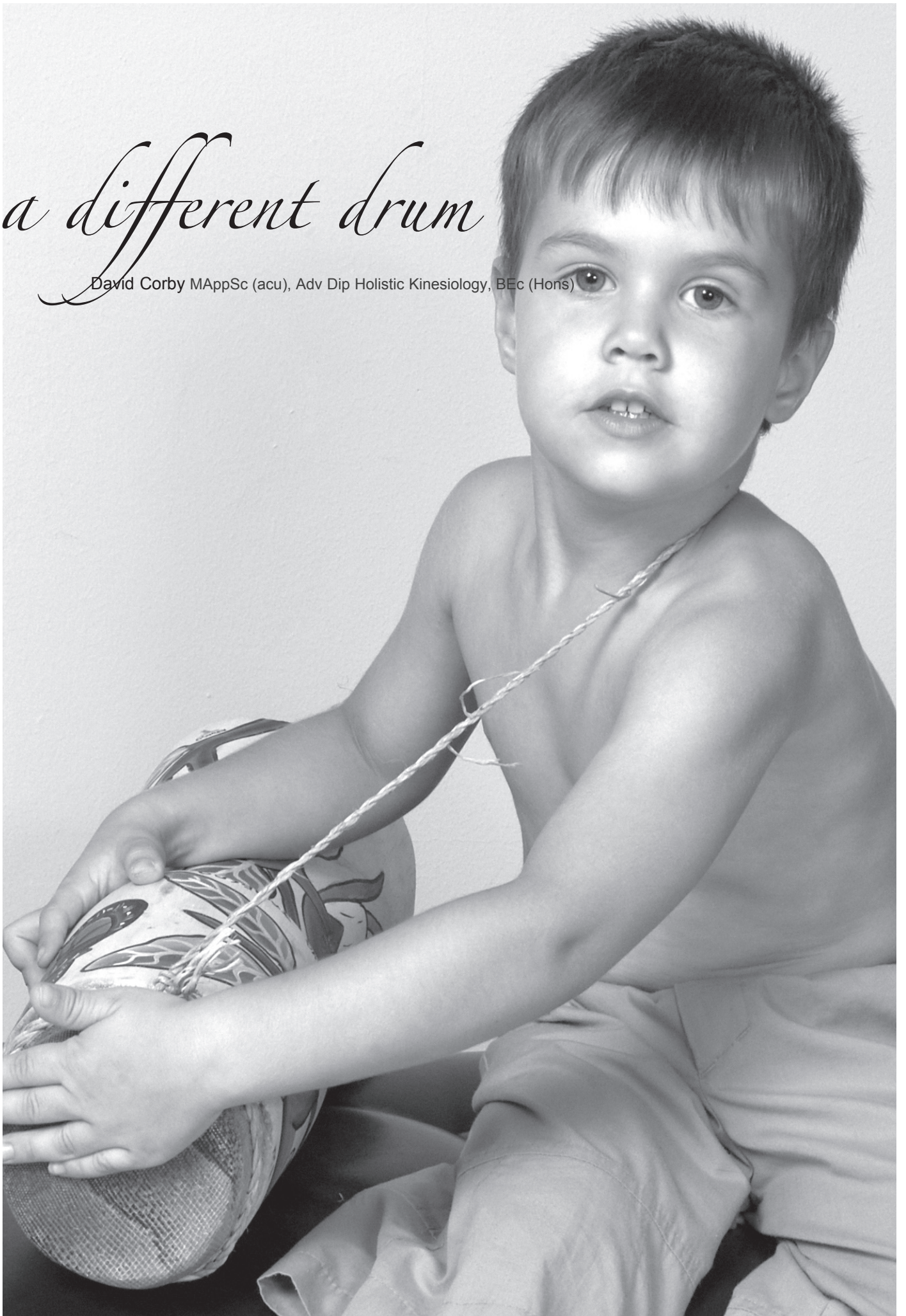


a different drum

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children with Asperger's Syndrome have a different way of seeing and relating to the world around them

Imagine having a child who finds it very difficult to fit in with other kids, teachers and any unstructured social environment. He wants to have friends, but continues to fail to make or maintain relationships. What makes it worse is he realises his inadequacy in social situations but can't seem to do anything about it. His social ineptness feeds a poor self image, which can lead to despondency and in some cases depression. This is often the situation confronting a child with Asperger's Syndrome.

Asperger's Syndrome has gained recognition over the past ten years as an increasing number of children are being diagnosed with it. Asperger's is closely related to autism without mental retardation, or what is sometimes called Higher Functioning Autism. Asperger's is also sometimes initially diagnosed as Attention Deficit Syndrome because many symptoms are common to both diagnoses.

