

Social Issues Surrounding the Adolescent with Asperger Syndrome: Perceptions of Parents and Teachers

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study, a focused case study of a community, was to investigate the perceptions and experiences of three parents and three teachers regarding social issues of adolescents with Asperger Syndrome (AS). The study revealed that, in this small, rural community, students with AS are supported by their peers, appear to be content with who they are, and the parents and teachers foster a positive social climate that promotes acceptance and understanding.

Social Issues Surrounding the Adolescent with Asperger Syndrome: Perceptions of Parents and Teachers

Adolescence is an important time for social experiences that develop feelings of connectedness with peers and affirm self-esteem. It is viewed as a period of intense social change where the adolescent changes not only physically but socially as well. Howlin (2003) described social characteristic changes of the typical adolescent as a time of becoming less dependent upon parents while being more influenced by peers, the development of sexuality and sexual relationships, and increased academic pressure and demands at school. Adolescents explore many social experiences thus developing a social connectedness unique to this age group. This can prove to be a very challenging and frustrating time for adolescents with Asperger Syndrome (AS), who struggle with developing and maintaining relationships with peers and fitting in at school. Bolick (2001) stated that adolescents with AS often experience missed opportunities for incidental learning and practice when it comes to friendships, thereby affecting the development of these relationships.

Typical adolescents understand social situations by observing facial expressions, vocal tones, body language, and the dynamics of the group, whereas individuals with AS struggle with this very ability. This, along with rigidity in routine and the development of narrow interests, makes socializing difficult for adolescents with AS (Attwood, 2007; Bolick, 2007). They often develop a passionate interest in a subject or topic, generally a solitary pursuit, and not necessarily what a typical

adolescent may be interested in. According to Attwood (1998), individuals with AS may develop an encyclopedic knowledge of a topic and may believe that everyone should be as interested in the topic as they are. As one adult with AS shared, “It’s hard to stifle what you like because you are trying to fit in!” (Hurlbutt, 2007, p. 5). Educational demands also become more complex during the adolescent years, and students with AS begin experiencing difficulties with note-taking, organizational skills, working on a timeline, and understanding the requirements of multiple classes with different teachers who have different personalities and expectations.

Jackson (2004, p. 121) described the disadvantage that adolescents with AS face in this way: “The AS adolescents have so much more to cope with. Not only do they have all the changes that teenagers have to endure, but there is also a growing realization that their attitudes and behaviors are vastly different to those of their peers. The AS teenagers often try many ways to bridge the gap, either by trying to assimilate with peers’ behavior, engaging in risk-taking and inappropriate behavior, or by distancing themselves completely and ignoring peer pressure and their peer group completely.” This can lead to social isolation, loneliness, depression, ridicule due to unusual social behaviors, and anxiety which can result in reduced motivation to even make contact with peers.

The purpose of this small, qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions and experiences of three parents and three teachers regarding social issues of adolescents with Asperger Syndrome (AS). This comparison between parents and teachers was important because parents have extensive and longterm knowledge about their own adolescent across several environments, while teachers’ perspectives are usually based on an understanding of typical student development, allowing them to make comparisons between a student’s social behaviors and that of his peers. There has been relatively little published specifically on the adolescent with Asperger Syndrome, and even less regarding the perceptions of the parents and teachers of these students. The results of this study can contribute to the development of the understanding of adolescents with AS, particularly in understanding the social experiences for the adolescent with AS.

