What do we mean when we talk about Asperger’s?

Workshop presentation for the Ninth Annual National PACER Symposium about Children and Young Adults with Mental Health and Learning Disabilities

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Learning Objectives:
1. Appreciate that diagnoses are philosophical models that allow us to easily describe, research, and treat some patterns of human behavior.
2. Understand something of the history of the concept of autism and Asperger’s.
3. Learn how researchers in this field have contributed to our understanding of what it means to be a successful human being.

What do we know about autism spectrum disorders?
1. History of autism as a diagnosis – why so common now?
2. The controversy between lumpers and splitters and the nature of “evidence.”
   DSM-III to DSM-V
3. Traits observed in persons on the autism spectrum:
   Executive functions
   Social skills
   Language pragmatics, non-verbal communication, non-literal communication
   Sensory sensitivities
   Theory of mind and mirror neurons; impact on empathy and moral development
   Context blindness and weak central coherence
   Independent living skills
   Lack of initiative; lack of persistence
4. Comorbidities – If you’ve met one student with autism, you’ve met one student with autism.

   Intellectual Disability
   ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder)
   Learning disabilities
   OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder), getting "stuck"; restricted areas of interest
   Generalized anxiety and panic attacks; social anxiety
   Tics, fidgets, and stereotypies
   Dyspraxias, bowel issues, sleep problems, pain perception
   Seizures
   Depression – wear and tear
   Victimization – PTSD, trauma, attachment disorders
   Sleep disorders
   Psychoses

5. Future resolution:
   a) Moving targets – we’re researching outcomes while attempting to influence outcomes
   b) Genetics promises some answers
   c) Ways of studying the working brain

6. What teachers, counselors, and school administrators can do for students on the autism spectrum:
   a) Prevent bullying; teach communication and social skills
   b) Believe that the student is trying – understand and accommodate; suggested accommodations; impairment tends to increase through school years
   c) Identify islands of strength and build on them; watch for specific problems
   d) Stay tuned