DEFINING ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

Children with Asperger's Syndrome usually have

- Normal to above-normal IQ
- A good vocabulary
- Marked deficiencies in social skills, particularly when in unstructured environments
- Difficulty coping with changes or transitions - for example, the transition from school to home at the end of school term
- Obsessive routines and preoccupation with a subject of interest
- Sensitivity to sounds, sights, smells and tastes
- A tendency to interpret literally what is said
- Difficulty reading non-verbal cues
- Difficulty determining body space
- Clumsiness and lack of coordination
- Exceptional skill in a particular area

One element common to these symptoms is the child seems to be missing a felt instinct for their environment, viewing their world literally rather than taking cues from body language, tone and context.

Another defining characteristic of Asperger's Syndrome is over-sensitivity to sensory information. This makes it very difficult to learn in classroom situations as any

noises or movements are very distracting. For example, children with Asperger's Syndrome often jump in response to loud noises or sirens. These trigger survival responses and anxiety. The child may even show signs of shock and often can take a long time to calm down.

We all respond to loud noises to a certain extent. For example, loud sounds in movies can get your heart pumping and put you on the edge of your seat. But imagine being like that constantly, with everyday noises prompting that response. It becomes very difficult to feel calm or relaxed because you are constantly over-stimulated.

My Asperger's clients become more focused when the stress in the areas of brain that process sensory information is defused. One of my clients recently completed a whole exam for the first time. This was a big achievement for him because he usually finds it too difficult to sit and concentrate for any length of time.

One-to-one teaching also helps people with Asperger's Syndrome to focus because there are fewer distractions.

BAD PARENT SYNDROME

Children with Asperger's Syndrome see the world in a different way from the "norm". As a result they often appear to overreact or react in inappropriate ways. The child finds it very difficult to adapt behaviour to suit new situations so they often react out of stress, hitting other children or teachers, shouting abuse, or reacting angrily to suggestions. Parents often feel that people look at their child's behaviour and think what a bad parent they must be. At the same time their child looks up at them and wonders what's going on - why is this person being nasty to me?

Many parents have difficulty coming to terms with their child's behaviour. It's hard to keep in mind that their child, who looks normal/ sees the world very differently. Parents say discipline is not always constructive with Asperger's Syndrome and that often it's best to give the child time out to calm down. This can be difficult in a school setting and it takes time to educate the teachers as to how best respond to the child.



CLINICAL EXPERIENCES WITH ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

There are many theories about the cause of Asperger's Syndrome. In my practice I have found there are many contributing factors. One common theme is the mother often experienced a shock while the baby was in utero. When a mother becomes stressed it affects the foetus, though you would expect the baby to calm down once the mother relaxes. It seems for children with Asperger's Syndrome that the initial shock is sufficient to trigger a change in their sensitivity to the outside world. Perhaps this increased sensitivity is a subconscious response to the need to avoid a similar shock in the future.

I have found that de-stressing the processing of information from the senses is critical to most clients with Asperger's Syndrome. For example, in one recent session I worked on the sense of touch with a nine-year-old child. At the beginning of the session I asked him to give his mother a hug, as a way of simulating one aspect of the stress around touch. He didn't want to give her a hug but was comfortable with shaking her hand. I then assessed and defused stress in different brain areas to do with touch. At the end of the session I asked him if he wanted to give his mum a hug. He looked at me, smiled and said yes. He then went over to his mother and gave her a big hug.

It's important to understand that this child's previous reluctance was not due to a lack of love but simply because physical contact was stressful for him. Touch is important not just for tactile contact but for many

aspects of brain development and learning. It's vital for fine motor movement because our sense of balance and coordination rely in part on information from our feet and skin. This feedback helps the brain adjust the tension of our muscles and keep us upright.

People with Asperger's Syndrome also tend to be over-sensitive to sound and visual stimulation, which makes it difficult to concentrate. It also makes it hard to relax. It's important that teachers don't yell at these children because that can trigger the kids' survival mechanisms. The outcome may be an inappropriate response such as hitting the teacher to make them stop yelling.

This survival response is by nature instinctual with very little conscious rational thought involved, in other words, the child has little choice over how to react. We all react in this way at times. Perhaps in an argument we say inappropriate things that we wouldn't say if we were clear-headed. When we feel threatened, our survival circuits can take over and part of that response is to rum down our ability to reason and turn up our ability to respond instinctively - fight or flight. This response is appropriate when there's a truck bearing down about to run you over. It would be no use wasting time thinking about what a pretty colour scheme the truck has before you were splattered. The best response is to react and flee rather than think first.

