

Police Article: What are Autism, Asperger Syndrome and Autism Spectrum Disorders?

By Dennis Debbaudt

Autism is a lifelong neurological disorder that disrupts a person's learning, communication and socialisation. People with autism (Autism Spectrum Disorder) often do not look as though they have a disability but are "out-of-sync" with the world. They have difficulty processing sounds, sights touch or smells. This leads to many other problems including social problems, language disorders, eating & stomach disorders, and seizures.

People with autism can have many or just a few of the disorder's characteristics. No two people have the exact same symptoms, making autism a spectrum disorder.

The disability ranges from a person who is successful academically with a Ph.D to people who have an intellectual disability and may exhibit complex psychiatric or self-harming behaviour.

People with Autism Spectrum Disorders may have disabilities which can loosely divided be into three groups

Classic Autism: the person with classic autism is often profoundly disabled with little or no communication or speech, may suffer from hyper sensitivity to sounds, lights and other sensory stimulus. They may also have adopted odd or bizarre behaviours which intensify when stressed

A person with classic autism may attract police attention because:

- They are exhibiting bizarre behaviour, hand flapping, self-injurious or repetitious behaviour, head banging, rocking etc.
- A child wandering alone, unsupervised. (Children with autism often run off given an opportunity.)
- A person with autism may be found naked or unsuitably clothed. (Clothing is often removed as textures may be uncomfortable)
- Odd or nuisance behaviour in shops, public or private areas; rearranging objects, being entranced with an object and leaving with it, turning lights on and off, opening and losing doors, turning on water taps and playing with water, climbing onto dangerous high places, pushing others, staring at objects or lights, incessantly smelling objects, peering into windows, appearing nervous and agitated.
- Suspected drug abuse or mental illness. Many behaviours of autism resemble mental illness or drug/alcohol intoxication. A person may seem crazy, or potentially violent.
- People with autism can sometimes be violent, particularly if reacting to extremely stressful situations. Institutionalised people may become unmanageable in a situation of extreme stress, particularly when there is an absence of suitably trained staff.
- Suspected child abuse – children with autism may be seen acting bizarrely; screaming, throwing tantrums, biting etc. Parents may be blamed for being the cause of the behaviour or

seen be using questionable force to control a child's escalating, violent behaviour.

High Functioning Autism: As they grow older, a person with High Functioning Autism, will develop some communication and many social skills that assist them to make their way in the world, hold down jobs and live independently. However they suffer from many of the same symptoms that a person with classic autism suffers from. As a situation becomes more stressful, a person with High Functioning Autism may have increased difficulty in expressing themselves and making sense of the situation.

The person may exhibit behaviours which may seem to indicate guilt, defiance, and disobedience.

Such behaviours will often include:

- Avoidance of eye contact – typical of Autism Spectrum Disorders
- Preference to be alone
- Difficulty in expressing needs, does not use or understand gesture
- Insistence on sameness
- Inappropriate response to sound or other sensory input
- Difficulty interacting with others
- No real fear of dangers
- Apparent insensitivity to pain
- Uneven physical skills
- Uneven or missing verbal skills
- Inappropriate laughing or giggling
- Inappropriate attachment to objects
- Fascination to water, lights and reflection
- Echoes words or phrases
- May seek sensory stimulation including heavy pressure
- Spins objects or self

Asperger Syndrome: a person with Asperger syndrome has a large vocabulary and little language disability in producing speech, however a person with Asperger syndrome does have difficulty understanding social cues, nonliteral figures of speech, gestures, facial expressions and subtle sarcasm. They are often susceptible to bullying and manipulation by peers and can be eager to please when given attention.

A young person with autism or Asperger Syndrome may get into trouble without even realising they have committed an offence. Offences such as making threatening statements; personal, telephone, or internet stalking; inappropriate sexual advances; accomplice crimes with false friends; and making physical outbursts at school, would certainly strike most of society as offences which demand some sort of punishment.

This assumption, though valid at face value, does not take into account the particular issues that challenge the individual with autism or Asperger syndrome. Problems with sensory overload, poor social awareness, semantic misunderstandings, inability to deal with changes in routine or structure, and little to no understanding of non-verbal communications make more appropriate responses to society very difficult for someone with autism or Asperger syndrome. For example, what appears as anti-social behaviour to the 'regular' world, is often simply the manifestation of the ASD person's social misunderstandings. While most would see too many phone calls in the middle of the night as aberrant phone stalking, the person

with autism or Asperger syndrome might well view the situation as one friend wanting to talk to another, no matter the time or frequency of calls. And a physical outburst at school might well be related to the person's sensory dysfunction or inability to deal with interruptions in the daily routine. So, while the individual with autism or Asperger syndrome might have committed the offence in question, the intent might well have been anything other than to do harm

Problems of Communication for Police and Authority

The teenager with autism or Asperger syndrome will likely have communication difficulties which include hardships in making sense of the verbal and body language of others. His difficulty maintaining eye contact or his insistence on changing the subject of conversation to a topic of his choice—all typical diagnostic behaviours of a person with autism – can mislead the untrained investigator. The investigator may see someone who seems to lack respect and observe a “rude, fidgety and belligerent kid” who by nature of his lack of eye contact and evasive conversation, appears to have something to hide. Standard interrogation techniques that utilize trickery and deceit can confuse the concrete thinking adolescent (or adult) with autism into producing a misleading statement or false confession. The teen can become overly influenced by the friendly interrogator. Isolated and in a never-ending search for friends, the teen can easily be led into saying whatever his new friend wants to hear.

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Bibliography

Autism, Advocates and Law enforcement Professionals

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Dangerous Encounters: avoiding Perilous Situations with Autism

Bill Davis and Wendy Goldband-Schunick Publishers Jessica Kingsley 116 Pentonvill Rd London N1 9JB

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