Method

Participant Selection

The special education director of a small Midwestern school district in a community of 16,000, was contacted and asked to communicate the request for parent participants through the special education teachers in the district who work with junior high students with AS. In the junior high school, there are 180 students, with only five students being identified as having AS. The parents of all five were initially contacted for participation. Parents of three adolescents with AS volunteered, and they, in turn, identified general education teachers with

whom their child had a positive relationship. These three teachers also agreed to be interviewed for the study. The parent participants were chosen based on two criteria. They needed to have a child in the junior high school with a diagnosis of AS and needed to be willing to share perceptions of their child's social experiences. Two criteria were used to select the teachers to be interviewed. First, the teachers had to be practicing, general education teachers with at least five years of teaching experience so that they were not new to the teaching field and had gained professional experience as a teacher. General education teachers were selected because the students with AS in this school district are generally served in an inclusive setting with minimal supports from special education staff. Secondly, they must have had a positive relationship with the student and taught a topic that was of interest to the student with AS. This was required so that the teacher could discuss positive experiences they had with the students in these inclusive classrooms. In each of the three classrooms, there were 21-25 students, including two to three other students with disabilities, primarily learning disabilities. The three students with AS represented in this study were on IEPs, had a documented primary disability of autism spectrum disorder on the IEPs, and all had social goals and objectives. One student also had a reading comprehension goal.

Interviews

Once the parents had been determined, an initial phone call was made to further explain the purpose of the study and assurance of confidentiality, and to select a time and place to meet. The interviews were held individually with the parents at a location chosen by them. Two parents chose to meet in the small, hometown restaurant, and the third requested to meet at her place of employment. Each of the teachers chose to meet in their classrooms at school when no one else was present. Each interview lasted approximately one and a half hours, after engaging in small talk in order to get to know each other. The participants were informed of their confidentiality and anonymity, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The interviews were audiotaped, and later transcribed, being written word for word from the taped interviews, with notes the primary researcher made during the interview. The tapes were kept in a locked file for confidentiality during the data collection and analysis process.

Each of the participants were asked the following questions: 1) in general, what social skills do you feel are important for adolescents?, 2) what social issues appear as strengths for the adolescent with AS?, 3) what social issues are difficult for the adolescent with AS?, 4) how do you see adolescents with AS interacting with peers?, and 5) what do you feel one could do to help adolescents with AS in social situations? Each participant was encouraged to elaborate on their responses and use examples from their experiences with the identified adolescent with AS.

Each interview was transcribed, and data were coded, using the process of data analysis as described by Moustakas (1994). Codes were categorized into

descriptive units, and then identified as themes and findings. Throughout the coding process, the secondary researcher reviewed the transcripts and also identified key words and codes. The two researchers met to discuss the identified key words and codes, and achieved an 85% level of agreement between them. Data that had been coded differently were discussed and deliberated, and the researchers together chose codes they mutually agreed upon. Member checks were also utilized as a way to ensure validity. This strategy required asking participants for clarification during the interviews, and required showing the transcribed interviews to the participants so they could comment on the information and determine if the data was accurately stating their thoughts. No participants made changes in the transcripts. Care was taken to ensure reliability as well by creating as much similarity as possible. Procedures were explained the same way to all participants, all participants were asked the same questions, all interviews were audiotaped and reviewed immediately after interview sessions, and all participants were informed of their right to review and comment on, the identified themes and findings, should they choose to do so.

Participants

Each of the names used are pseudonyms chosen by the primary researcher, in order to assure confidentiality and anonymity.

Parents

Ms. Kalz is a single mother who works outside the home. She shared that she had never heard about Asperger's until her son Tim was diagnosed with AS at five years of age. He was first thought to have ADD or ADHD, and when the doctor diagnosed him with AS, he described Tim as "a young boy with the vocabulary of a little old man." Tim is now 14 years old, and even with his high intelligence level, his mother reported that he "has a difficult time completing homework, lacks social skills, and doesn't have any really close friends." She felt as though he interacts better with adults. He is very interested in the "Price is Right" television show and she felt that most adolescents have different interests than Tim.

Ms. Nots currently works outside the home as a bank officer. Her husband died three years ago, and she has two sons, the one with Asperger's being the one still at home. James, now 13, did well in elementary school, but his mother reported that he is "struggling a bit" in junior high. James becomes easily overwhelmed with assignments and often refuses to complete them. Ms. Nots also shared that James is "really into a routine." She felt that James gets along better with adults, as they seem to be more tolerant and ask him questions about his interests. She commented that he appears to not desire social interactions and he struggles with reading social situations correctly.

