

Executive Functioning and Theory of Mind

Individuals with Asperger Syndrome/HFA may often face challenges related to their ability to interpret certain social cues and skills. They may have difficulty processing large amounts of information and relating to others. Two core terms relating to these challenges are Executive Functioning and Theory of Mind. Executive Functioning includes skills such as organizing, planning, sustaining attention, and inhibiting inappropriate responses. Theory of Mind refers to one's ability to perceive how others think and feel, and how that relates to oneself. Both of these issues can impact the behavior of individuals with AS.

Difficulties in the area of Executive Functioning can manifest themselves in many different ways. Some individuals pay attention to minor details, but fail to see how these details fit into a bigger picture. Others have difficulty with complex thinking that requires holding more than one train of thought simultaneously. Others have difficulty maintaining their attention, or organizing their thoughts and actions. Executive Functioning difficulties can also be associated with poor impulse control. Temple Grandin once said: "I cannot hold one piece of information in my mind while I manipulate the next step in the sequence." Individuals with AS often lack the ability to use skills related to executive functioning like planning, sequencing and self-regulation.

Theory of Mind can be summed up as a person's inability to understand and identify the thoughts, feelings and intentions of others. Individuals with Asperger Syndrome/HFA can encounter have difficulty recognizing and processing the feelings of others, which is sometimes referred to as "mind-blindness". As a result of this mind-blindness, people with AS may not realize if another person's behaviors are intentional or unintentional. This challenge often leads others to believe that the individual with AS does not show empathy or understand them, which can create great difficulty in social situations.

Theory of Mind deficits can oftentimes have a large impact on individuals with AS. In the book *Asperger Syndrome and Difficult Moments* by Brenda Smith Myles and Jack Southwick, the authors illustrate social deficits caused by theory of mind:

- 1. Difficulty explaining ones behaviors*
- 2. Difficulty understanding emotions*
- 3. Difficulty predicting the behavior or emotional state of others*
- 4. Problems understanding the perspectives of others*
- 5. Problems inferring the intentions of others*
- 6. Lack of understanding that behavior impacts how others think and/or feel*
- 7. Problems with joint attention and other social conventions*
- 8. Problems differentiating fiction from fact*



Ozonoff, Dawson, and McPartland, in their book *A Parent's Guide to Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism*, offer several suggestions for helping children with AS/HFA succeed in the classroom. To address challenges in the area of Executive Functioning, they offer the following suggestions:

- Use a weekly homework log that is sent from school to home and back, keeping all parties informed of work due and progress.
- Assignment checklists can be used to break large, often overwhelming tasks into manageable unites.
- Day planners, including PDAs, can help organize your child.
- A posted classroom schedule.
- Allocation of sufficient time for instructions, repetition of instructions, and individual student assistance.
- Preferential desk placement near teacher and away from distractions

