

ASPERGER'S SYNDROME in Adults - potential for abuse?

By Carol Grigg

Many readers would be aware that over the last 10-15 years there has been an upsurge of awareness and diagnosis of Autism & Asperger's Syndrome. Most of the cases being identified are children, whose behaviours are often exposed and uninhibited, allowing for ready identification and appropriate intervention and assistance to take place, thereby improving behaviour & communication patterns which in turn should enable more successful adjustment into adulthood.

What many will not be aware of is that there is a second wave of identification taking place within the adult population, whose behaviours since childhood have gone "underground" and layers of coping strategies and defence mechanisms greet the social world, often giving the impression of someone quite "together", perhaps a little eccentric or odd, but passable, particularly because of their high intelligence, impressive knowledge, high integrity and particular flair or gift in an area or career, such as engineering, telecommunications, computers, art, religion, politics, etc.

Many of these adults do marry and have children, but the experience of their partners and children are quite different to what those outside of the family would naturally expect, and also what the partner naturally expected following an often "ideal" courtship.

In this article, I am seeking to raise concerns that there are some adults with Asperger's Syndrome whose behaviours have the potential to be experienced by a child as abusive, although I must stress that these behaviours are unlikely to include sexual abuse, according to the range of examples known to the writer.

Asperger's Syndrome involves a whole range of complex characteristics and behaviours, particularly when coupled with many dysfunctional or unproductive defence and coping strategies. It is not my intention to give an exhaustive description of all the ways Asperger's Syndrome may manifest in family life, but just to examine a few key areas which would raise the greatest concern in relation to the well-being of a child within that family.

Asperger's Syndrome is known to involve rigidity of thought and behaviour and a tendency to make and enforce rules for ordinary, everyday things without an inbuilt flexibility or adaptability that provides for "on the spot" change/deviation or "spontaneous" alternatives that family life may demand or require. Instead, families experience a sense of feeling rail-roaded, bullied or manipulated in some way into satisfying the Asperger parent's need for the way it's "supposed" to be done. These behaviours may not necessarily be aggressive or outward and can include passivity, withdrawal, detachment and coldness.

Families find themselves becoming anxious about allowing situations to develop that upset the person with Asperger's Syndrome and the experience of families is that this can reduce family life to a system of systems, rules, roles, routines & formulas to ensure the predictability, order and "correctness" that the Asperger person seems to need in their life and environment. It would seem however, that in spite of this need for order, the Asperger person can in fact

seem quite personally disorganised and also seem to lack the "follow-through" necessary for attending to practical or financial responsibilities within the household.

Family members describe the Asperger person as appearing to be completely self-centred and unable to acknowledge or display awareness of the individual thoughts, feelings, interests, preferences, abilities, stages and needs of individual family members, which necessarily need to be incorporated into the daily functioning, flow and decisions of family life.

As a result, the children of the family can feel quite neglected, rejected, of no importance to the Asperger parent, and quite cruelly treated, or that they can never achieve their admiration, attention or love. All their efforts to reach out to the parent or perform well at school or at home seem unnoticed and unaffirmed. If the Asperger parent is of a more aggressive, retaliatory or controlling nature, the child may experience regular criticism, correction, condescending comments in the form of mocking and put-downs, verbal abuse, rage and sometimes physical abuse in the form of heavy-handed corporal punishment, lashing out and striking, or other more secretly inflicted pain such as twisting or squeezing certain limbs or muscles.

The person with Asperger's Syndrome seems completely lacking of insight into the impact that their behaviours, words or neglect are having on family members and they will deny any mistake or wrongdoing, tending rather to blame the partner or child for causing the situation or being unjust in their accusation. When the non-Asperger parent tries to mediate, intervene or reason with the Asperger parent, the Asperger parent may either be forced into more withdrawal or shutdown, or they may react with aggression and accusations of attacking them, criticising, shaming them or being disloyal. The non-Asperger parent is left with few or no options and in most cases experiences the same feelings of rejection and abuse that the children experience. In some situations the Asperger parent may actively engage in turning family members against each other, or intimidating family members into isolation.

When these children or partners go outside of the home to seek help, their frequent experience is that they are not believed because the Asperger partner/parent presents as being of such competent and upstanding character in the eyes of the outside world. In fact, the partner or child are often seen as the ones with an unacceptable or even malicious attitude because of their claims which sound quite implausible or slanderous against the character of the accused parent or partner. Hence, the cruelty is multiplied, which I understand also happens to those who report other forms of abuse. This leaves the non-Asperger parent in a situation where he/she cannot defend his/her children, secure help or find some form of accountability for the Asperger parent.

It is very important to understand when dealing with Asperger's Syndrome and its behaviours, that people with Asperger's Syndrome operate constantly with an elevated sense of anxiety. They are seeking to navigate social situations and relationships without the inbuilt intuitive skills that non-Asperger people possess naturally. They are impaired in their ability to sense an atmosphere within a room or group of people, accurately read the body language or facial expression of those around them, respect personal boundaries or space or even accurately process personal communication. It seems that they have a level of awareness of personal inadequacy but lack the ability to know what to do about this inadequacy and as a result we can understand the formation of mechanisms and strategies for defence and survival.

It would be wrong not to mention that whilst many people with Asperger's Syndrome do struggle enormously with marriage and parenting expectations, there are some who have learned some excellent parenting skills in their family of origin or other early context, particularly in relation to a specific field of interest or activity in which they can include their child. It is also extremely important to remember that the abusive behaviours experienced by family members at the hand of an Asperger parent/partner are not intentional but come from the neurological difference that creates a different way of thinking, perceiving, prioritising and relating to those around them.

It is fair to say however, that every family affected by Asperger's Syndrome has "normal" expectations of the Asperger parent because they are not aware of or understand Asperger's Syndrome, and they live with deep confusion, frustration and emotional pain. What the family members experience can lead to long-term resentment towards the Asperger parent who is not understood, who is expected to be "normal", who is capable of creating enormous fear and a sense of abandonment in a child, and who seems incapable of accepting the opinions and feelings of other family members. This can and often does lead to estrangement, which in most cases will not be remedied by the parent, but the child may make many attempts to reconcile and still fail to make progress or reach a compromise over the passage of many years, and often well into mature adulthood.

It is my opinion, and one supported by the increasing number of examples known to me, that Asperger's Syndrome may be present in a significant number of family situations where life-long confusing or inexplicable behaviours are present, but where a mental illness is not present. A person with Asperger's Syndrome can seem to require an extraordinary amount of support and instruction, with many accommodations made for communication difficulties (processing and expression) and seemingly antisocial, non-coping or non-functional behaviours. Their apparent need to control their environment and "subjects" may lead to a variety of forms of abuse against family members and although the behaviours are not intentionally abusive, the impact is the same as if the abusive behaviours were intentional and counselling and therapy are often required for recovery.

I believe it is extremely important that communities and families everywhere are given the opportunity to learn about Asperger's Syndrome, and receive appropriate support and referral if Asperger's Syndrome is suspected.

Carol Grigg is a founding member and co-ordinator of ASPIA INC, Asperger Syndrome Partner Information Australia Incorporated, which is based in Sydney, Australia and commenced in June 2003 under the name of "GRASP". Aspia has a contact list of more than 200 non-Asperger partners/parents, with 25-30 attending monthly meetings. Carol was married for 20 years to a man diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome after 17 years of marriage and has five children, ranging in age from 9yrs to 21yrs. For more information about ASPIA or Asperger's Syndrome within marriage/families please visit our website at www.aspia.org.au or email info@aspia.org.au

A website totally dedicated to people raised by an Asperger parent is at www.aspar.klattu.com.au