Ms. Canue is a stay-at-home mother to Beau, her 14 year old son with AS, and one younger sibling. Her husband travels quite a bit for his job. She shared that she knew Beau was “different at age 3 because of his fascination with numbers.” Beau was diagnosed with AS at the age of 9 and was first placed in a class for children with behavioral problems. At that age, he had been becoming “kind of aggressive” during social interactions, such as grabbing someone around the neck from the back in order to get his or her attention. He now attends all general education classes but goes to the resource room for academic support during his study hall time. Beau’s mother commented on his apparent lack of interest in how he looks, including combing his hair.

Teachers

Ms. Hoffer is a junior high language arts teacher and has been teaching for 24 years. She began her teaching career by working with students with cognitive disabilities, then learning disabilities, and now teaches general education language arts. She is Tim’s teacher and shared many thoughts on the social aspects in the junior high classroom, and her experiences in working with students with AS.

Ms. Pepper has been teaching for over 20 years and has taught almost every grade from kindergarten through seventh grade, as well as teaching in the Title One Reading program. She is currently an English teacher at this school. She is James’ teacher and described some of his difficulties and uneasiness in working in large group and cooperative group work settings. She liked the idea of using the buddy system as a way to continue a support system when teachers and other adults are not available.

Mr. Fish has been teaching Social Studies for 39 years, first at the high school level, now in junior high. He prefers the junior high level because he believes a teacher can “still make a difference within the lives of the students.” He believes it is of utmost importance to help junior high students develop self-esteem, and of the necessity of providing a respectful, safe classroom environment for them. He is Beau’s teacher, and felt as though students with AS want acceptance and recognition just like other students.

Results

The following is a discussion of the themes that emerged from the data.

Overall theme: *The parents and teachers modeled a positive social climate in this school that fostered an understanding and acceptance of these students as being and doing “okay” socially.*

In spite of social differences, the parents and teachers in this study felt as though the adolescent with AS retained a sense of doing well socially and academically

in junior high school. Overall, they were having positive experiences at school. One parent, Ms. Canue, summarized her feelings and her son's junior high experience in this way, "I mean, I was scared to death of junior high; and he is doing fantastic."

The collaboration of families and teachers builds a social network for adolescents with AS by providing role models, respect, consideration, a sense of belonging and academic success. The participants in this study demonstrated this collaboration through mutual respect for each other as well as wanting to provide typical, everyday experiences for the adolescent with AS to learn from. Parents and teachers both recommended having open communication between home and school in order to better understand and work with the adolescent with AS. Bashe & Kirby (2001) maintained that open communication builds a good relationship between parents, teachers, and the student. Mrs. Canue shared her beliefs on maintaining good relationships and open communication with the teachers of her son. "I think for these kids to survive, parents got to be in constant contact with teachers. We do a notebook that goes back and forth every single day. I tell them my line is open, call me for anything that you have a questions about and I will stop in." Additionally, this positive relationship can provide learning opportunities that enhance the student's social-emotional development, and builds a social network for adolescents with AS by providing role models, respect, a sense of belonging, and academic success.

Ms. Canue also shared an example of how appreciative she is of the opportunities her son's teacher has provided to him. She felt that her son had excelled in Mr. Fish's geography class, in which his teacher was respectful and understanding and encouraged him to use and share his wealth of knowledge.

Sub-theme 1: *While typical peers do not necessarily include students with AS in their social circles, they do support and help them; they are impressed with these students' knowledge and can/do learn from them.*

The typical peers did include adolescents with AS in casual conversation, such as before class started, but did not specifically invite them to be a part of their groups. Both parents and teachers had witnessed classmates supporting their peer with AS, and teachers perceived that they would protect their peer with AS whom they believed was being taunted. Also, the peers validated the individuality and uniqueness of their peer with AS by seeming to appreciate their vast knowledge of information, although they occasionally showed signs of frustration with their peers' behaviors.

