

Hans Asperger (1906-1980)

Hans Asperger studied mental abnormalities in children in Vienna, Austria, in the early twentieth century. Asperger was one of the early researchers who studied the syndrome that was later named after him, Asperger's Syndrome. Asperger described the syndrome in his 1944 publication *Die Autistischen Psychopathen im Kindesalter* (Autistic Psychopathy in Childhood). At that time, the syndrome was called autistic psychopathy, and Asperger noted that characteristics of the syndrome included lack of sympathy, one-sided conversations, and difficulty forming friendships. Asperger's work led to the recognition of Asperger's Syndrome as a disorder that results from abnormal development, and the syndrome was later classed on the autism spectrum.

Asperger was born on 18 February 1906 on a farm in Hausbrunn, Austria, to Sophie Asperger and Johann Asperger, the eldest of three sons. While both of his parents grew up in farming communities, Asperger was raised in the city of Vienna with his youngest brother Karl Asperger, as his middle brother had died early in childhood. In elementary school, Asperger studied language and often memorized passages by Franz Grillparzer, the national poet of Austria. In the 1920s, the teenage Asperger joined the youth movement called Bund Neuland, which formed in Austria and Germany after World War I. The youth movement included outdoor activities and freedom of speech not possible in many venues of Asperger's social class in Austria. Even though some in the movement described Asperger as distant, he met a few individuals there who became his life-long friends.

Asperger later described his connection with the youth movement as influential to his interest in special pedagogy. Special pedagogy is a field about the theory and practice of alternative education for those who have difficulties with personalization and socialization. Special pedagogy also examines the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual difficulties that affect the development of one's personality. Asperger's difficulties with personal relationships and his talent for languages, which his daughter Maria Asperger Felder described, continued throughout his life. Based on the characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome, which is typically associated with impairments in reciprocal social interaction and a high verbal quotient (IQ), some autism researchers like Christopher Gillberg hypothesized that Asperger himself may have been affected with a form of autism.

After attending the Humanistic Gymnasium in Vienna, which included a Latin and Greek curriculum, Asperger began medical studies under the direction of Franz Hamburger at the University of Vienna. He completed his doctorate as a pediatrician in 1931. After finishing medical school, Asperger began a residency at the University Children's Hospital in Vienna. After working as a resident for one year in 1932, Asperger replaced the head physician of the Heilpädagogik (Special Pedagogy) department of the hospital.

Except for a brief interruption in 1934, when he visited the psychiatric clinic in Leipzig, Germany, Asperger remained chair of the special pedagogy department at the University Children's Hospital for twenty years. In 1935, Asperger married Hanna Kalmon, with whom he had five children, three daughters and two sons. Two of his daughters also worked in medicine and three of his children pursued careers in agriculture.

In March 1938, Austria became part of the German Reich and the principles of National Socialism Eugenics were officially integrated into research at all levels of teaching. The National Socialism Eugenic principles included influence on spouse choice for marriage, forced sterilization for certain diseases or populations, compulsorily abortions, and euthanizing individuals with disabilities.

In October 1938, Asperger presented a lecture at the University Children's Hospital titled "Das Psychisch Abnormel Kind" (The Mentally Abnormal Child) in which he discussed his research about

developmentally disabled children he worked with at the hospital. Because the lecture topic might have been interpreted as conflicting with the laws of National Socialism, Asperger outlined the characteristics of what he called the autistic psychopaths and emphasized their benefit to the employment sector. In his lecture, Asperger introduced the term autistic psychopathy, a definition of the mentally abnormal child based on Eugen Bleuler's definition from 1911. Bleuler, a psychiatrist who worked in Switzerland, had used the term autism to describe the reclusive, self-centered behavior of schizophrenic patients, behaviors that Asperger saw in his own patients. In 1938, Asperger's lecture was published in the *Wiener Klinischen Wochenzeitschrift* (Vienna Weekly Clinical Newspaper).

In 1944, Asperger published his research paper "Die Autistischen Psychopathen im Kindesalter" (Autistic Psychopathy in Childhood). In the paper, Asperger described children with creative intelligence who mastered speech but made clumsy movements. The publication discussed Asperger's research on autistic psychopathy and presented multiple case studies of what he called autistic psychopathy. The symptoms of autistic psychopathy were later redefined as a disorder and named after him as Asperger Syndrome.

After World War II, in 1946 Asperger became the interim chair of the University Children's Hospital. In 1948, Asperger co-founded the *Österreichische Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Heilpädagogik* (Austrian Association for Special Pedagogy), an organization focusing on interdisciplinary research, training, and networking for special pedagogy. In 1952, Asperger published his book *Heilpädagogik. Einführung in die Psychopathologie des Kindes für Ärzte, Lehrer, Psychologen, Richter und Fürsorgerinnen* (Special Pedagogy. Introduction to the Psychopathology of the Child for Doctors, Teachers, Psychologists, Judges, and Social Workers). The book details the psychopathology of children and elaborates on autistic psychopaths as discussed in his original 1944 journal publication.

In 1957, Asperger became an associate professor of pediatrics at the University Children's Hospital in Innsbruck, Austria, and in 1962 he returned to Vienna for a similar position at the University Children's Hospital. One year later, Asperger founded the therapeutic healing department of the SOS-Children's Villages in Hinterbrühl, Austria. The following year, Asperger became the president of the International Society of Special Pedagogy. In 1977, Asperger retired from the University Children's Hospital, although he continued to lecture well into his seventies. Asperger died six days after his last lecture, on 21 October 1980 at the age of 75 years.

Many of Asperger's publications remained internationally unnoticed for decades, but in the late twentieth century his work received worldwide attention. In 1981 Lorna Wing, a psychiatrist in England, introduced the term Asperger's Syndrome to replace the expression autistic psychopathy. Uta Frith translated Asperger's publication *Die Autistischen Psychopathen im Kindesalter* (Autistic Psychopathy in Childhood) in 1991, which led to international recognition of Asperger's work. In 1992 the World Health Organization, headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, characterized Asperger's Syndrome as a developmental disorder in the tenth edition of *The International Classification of Disease (ICD)*. In 1994, the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* from the American Psychiatric Association included Asperger's Syndrome for the first time, classifying the syndrome under the heading of developmental disorders. The fifth edition of the DSM, published in 2013, included a new disorder, called the autism spectrum disorder, which reclassified Asperger's Syndrome under that spectrum.

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