

Atypical Learners and God's Atypical Love



It is good for everyone to learn that God created each of us to be unique children of God to love and serve Him. He has a plan to develop the gifts of these children with ADD, Asperger, or SPD and to use them in His kingdom.

SOME CHILDREN ARE JUST DIFFERENT. SOME OVERREACT TO SOUNDS, OTHERS ARE CLUELESS ABOUT THE MOST BASIC OF SOCIAL SKILLS, SOME SOUND FUNNY WHEN THEY TALK OR MAYBE ARE OBSESSED ABOUT A SINGLE TOPIC. EACH CHILD HAS ASPECTS OF PERSONALITY OR PREFERENCES THAT MAKE HIM OR HER UNIQUE, AND ALL CHILDREN HAVE DIFFICULTY PAYING ATTENTION AT TIMES, OR ARE AWKWARD AROUND UNFAMILIAR PEOPLE.

For some children, these behaviors occur more frequently or are more pronounced. Children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Asperger Syndrome (Autism Spectrum Disorder), or Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) have unique challenges and often unique gifts. Children who learn in a different way are sometimes referred to as atypical learners. Children with the mentioned neurological circumstances are three examples of atypical learners.

Children with ADD have significant problems with cognitive inhibition. They cannot block out information that is unimportant. They are unable to direct their own focus and are easily distracted by sights and sounds. This also shows in their inability to organize behavior for learning. Their social skills often suffer because they cannot organize information regarding other children to be able to predict reactions. They can fall into the pattern of being the class clown because their unpredictable behavior is often humorous.

While students with ADD may do poorly in

class, there is no indication they have a lack of intelligence. They can be a challenge as they require almost constant redirection, but the effort is worth it. With proper diagnosis and treatment, these children often use their disability to their advantage as adults.

Children with Asperger Syndrome are often identifiable because they have a confined area of interest. Such a child may have a strong interest in cars or insects to the exclusion of anything else. They can be clumsy and exhibit speech patterns that are formal and lack inflection. They especially struggle with social skills as they have difficulty reading social cues. Difficulty relating to peers often pushes them further into their interest, contributing to their lack of social skills. These children do not lack intelligence; they just seem to be somewhat restricted in how they are able to use it. They have many gifts that can be nurtured with proper diagnosis and treatment.

Sensory Processing Disorder overlaps both ADD and ASD. Children with this disorder have difficulty processing information gained

through their senses. Some children over-react to stimuli, causing them to complain about the feel of clothes or the volume of a noise. Others can under-react to stimuli, which can encourage them to eat foods with strong tastes or to seek touch by being in the face and space of peers. This need to feed their senses can cause social skills issues because it keeps these children from developing a sense of empathy regarding what behaviors other children prefer. Again, this is not a disorder that affects intelligence. There are therapies that can help a child reach his or her potential.

An expert, such as a developmental pediatrician or a neuropsychologist, should diagnose the disorders. If you have concerns that your child may fit the patterns of these disorders, seek professional help through your school or family doctor. An occupational therapist would be especially helpful in providing therapy or referrals.

Living with, playing with, or working with a child with ADD, Asperger, or SPD can be a challenge. It's difficult with some to get them to stay on track; with others it's difficult to distract them from their primary focus. When sensory issues are involved, the sensory need (an itchy shirt or the need to be touched) will take precedence over anything else at that moment. Typical behaviors for these children are unexpected behaviors when compared to other children. However, once you get to know the child and his or her particular needs, their behavior can become more predictable.

If you have an ADD, Asperger, or SPD child in your life, try to live in his or her shoes. See if you can figure out the reason behind the behavior. Remember that the reason for the behavior is quite likely to be atypical, and look for other possibilities than the most obvious. The same input for two different children will result in

different output when the brain processes things in an atypical way. One child will love a large group of children for the potential play; another child will be terrified because of the potential for

misunderstanding. One child will revel in the fact that school teaches so many different things while another child will prefer to focus on only one topic and may be annoyed at any teaching that doesn't center on the primary interest. Most children in my kindergarten classes were quite eager to learn to write their name. I remember needing to bargain with one child: "First we practice your name, and then you can go back to reading the dinosaur book." We got to our goal in a less than conventional way, but we got there.

Just like typical children have a need to learn, play, and grow, so do atypical children. And just like typical children, those who have ADD, Asperger, or SPD will learn best when around other children. Homeschooling can be a great option for some children, but a good elementary school can also be great. Variety in a classroom is a good thing!

The children who are typical learners can be a great blessing to those who need extra understanding; they serve as peer models and can offer reassurance and encouragement. Similarly, our atypical learners have much to offer others. They share their gifts and give opportunity for all to learn empathy. It is good for everyone to learn that God created each of us to be unique children of God to love and serve Him. He has a plan to develop the gifts of these children with ADD, Asperger, or



SPD and to use them in His kingdom.

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34–36).

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For Discussion:

- ▶ Can you think of children from your past who were different? How were they different? Did you find a way to accept them?
- ▶ How do you react when your children are critical of others who are different?
- ▶ What are the benefits of teaching children to be tolerant of differences? What are the disadvantages?
- ▶ What can you do to be more supportive of parents who have children who are atypical learners?

For Further Study:

- ▶ For more information about neurological disorders you can start with www.ninds.nih.gov.