Both the parents and the teachers in this study have witnessed that classmates supported the peer with AS, and they discussed the ways typical students helped them in the classroom. Ms Pepper was impressed with the 7th graders. "These kids are very good to these boys that we have this year. I have never seen anything

negative, never not including them, or being mean. I've never seen any of that." She recalled how classmates helped Tim, the student with AS in her classroom.

"They just took care of him. He would come without pencils or paper, and I didn't have to say anything, whoever I would put him by, they would just be like 'O.K. we're going to take a spelling test' and Tim would say 'I don't have a pencil, I don't have paper' and the kid in front of him or behind him would invariably take out a piece of paper or pencil and hand it to him."

Ms. Nots praised peer support, while realizing her son, James, was still not within the social group. "They knew that he was a nice kid and they liked him for that. They didn't encircle him into the group like, 'hey, you want to be my buddy', but they've always treated him with the utmost respect."

The participants shed some light as to why the peers do not necessarily include their peer with AS, even though they do support them. They all felt that belonging to a group of peers and fitting in is of utmost importance to early adolescents. Ms. Pepper described how peers and peer relationships are very important. "They have to fit in and they still want to be part of whatever the popular group is, however that's defined . . ." and tend to follow what the group is doing. Ms. Hoffer supported this thought by stating, "the big one for this age group is how they're perceived by their peers."

Abuod & Mendelson (1996) discussed two general hypotheses for social connectedness. One hypothesis is that "people select friends who are similar to themselves," while the second hypothesis states that "people select friends who have desirable attributes" (p. 88). This similar attraction would tend to have adolescents dressing and looking alike or having a desirable material attribute. The typical peers may have felt as though their peers with AS did not have traits similar to their own, and may not have exhibited what they considered to be desirable attributes.

The participants identified a few possible explanations as to why the adolescents with AS struggled with fitting in with their typical peers. These may include appearance, difficulty with nonverbal communication, level of maturity, apparent preference to being alone, and difficulty establishing relationships. Grandin & Barron (2005) discussed that one unwritten rule of social relationships at the adolescent age is "the outside package is just as important as what is inside" (p.311) but that individuals with AS struggle with this concept. In one study, a woman with AS shared that as a teenager, she "experimented with makeup and hairstyling, though, but didn't get it right" (Hurlbutt, 2007, p. 7).

Ms. Canue's comment about her son is an example of this struggle. "Beau is not as mature as other kids his age. I can see that in how he dresses; how he looks. He could care less if his hair has been combed. . . kids his age are interested in that."

Difficulty with nonverbal communication may be another reason why typical peers do not fully include their peers with AS. The adolescents with AS were unaware that what they say may be socially hurtful or appear rude. These adolescents tended to be very factual and usually spoke the way they saw it, seeming to feel they were right. For example, Ms. Hoffer shared the following perception.

“The AS student may make the comment and not know that, oh, maybe he shouldn’t have said it that way. . . they have an unbelievable wealth of knowledge that they’re just waiting to share, but they have no clue when to share it and how to share it. Blurting out in the middle of class a piece of trivia information may not be the most appropriate.”

The participants in this study shared how the individual with AS missed subtle social cues, and how these students were unable to perceive and understand social cues, such as boredom conveyed by the rolling of the eyes. Ms. Hoffer shared an incident where one student was unaware of his social inappropriateness and the subtle cues of another boy.

“One day a couple weeks ago a child had gotten hurt out on the playground. He had skinned his knee, and my AS student wanted to do first aid on it. He kept saying, ‘but I know how to do first aid, would you just let me see your knee and I could patch it up.’ So [the student who fell] is growing more and more uncomfortable with him and I was wondering if Tim was going to give it up. No, he doesn’t give things up very easily. Finally, I just said, ‘We need to start with class, if there’s any first aid to be done, we should do it after class.’”

