

# Pathologizing Giftedness

*Bright children are being labeled with Asperger's syndrome because they don't fit the mould.*

By Colleen Clements

A young boy's story recently appeared in a popular magazine because he and his brother had been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome.

The problem was he was a bright boy, had an intense interest in astronomy and space travel, was engrossed in *Star Wars* games and toys, liked to lecture on topics that interested him to his primary school companions, didn't seem very empathetic, was bored with his 'peers,' and began to show the stress of his social isolation.

In addition, he was articulate (talked too much and too fast), didn't have 'play dates' (the latest fad in the affluent suburbs where even child's play is formally scheduled), didn't participate well in activities with his peers (who weren't really his peers in terms of developmental stage), and didn't like to look people in the eye.

On that basis and because one of his brothers had been labeled autistic and another diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, this little boy, still in preschool, was given the permanent diagnosis of a neurological disease.

Asperger's syndrome is diagnosed at least four times as often in boys as in girls. Its symptoms describe the typical nature of boys rather than girls: social skills not as quickly developed or sensitive as girls, 'disruptive' or aggressive behaviour used for problem-solving more often than with girls, and reluctance to express inner feelings in public in contrast to girls.

Asperger's syndrome is part of the vast wastebasket of the autism complex. As with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, probably a small number of children actually suffer from neurological abnormality who might fit a more scientifically-tested classification.

The public school systems, however, have rapidly increased the diagnosis of such 'diseases' in order to substitute chemical manipulation and medical pathologizing for competent classroom control and learning.

The Centre for the Study of Asperger Syndrome recommends that children be placed at their academic level of performance and not their chronological level. That makes basic common sense. We would hardly give a medical diagnosis to an eight-year-old for failing to relate well socially with an eight-week-old.

The Centre reports that adults who had been diagnosed with Asperger's go on to lead productive lives as college professors, dentists, programmers and, I suspect, physicians. As adults, of course, they can finally find some peers, although it is hard when one is extremely intelligent, as the autobiographies of great men and women proclaim. Were all these individuals actually suffering from Asperger's?

Although our culture is willing to agree that some people exhibit superior physical abilities, we tend to be reluctant to do the same for intelligence. Asperger's syndrome may be just a fancy way of calling the class genius a geek or freak.

One of the key symptoms of Asperger's is high intelligence. Asperger's children are supposed to have lucid speech before four years of age and to have IQ's above normal. These traits are pathologized by calling the speech sometimes repetitive, flat, and revolving around the self.

There are some physical signs of Asperger's, but they too are vague. Physical movements are described as clumsy or awkward, bringing us back to the 'geek' label. But the saddest symptoms are the social symptoms.

These children are supposed to show socially-inappropriate reciprocal interactions. They are 'socially odd.' It is amazing that these children do so well as adults, considering how we have battered their inner core of being in order to break them down to fit into the 'average' social 'norm.'

Many Asperger's children are saved by being home-schooled and go on successfully to university. Being a member of the social in-crowd or a social butterfly is not always the goal for human beings — after all, we may be called to greater things than that. Our peer group should not be our value system: that is not a definition of health or the norm.

Neurological diseases are sometimes easy to classify, sometimes very difficult. The scientific method finally straightened out tertiary syphilis, removing it from the dementia category.

But soft syndromes like Asperger's may not be so easily rectified, especially if we look at the history of ADHD. We might even lose the scientific method in our rush to embrace social and political conventions.

*(Adapted with permission from "Asperger's: Making intelligence a disease" in The Medical Post, March 2001. Dr. Clements is clinical associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Rochester. She has several very bright grandchildren who are suffering the effects of ideology in education.)*