



ASPERGER
CENTER FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Teaching Social Literacy: The Social Skills Seminar

By Mary Riggs Cohen, Ph.D.
Licensed Psychologist
Spectrum Services

For many individuals with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) the social world remains a "black box" that is incomprehensible, confusing and a source of frustration in their daily lives. While some retreat from social gatherings and avoid social contact, there are a great number of individuals who seek to understand social behavior and long for interpersonal connections. Although individuals with AS are often portrayed as aloof and uncaring, those who know them are aware that this is an inaccurate (and unfair) characterization. There are many who desire social contact but do not know how to initiate or maintain relationships. Tired of their solitary existence and isolation, they try to gain insight into the mystifying social behaviors of neurotypical individuals.

In 2003, I was asked by colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania to develop a program to teach young adults with Asperger's Syndrome how to increase their social awareness and gain a better understanding of the social world around them. The result was the Social Skills Seminar, a twelve week course that meets weekly for three hours. With few models to draw upon, the curriculum was created, to a great extent, through trial and error. Some training methods were research based while others were developed from knowledge of the learning styles of AS individuals. Over the last seven years, more than 300 men and women with Asperger's Syndrome, nonverbal learning disability, and social anxiety have participated in this program in Philadelphia and New York City. As the course has developed, there have been many opportunities to learn what "works" and "doesn't work" with our participants. The instructors and social coaches who have contributed to the development of the course have helped me to evaluate the successful components of the program and we have reached the following conclusions.

Social skills training programs have often been found to be ineffective because only basic instrumental skills (eye contact, greeting) are taught. Individuals must "understand social norms and develop more sophisticated social cognition skills" which are essential to the development of interpersonal relationships and achieving social success (Geller, 2009).

Asperger adults are often told to smile and make eye contact but no one has explained to them the rationale for these behaviors. Moreover the approach to adults has been to modify existing programs used for children and adolescents rather than address the unique demands of adult social development. As a result, many AS adults view social skills training as juvenile, a repeat of what they already know, and inappropriate for their current social needs. There is a critical need for social skills training that is geared to adults who have acquired some basic skills but need to progress to the complexities of dealing with co-workers, establishing romantic relationships and discovering the social norms of college life as well as the workplace. It is also essential that social skills be taught in an intellectually stimulating fashion drawing from current research in the various scientific disciplines that study social behavior.

Tager-Flusberg (2001), argued that social perception is the main deficit seen in Asperger Syndrome. Social phobics also exhibit perceptual differences by their “negative bias” to social situations (i.e. only noticing faces with unfriendly rather than friendly expressions). Although AS adults can often make appropriate responses in a laboratory setting, they have difficulty in real-life situations, which are more complex and require quick responses to often ambiguous situations (Frith, 2004). Students in the social skills seminars can often arrive at a correct response, given enough time, by using logic. However, this does not translate to the social world where cues must be processed quickly.

The Social Skills Seminar program incorporates these critical elements in an interesting and interactive format over twelve weeks of three hour sessions. Although the program was initially designed for participants with Asperger’s Syndrome, it has been used successfully with participants with diagnoses of high-functioning autism, nonverbal learning disability and social phobia. The program focuses on communication skills, recognition of nonverbal communication, job interview skills, and interpersonal skills (friendship, dating, sexuality). An experiential approach is employed in which participants are observed, and sometimes videotaped, while role-playing common social situations they might encounter outside the classroom. There is an emphasis on feedback and support so that each participant is given encouragement to improve his/her social skill repertoire. Most of the classes have had 6-10 participants who were young adult males and females (under 30 years) however, there were also a few older participants. The participants lived in the Philadelphia metropolitan area (including New Jersey and Delaware) and most recently the New York metropolitan area. The education level ranged from college-bound high school graduates to graduate and professional school students with the majority of participants being college graduates.

It is acknowledged that the population that participated in this program was high-functioning in general and not representative of all those with the diagnoses of Asperger’s disorder, high-functioning autism, nonverbal learning disorder or social phobia. Much of the literature regarding more severely affected adults, such as Dr. Patricia Howlin’s study (1999), does not reflect the positive outcomes that have been reported for this program’s participants. The program is typically conducted in an outpatient setting and therefore, is not accessible to those with more severe disabilities. It is a future goal to expand the options for these individuals through collaboration with vocational rehabilitation centers, residential settings and organizations such

as Autism Living and Working (www.autismlivingworking.org) that support those with greater social disabilities. The program can be modified to meet the needs of various populations by eliminating more complex aspects of the curriculum (i.e. internet dating, career selection) or focusing on areas most relevant to a particular group. An additional goal is to expand the program to include more female participants. The ratio of males to females with Asperger Syndrome's Disorder is 8:1. However, research data suggests that Social Phobia is more prevalent in females (Heimberg & Becker, 2002) and clinicians/researchers suspect many females are undiagnosed (Baron-Cohen, 2010). Currently, 16% of the program's participants have been female.

There are many with social learning disorders that could benefit from this program as past participants have. Our research has indicated that the program reduces social anxiety and increases social motivation for most participants. These two factors are fundamental in breaking the cycle of social isolation and social avoidance that many are experiencing. Over the past seven years it has been gratifying to see these individuals achieve a sense of social literacy and thereby improve their self-image and become a part of the social world around them.

Dr. Cohen can be contacted at mc@autismsrc.org.