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Mentoring: The Great Asperger's Awakening

By Robin Aronow-Meredith

James uncharacteristically burst through the front door with true sense of urgency and breathing heavily from excitement. When he saw his brothers and me sitting in the living room together, he stopped cold in his tracks. I could tell he was trying to compose himself. We called him over to visit with us.

“So how was your time with Paul?”

“OK,” he mumbled under his breath as he glanced at me from the corner of his eye and then quickly looked down.

I understood. He wanted to talk alone.

James had just returned from a night out with his mentor, Paul. They had joined a few of Paul's friends at a nearby ice hockey rink to watch a game. And even though James never took to sports, spectator or otherwise, it was obvious he had just had a great evening out, and with a group of strangers! He wanted to tell me all about it.

There is a “Great Asperger's Awakening” taking place. Substantial efforts are being made in public and private sectors to help bridge the social gap between Asperger's individuals (AIs) and their neurotypical (NT) counterparts. One benediction of this awakening is a growing number of mentoring relationships. These wide-ranged, many-faceted endeavors can be educational and beneficial to both the person with AS and the mentor.

In a mentoring relationship an AI is paired with an NT, whose goal is to impart social navigational skills to the person with Asperger's. The need for this service is immeasurable. As children with Asperger's grow into adults, the structures lessen that once existed to help them cope with the daily demands of life. Social lifelines fade away. For example, less and less routine is built into a person's daily schedule than during the grade school days. The consequences of a social faux pas become more serious in areas of college life or employment than they were during cafeteria time or recess. For some, dependence on mom and dad to structure their day or right whatever goes wrong is no longer acceptable nor available. The mentor brings a sense of social normalcy, a tangible example of what socialization looks like, the flesh and bones of walking and talking in the coffee shop, in the classroom, and in the workplace. The mentor also brings a sense of emotional normalcy as he becomes a friend, someone to talk to and confide in,

someone with whom the AI can volley verbal and emotional exchanges. The AI learns to think about the needs and interests of someone else, and learns to accept the emotional care and support of someone outside the family.

AIs are as different from each other in personality and functionality as are snowflakes that fall from the sky. A “one-size-fits- all” approach to mentoring will never achieve success for the mentor nor the AI. There are unique challenges that both need to address.



NT Mentor

Mentors are often individuals preparing for a career in communication disorders or special education. They come with built-in motivation, but keeping the momentum high can prove challenging at times. The mentor can soon feel the relationship is one-sided, characterized by all give and no take, all output and no input, all talking with little response from the AI. When hiccups occur in the relationship, mentors can keep the following points in mind.

If the AI does not respond verbally and seems nervous when you’re both together, try to spend time with him in a familiar social setting, a family gathering, for instance. You’ll get a sense of what “normal” interactions look like for the AI and have more realistic expectations.

Set up a second contact person in case you cannot easily reach the AI by phone or email.

Don’t depend on words of encouragement (a thank you or positive closure to the outing) or typical emotional cues (smile, hug) from the AI as measurements of satisfaction or contentment. Many AIs have low affect. They can be having the time of their lives and still have a sullen or nondescript look on their face. The feelings are present; the outward signs of those feelings may be absent or mismatched.

Social awkwardness and compulsive/obsessive behaviors can be embarrassing and difficult to deal with in public. Make sure the AI’s parent or caregiver explains what to expect, behavior triggers, and how to handle a behavioral meltdown or crisis.

Don’t be afraid of being pedantic and overemphasizing what you are there to teach. Even though you and your AI may be the same age, you are the social guide. The AI is depending on you to spell out social and behavioral goals in clear, concrete ways, and model appropriate social actions. It may be helpful to the AI to keep a running social commentary going about what you’re doing and why. The social thinking and perspective taking that comes almost naturally to the mentor in a situation may be the very thing that’s difficult for the AI to grasp. “Talk out loud” through situations as needed.

Keep a journal to track progress and positive interactions. It’s great encouragement for times when things aren’t going so well.

Mentoring can become overwhelming, especially if the chemistry suffers. Agree upfront on a time frame when both parties can meet and discuss whether or not to continue the mentoring relationship. Some mentors stop after a few months; others continue much longer.

AI

It is very likely your mentor will not understand your verbal or body language or your reasoning. Be patient and take the time to explain yourself. Your mentor will grow personally from learning to see life through your perspective.

Make yourself available. Give your mentor several times in the week when you can get together. Be sure to respond to phone calls and emails which bear invitations.

Write down meeting times on a calendar or date book. Ask someone you live with to help you remember when and where you are meeting your mentor.

Expect some discomfort and anxiety when you first meet with your mentor; the two of you are strangers just getting to know one another. Give the new friendship time to grow. If you feel really uncomfortable, tell someone who can help you decide whether or not this mentor is a good match for you.

Let your mentor take the lead in making plans and carrying them through. Don't be a control freak. You are in this relationship to learn.

Keep a journal or a folder on your computer desktop where you jot down a few thoughts after each meeting. Include what you thought went well, what you didn't enjoy and why, and what changes you would like to see in your life as a result. Then talk about this with a parent or therapist who can support you in making these changes.

James and I stole away to the kitchen where he spent a good fifteen minutes telling me about dinner out, what he ate, how he paid for himself, the subjects he discussed with Paul's buddies, and how he was invited back to "be social" with everyone in a few weeks.

"I think they liked me," he said with a grin before getting up from the kitchen table.

A good mentoring relationship is a win-win situation. The mentor grows personally and professionally; the individual with AS develops skills that will last a lifetime. For both, it can be a life changing relationship long remembered.

Mentoring Session Ideas

Possible areas of skill development to work on with the AI include:

- Decision making skills
- Managing finances
- Study skills

- Small talk
- Networking at a social gathering
- Job interviews
- Building a Facebook account
- Telephone and email interaction
- Dating

Tips for Making the Relationship a Success

1. **Find a good match**
 - a. Make sure your AI is comfortable with the sex and personality of his mentor.
 - b. Make sure both parties share some common interests.
2. **Educate the mentor**
 - a. Outline what your AI really needs in terms of support or social skills training.
 - b. Provide information so the mentor understands the idiosyncrasies of *your* AI.
3. **Agree on a plan**
 - a. Most programs suggest spending 1-2 hours per week together.
 - b. Find a good time and place to meet.
 - c. Establish a set schedule so the AI can anticipate the outing without any uncomfortable surprises. (Unless of course one skill to be learned is how to deal with surprises and be spontaneous.)
4. **Find interesting activities to do together**
 - a. The decision making process should be a joint effort.
 - b. If needed, work on skills like perspective taking or negotiation so the AI feels he has some control over the time together.
5. **Define clear goals and expectations**
 - a. Mentoring an AI can be full of ambiguity. Set clear, tangible and measurable goals for your child. For instance: learning to respond to a question with two sentences rather than a simple “yes or no.” Or, being sure to leave his cell phone on to intercept phone calls.
 - b. Discuss the do’s and don’ts of the mentoring relationship with the AI. For instance: how often the AI can contact the mentor outside their time together.
 - c. Based on family values, clearly define activities that are off-limits, such as certain movies, bars and drinking, use of profanity, etc.
6. **Don’t be afraid to switch to a different mentor** if personalities obviously clash or the AI feels extremely uncomfortable with the mentor. Look for a better match. However, do give the relationship time to take hold. For many AIs, this social relationship will be strange at first, and the AI will need time to adjust.

BIO

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