At other times, this survival reaction is triggered inappropriately. For example, your mind may go blank as you stand up in front of a group of people to give a

speech. This happens because speaking in front of all those people makes you feel nervous, which prompts the survival circuits to kick in and your reasoning centres to turn off. This is the exact opposite of what you most need at the time: you want your mind to continue to function and remain calm instead of have the impulse to run away (the fight or flight response).

People with Asperger's Syndrome have these survival reactions constantly because of their over-sensitivity to the environment. One of the most important therapeutic goals is to tone down this sensitivity to give them greater choice over their responses. One of the outcomes of my clinical work with Asperger's Syndrome is to reduce the time the client takes to become calm and re-evaluate.

For example, a parent told me recently that her son shouted at her on the way to school in the morning but was calm enough to apologise before he hopped out of the car. Though it may not seem like a major thing for a parent of a normal child, for her it was a huge breakthrough, as it meant her son was not obsessing about what happened all through the day. This type of improvement also supports the child's self image because they feel more in control of their reactions.

SUPPORTIVE THERAPIES

There is a range of supportive therapies available for people with Asperger's Syndrome. Many of these approaches are complementary, so it's often best to tackle the condition from different angles. The conventional medical approach is to help the child learn systemised responses to certain situations, encourage structured and supervised social interaction, train them in non-verbal cues and generally try to provide coping mechanisms to make social interaction smoother.

Some children with Asperger's Syndrome prescribed Ritalin, with varying results, some parents seeing their child respond well and others not. Doctors vary in their enthusiasm for the drug, with many such as Dr Robyn Cosford of the Northern Beaches Care Centre in Sydney seeing it as a last resort for children and families who are struggling to cope.

Dr Cosford prefers to target the underlying causes rather than use drugs to mask the symptoms. She believes a child's overall health and wellbeing have a significant effect on their behavior and ability to learn. In particular, she finds children with Asperger's Syndrome often have nutritional deficiencies and sensitivities, gastrointestinal and immune dysfunction and hidden infections. She also assesses them for the presence of heavy metals and toxins. When these conditions are properly addressed, the Asperger's symptoms often improve greatly.

Nutritional considerations are particularly important for children with Asperger's Syndrome because they are often fussy eaters with limited diets. They also live with relatively high stress, which increases their need for certain nutrients. As a result, nutritional deficiencies are fairly common. Parents usually say their child is much happier if they can keep them away from junk food, preservatives, artificial colours and sugars. Parents often find their child's mood swings after ingesting these foods, and high or low blood sugar can result in difficult behavior.

My own specialty is holistic kinesiology, a modality that uses muscle feedback to assess the client and find the causes of stress in the body and mind. My experience with children with Asperger's Syndrome has shown the condition requires skills in a broad range of areas of kinesiology, particularly in the acupressure system, nutrition, primitive reflexes, and sound-, colour- and movement-based therapy. Acupressure is especially useful because the acupuncture system is intimately linked with the body's neurology. When used in a way that's consistent with the Chinese tradition of acupuncture, acupressure enables the practitioner to physically access and defuse stress in different brain areas and for each sense.

Chiropractors and osteopaths, particularly those who specialise in primitive reflexes or cranial work, can help to improve basic coordination, the foundation on which higher-order function is built. Sometimes these reflexes are preventing better function. Neuro-feedback training allows you to train the brain to produce more appropriate brainwave patterns. These patterns are altered through computer games based on operant conditioning. This conditioning helps to normalise brain patterns.

Ondrej Bursik of Neuro-development and Samonas Sound Therapy Centre in Sydney says when children with Asperger's Syndrome go through these types of programs there is often a significant improvement in obsessive or compulsive behaviour. Relationships with their family often improve as brain patterns normalise. Samonas Sound Therapy is commonly used in treating autism, including Asperger's Syndrome. It may be particularly appropriate where

- The auditory system is over-sensitive
- The child is experiencing auditory processing difficulties
- The child finds it difficult to filter out background noises and focus on a conversation

Magnetic therapy is also being more widely used for children with severe learning difficulties. Studies have shown that quadrapolar magnetic flux generator systems, for example, can improve the functioning of cell membranes and enzymes and help to stabilise the nervous system. Effects can vary, but many children become calmer and some see major improvements in a wide range of symptoms, such as bed wetting, and in social interaction.

People with Asperger's Syndrome require understanding and support. They see the world differently and react accordingly. We need to look beyond their actions to the beauty inside and help remind them of their own worth. Much can be done to help, with many therapies providing not just relief from the symptoms but often much improved function. These therapies are almost all complementary, allowing parents to choose the combination that best suits their child's individual circumstances.

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