Throughout the course of the year, however, the parents and teachers noted the social-emotional growth that occurred in the adolescents with AS, along with their peers’ growth in their acceptance of them. Social maturity for the student with AS was noted as being similar to that of the typical teenager, such as wanting to do social things independently. Ms. Kalz shared a story about her son and his typical teenager activities by him meeting up with a couple of peers at the community center to go swimming and by not wanting to sit with her in the movie theater. “No, he will go and sit down [with students he knows from his class] and I will sit somewhere else. I think that is pretty normal, not wanting to sit with your mom.”

Additionally, the students with AS appeared to be more responsible as the year progressed, as displayed by staying in the classroom and handling their anxieties there instead of leaving immediately when feeling anxious, and decreasing inappropriate behaviors and bodily movements. Teachers commented on observing fewer verbal outbursts and more appropriate body language as the year progressed as well. Mr. Fish stated, “Beau has become more aware now of what he should be doing than he was before, in some of his inappropriate little gestures and body movements and squirming around, because he’s always in motion.” Another incident shared by Ms. Pepper conveyed these changes in the adolescent

with AS. “We were doing this test, and James didn’t understand it and was getting all agitated. I could tell, but I gave it to him and thought ‘well, I’m going to wait and see what he does’ because a lot of times at the beginning of the year he’d come up and he would do this [put the binder by his face] to block out the rest of the class. He doesn’t do this anymore; he must be letting some of that go.”

Mr. Fish commented that Beau was “starting to be much more focused on what he’s doing . . . he’s come a long, long way.” He felt that is an important attribute for success in the classroom.

The typical peers also showed signs of growth in terms of relating to their peers with AS. Mr. Fish talked about the growth of these students’ social skills. “They’re looking totally different at things compared to the beginning of the school year. They would get tired of kids who were constantly saying things that were inappropriate. Now they’re at the stage where they’ll say . . . appropriately, ‘enough of that, do your work’. So I think the maturity factor is already creeping in a little more; [they are developing] more responsibility.”

The data from the interviews indicated that knowledge about the peer with AS created an understanding and support from the typical students. The reason for this support may be a better understanding of the peer’s unique social behaviors, which in turn tends to create understanding and tolerance. This increased understanding may develop as a result of the teachers’ positive and inclusive attitudes and practices, as well as just spending more time in school with them.

Two parents in the study shared that the classmates who have attended elementary school with their child have gained knowledge of the individual’s personality and seemed to be more accepting and supporting of the peer with AS. Ms. Nots explained, “They knew that he [James] was a nice kid and they liked him for that. . . all the teachers reinforce how much his classmates like him.” Additionally, Ms. Kalz shared her belief about classmates who have grown up with Tim. “He has friends at school and people he has grown up with and know him and know who he is . . . but I see the kids that come in and hardly know Tim and I think that they are kind of “put off” by him or don’t know what to do.”

The typical peers learned more about the intelligence and knowledge of the adolescent with AS over time as well. Mr. Fish discussed how the peers have learned from the intelligence of the student with AS. “Beau fits in really well and actually, to be honest, the class has learned from that kid because he knows his [geography], he really does.” In a parent interview, Ms. Kalz commented that “all the teachers have said when he [Tim] has been in class the peers really pay attention to the things he says because some of the things he says is so far above what is expected of him.”

The typical adolescents appear intrigued by the knowledge held by students with AS and respect what they know. Ms. Pepper explained James enjoyed telling stories about tsunamis and asteroids, topics in which the student was interested.

“He would come up right in the front, where I would stand, and he would tell the kids these stories. And they were so good, I can just see them sitting there, and they would be. . . looking at him, and then they’d be looking at me like ‘is that true?’ . . . [The students] enjoyed his stories. They would ask him questions and he would answer [them all].”

