do not think that Tony Atwood at all exaggerated when he wrote that the social pressures of trying to fit in can lead to "mental and physical exhaustion" (2007, p. 17). Who can blame such children for seeking and running to the refuge of, perhaps, their rooms, computers, and interests? For how long, let's ask ourselves, could you or I bear such pervasive frustration, ostracizing, and rejection? In an irony as cruel as it is common, such children, because of their social and emotional difficulties, are likely to be deprived of the continual social opportunities to work on their peer relations that neurotypical counterparts enjoy more regularly and naturally.

As if this is not enough, I have to point out that, for all of their developmental realities, children with Asperger's do not escape the usual ordeals of childhood, adolescence, and life – trauma, abuse, illness, family strife, loss, accidents, poverty and so on. Maybe too obvious to state, these misfortunes can be yet tougher for the children with Asperger's, given their relative lack of self-understanding and the absence of bolstering social connections, especially with friends.

Keeping all of this, the burden that confronts the child with Asperger's each and every moment, is more than an abstract or intellectual exercise. Holding onto the "place" from which the child encounters the world, holds profound implications for how we, parent or teacher, meet and guide the child. It informs the very sensitivities and vulnerabilities that such a child cannot help but feel when confronting people, situations, and demands over which they may feel little control, safety, or competence.

Whatever the type of interaction, whether in school or at home, our goal is to know empathy is at its heart, trying to grasp what it is the child herself or himself is experiencing. The neurological differences that these children live with are real. How can we reach them, and how can they feel that we truly care, if we do not strive to understand and empathize with what the Asperger experience is for them?

But how can parents and teachers do this? Here are a handful of tips to get you started:

Listen and watch the child to learn what she says bothers or preoccupies her.



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Remember the child's dilemma, ever considering how his neurological deficits lead to his behaviors and reactions.

Seek the meaning of what the child may be communicating, rather than dismissing what the child says or does as nonsense or neurological static.

Be real and be sincere, for the child with Asperger's admirably values honest relatedness more than just about any other human quality.

Be wary of overwhelming the child with demands or closeness, helping to keep the child's level of interpersonal anxiety manageable.

Appreciate sensory sensitivities, and try to make the physical space as welcoming and non-intrusive as possible, while also responding to

what the child is 'saying' about her sensory discomfort, gently nudging them toward greater sensory tolerance.

Respect downtime, for the child with Asperger's has very good reason for needing space and time that is safe, calming and free of demands that threaten her self-esteem.

Nourish the child's aptitudes and talents – whether gifted, ordinary or less – for the child's benefit as well as society's.

Take the child's feelings seriously, whether or not you judge them to be reasonable or significant, for what matters is what she feels.

Beware of your own frustration or anger getting in the way of your patience or empathy for the child's experience.

Don't expect a thank you note, as it will be the child's growing connectedness to you and her blossoming that will express the gratitude.

Look for creativity everywhere, remembering that it can be found in every sort of activity, and guarding against preconceptions as to what creativity should look like.

Be a shepherd more than a leader, avoiding head-to-head battles, instead gently guiding the child toward and through growth-enhancing experiences and self-promoting self-determination.

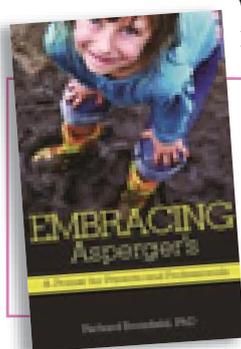
Connect, for no matter what the activity, it is that human connectedness that, molecule by molecule, adds up to something that ultimately protects the child from the isolation, self-hatred, and despair that can devastate a life.

Appreciate your power and influence, for whatever science discovers and innovates for the child with Asperger's, your profound value as a person to relate with will ever hold the greatest potential promoting the child's growth, inspiration, and hope. ■

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*Embracing Asperger's* by Richard Bromfield is published by Jessica Kingsley (RRP £12.99, ISBN 9781849058186). To buy a copy at the discounted price of £11.99 go to [www.jkp.com](http://www.jkp.com), or call +44 (0)20 7833 2307 and quote the code BROMON.