**Ask the Expert: How to Work with a Child with Asperger’s Syndrome**

**By Miranda J. Gabriel, Psy.D.**

**Question:** My client is an 11-year-old girl who was recently diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome. Her parents report that she has always had difficulty understanding social situations and that she has no close friends. Jade tends to join groups easily but when the social interactions becoming too difficult or confusing for her, she leaves her classmates and plays with the 1st graders. She is starting to feel sad more often than before when she is not invited to playdates or sleepovers with her classmates. She has a younger brother who is neuro-typical in his development and Jade often gets angry at her younger brother for having friends and being popular. Jade also gets angry when routines are changed. For examples, if her parents take a different route home or to school, she becomes angry and will often kick the back of the driver’s car seat and will sometimes scream loudly until her parents get back to the route she knows. This is Jade’s first time in psychotherapy because she is starting to show more awareness in her social difficulties and has been making her sad.

**Response:** There seem to be several issues that are at play for this newly diagnosed pre-teen and her family. In addition to starting therapy for the first time, Jade’s parents have recently learned that their oldest daughter has Asperger’s Syndrome. Her parents are probably confused and scared of this new diagnosis and will undoubtedly need assistance to learn more about Asperger’s Syndrome and how to best help Jade. As the treating therapist, you can help the parents by educating them on Asperger’s Syndrome and assigning reading, if are open to this idea. In California, there are numerous organizations and agencies that provide education, support, and advocacy for families with children with special needs and it would be a good idea to connect this family to some of those local agencies. It is unclear if Jade knows about her diagnosis. Whether or not she knows, what is important is that she starts to better understand her own internal feelings, her behaviors, and how to implement change.

Given that she has a very strict adherence to routines, part of the work with Jade will be to help her be more flexible in her thinking. Inflexible thinking is one of the hallmarks of children and adolescents on the autism spectrum. Jade’s desire to maintain rigid routes when in the car are a safety concern, especially when she kicks the back of the driver’s chair. Working with Jade on more appropriate ways to express her discontent is vital. Being able to verbalize how she is feeling when changes occur and having her parents there to reassure, soothe, and modulate her feelings will be important. Her parents can talk with her about the various routes that can be taken and perhaps a game could be made to not take the same route consecutively. Jade is also showing signs of being stressed and anxious when changes in her routine happen. Some interventions would be listening or singing to music she likes and having fidget toys in the car.

Some children on the spectrum also have concurrent sensory integration issues. For example, one child may be sensitive to bright lights so perhaps they enjoy a particular road that has more trees that provide more shade. Helping the parents to notice these possible areas of concern for their child will help them to better understand their child while also dealing with the behavior. A child with light sensitivities can try cool sunglasses or a baseball hat of their favorite color or sports team to block the sun.

Jade is struggling with her social relationships and she is starting to show more awareness, and hence more sadness. She is also comparing herself to her younger brother who tends to make friends with ease. Assessing Jade’s level of social interaction would be a good starting off point. Depending on her level of understanding of social relationships, reciprocity, and social communication, Jade can be helped in several areas. While she can join a peer group easily, she is probably missing more of the nuanced social interaction that takes place among 11-year-old girls. Therapy can help Jade to build and maintain friendships, even when misunderstandings happen.

Developmentally, Jade is more comfortable with much younger children who most likely look up to her and make her feel wanted. She is becoming more aware of the discrepancies in the friendships she has versus the ones she would like to have with her classmates. This is actually a great sign for Jade as she is showing more understanding of her internal life and will hopefully be more motivated to make changes. Children on the spectrum need help understanding and implementing how to build and maintain friendships. Teaching social competence and social perspective taking is vital for children on the spectrum. One technique is to help children and preteens on the spectrum become social scientists where they stop, watch, and think about social interactions. In therapy, this can be done with social stories, books, puppets or figurines or most adeptly with the therapist who can use their wide range of social expression to teach, modulate and break down the complexities of social communication and understanding for the child.

**About the Author: Miranda J. Gabriel, Psy.D. (PSY 19388) has been a licensed clinical psychologist for about 12 years. She has a private practice in Los Altos, CA where she specializes in treating children, adolescents, and adults. She provides psychotherapy and also conducts psychological testing. One of her primary areas of specialization is in providing assessment and treatment for children and adolescents who have autism and/or Asperger’s syndrome. She is currently on the Executive Board of CALAPT.**