Theme 2: *Adolescents with AS appear to be content with self*

The participants in this study described the adolescents with AS as appearing to be content with themselves and in being the way they are. In the study, parents and teachers perceived the contentment of the adolescent with AS as appearing to prefer being alone and having confidence in their knowledge. Ms Hoffer perceived the contentment of the adolescent with AS by stating that “I think he’s [Tim’s] secure enough in himself where he just says ‘that’s me, take it or leave it.’”

The participants in this study described the adolescent with AS as enjoying the company of self, or being a loner, finding solace in time alone and doing things they like by themselves. Ms. Kalz shared her personal thoughts on her son’s contentment: “I wanted Tim to find his own little niche and place. He has found that pretty much being off by himself.” Additionally, Ms. Notz commented on her son’s preference for being alone: “Since he was a little guy he has always been content being by himself; he has no need for being with other people, it seems like.”

Furthermore, the parents expressed how their child with AS enjoyed doing activities alone. Their interests, such as playing video games or talking about asteroids or numbers, appeared to consume a significant amount of time. Spending time with their own interests appeared to be extremely important to the adolescent with AS. In her book, *Pretending to be Normal*, Holliday Willey (1999), an adult with AS, echoed this sentiment when she recalled her own early adolescent years this way: “Not that I did not like the people in my group, I did. It was just that I would not have been terribly upset if I had been all alone and without a group to identify with. My own conversations and thoughts were always my best friends” (p.41). Conversely, other adults with AS have shared that they tried very hard to fit in when they were growing up but were not successful with this. In one study, one adult with AS stated that “fitting in and being myself was a paradox” (Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2002).

One reason that may explain the reason why adolescents with AS prefer to be alone is in their level of comfort in communicating with others. In this study, all participants commented on the adolescent with AS preferring adults over peers

for conversation. Ms. Notz stated, “James seems to get along better with the adults, probably because of the level of conversation, and maybe they’re more tolerant.” The reasoning for a preference of adult conversations was discussed by the participants as being related to their vast amount of knowledge on topics of interest. Also, adults are willing to follow the adolescent’s interest, while a peer might find it too detailed and possibly boring. Ms. Canue shared an example of her son’s expertise and interactions with adults.

“He has these expertise areas [and] people that we know, say, ‘Hey, Beau, I was on a trip and I went to’ and Beau will ask ‘what streets did you go on?’ Even though it [the conversation] is only what he likes, he will converse.”

This vast knowledge seems to give the adolescents with AS confidence, and they quickly engaged in conversations with adults. However, the study revealed the adolescents with AS were not shy about sharing information they knew with their peers in the classroom. The student with AS came into the classroom with strong knowledge, especially if the topic was of interest to him. Ms. Hoffer provided an example of this when she stated that, “sometimes these children have an unbelievable wealth of knowledge that they’re just waiting to share.” Another example of their vast knowledge transpired during a classroom observation when Ms. Hoffer had requested the students to name personality traits about a character in their reading book, and “Tim immediately listed comparable cartoon characters that had similar traits of the fictional person in their reading book.”

Mr. Fish shared how Beau will come and talk with him every day when he comes into class. “He’ll always come around and he wants to start up a conversation right away. I think one of his strengths is his confidence. His confidence in himself, because he’s not afraid to interject his answers when he knows something, or even if he knows something beyond that, he’s not afraid to express himself. Ms. Katz shared that “all the teachers have said when Tim has been in class everybody really pays attention to the things he says because some of the things he says is far above what is expected of him.”

Ms. Hoffer provided another example when she stated that, “Tim is such a trivia buff and when we have a movie, it feeds into that trivia and he wants that interaction [to share].” Finally, Mr. Fish added “to be honest with you, the class has learned from that kid [Beau], because he knows his stuff. He really does. He’s a pretty smart kid.”

An additional finding from this study supported some of the recommended adaptations for working with students with AS in the classroom. The described parents’ and teachers’ teaching styles revealed that there is a strong agreement between these two groups as to what is effective and beneficial for the adolescent with AS. The similar teaching style descriptors between the teacher and parent included breaking large tasks into smaller parts; providing structure and routine, including preparing the student with AS for upcoming changes; being organized

and teaching organizational skills; relating assignments to concrete experiences in their lives; working in small groups; using peers as mentors and models for appropriate social skills; and open communication between parents and teachers. These are strategies recommended in several published works (Attwood, 2007; Bashe & Kirby, 2001; Heflin & Alaimo, 2007; Myles & Simpson, 2003).

Conclusion

Even with all the fears surrounding the transition to the junior high school, the parents and teachers were satisfied with the progress that the students with AS were making. Academically, the parents and teachers were pleased with the intellectual abilities of the adolescents with AS, but continued to observe their social ineptness. However, they perceived them to be doing well socially overall and were pleased with the apparent contentment of the adolescent with AS and with the typical peers' increased understanding and acceptance.

In this study the social behaviors, such as appearance, maturity, preferring one's own company, difficulty communicating with peers and in using nonverbal communication, appeared to be factors as to why the adolescent with AS struggled with relationships with peers. However, both groups of students matured throughout the year, which resulted in more positive experiences for the students.

It appeared as though the inclusive and supportive nature exhibited by the parents and teachers had a positive effect on the students in the school. Typical peers were able to appreciate the knowledge and contributions of the students with AS and were supportive and helpful. Adolescents with AS appeared to be content with who they are, possibly because their parents and teachers celebrated who they were and included them in the typical, regular routine of the day, and because they also focused on the social development of these adolescents.

When reviewing the literature regarding the balance of social and academic development for the adolescent with AS, research indicated that the promotion of high academic standards was related to teachers creating supportive social contexts and developing a positive relationship with students (Stipek, 2006). In this study, the teachers appeared to have a balance between academics and teaching to social situations. This conclusion was based on participants testifying how they allowed the adolescent with AS to feel free to come and talk, and know that he would be listened to and respected. The essential key to building a successful support system was socially connecting to students to create a positive social atmosphere for learning.

It appeared as though the typical peers developed greater acceptance, perhaps through the modeling of the parents and teachers, and helped out when the student with AS was in need. That kind of support, both socially and academically, is important to the overall development of relationships between typical peers and

those with AS. Gutstein (2003) cited a study of teens with high-functioning autism and AS which suggested these students lack a real understanding of the emotional value of friendships. The findings of that study supported the importance of school and home working together to incorporate social strategies to help the adolescent with AS mature socially and develop relationships. By observing positive and inclusive attitudes and interactions, the possibility of true friendships between students with and without AS could become more commonplace.

Limitations of this study

1. This is a small study utilizing only six participants, which may not be applicable to all educational situations.
2. The participants are located in a small upper Midwestern town, which limits the results to be possibly unique to that size and location.
3. The adolescents with AS themselves were not interviewed, which limits the research to only parents' and teachers' perspectives.
4. General education teachers who had positive relationships with the students with AS were chosen, and the results of this study may have been different if a positive relationship between the teachers and students did not exist.

Recommendations for Future Studies

1. A qualitative study interviewing middle school adolescents with AS along with typical adolescents on the phenomenon of friendship.
2. A quantitative study looking at teachers and how they approach social skills in the classroom for adolescents with AS by using a survey on how they handle specific situations. Are the strategies teachers using the same for all students? What do they do specifically for students with AS?
3. A qualitative study with parents of young adults with AS who have gone through the school system 15-20 years ago to reflect on what they believed to be the schools' perceptions of students with AS and if they believe that influenced the programming/education for their child, and the pressure for the students with AS to conform.
4. As no professional literature was found specific to the adolescent with AS and maturation during junior high years, the completion of a longitudinal study to document the maturation process would provide parents and professionals with additional information and understanding.

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