



Hampshire Country School's Experience with Asperger's Syndrome and Nonverbal Learning Disabilities

Since its beginning, Hampshire Country School has had a special interest in students of high ability whose difficulties might today be described as Asperger's syndrome or nonverbal learning disabilities.

By the middle 1940's, when Austrian Hans Asperger first described the bright, narrowly focused children whose symptoms now bear his name, Boston psychologist Henry Patey and his wife Adelaide Patey, a teacher, were already sharing their home with their first sensitive and gifted student. By the end of 1948 their home had expanded and become a school in New Hampshire.

When Hampshire Country School was founded there were no diagnostic labels for children who were exceptionally bright but at the same time experiencing severe difficulty adapting to socially complex, fast paced, and high pressure settings. In fact, the Pateys did not necessarily view such children as handicapped. They often described their students as gifted and emotionally fragile. They viewed their students' special abilities and unusual personal qualities not as disabilities but as assets justifying the special consideration and nurturing provided by their small school.

Because the writings of Hans Asperger were not translated from the original German for several decades, few in the English-speaking world were aware of his work until the 1980's. It was also in the 1980's that Canadian psychologist Byron Rourke began publishing studies of children whose difficulties he described as nonverbal learning disabilities. The term is often misunderstood by those encountering it for the first time, and many people incorrectly assume it refers to children who are nonverbal. However, Dr. Rourke used the term to refer to children whose difficulties are in nonverbal areas, such as social skills. In contrast to children with the better known verbal learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, children with nonverbal learning disabilities are extremely verbal, tending to excel especially in reading and factual learning. Such students are often highly successful in school, but only if they are not overpowered by the social difficulties they experience while trying to function in large, socially complex schools with peers and teachers who have little understanding or tolerance for the difficulties presented by a child who is obviously bright and capable in other ways.

During the 1950's, 1960's, and 1970's, long before most of the educational and mental health world became aware of such students, Hampshire Country School was developing its understanding of the unusual children and adolescents who have such severe problems in other settings but can become talented, friendly, humorous, and successful in a small, manageable school community where their skills, interests, and temperament are understood and respected by those around them.



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Before they come to Hampshire Country School , many students have been in special educational or treatment programs designed primarily to help them manage their “disabilities.” They are frequently given the diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome or nonverbal learning disabilities (NLD). Some may also receive such diagnoses as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bipolar disorder, depression, Tourette's syndrome, obsessive compulsive disorder, or some other label. There is no question that some cases of Asperger's syndrome and NLD may be extremely debilitating; and such children may indeed need special education, major therapeutic intervention, and/or medication. A surprising number, however, may actually need just a supportive social world that they can understand, a community that shares and values their interests and abilities, and an environment that can tolerate or adapt to their social blunders and mistakes.

Hampshire Country School has never relied on diagnostic categories in approaching its students. In fact, the needs of such labeled students are very similar to the needs of many children who would not necessarily be given a diagnostic label: a need for personal guidance, attention, and support from caring adults; a need for a life style with clear expectations but also with tolerance for occasions when those expectations are not met; a need for a smaller, more manageable community without the overstimulation and pressure to conform often found in large schools; and a need for an educational program that provides a high level of intellectual challenge but also a slow enough pace to address basic weaknesses in specific skills and development.

Hampshire Country School is not just for students with Asperger's Syndrome, NLD or any other specific disability. However, for more than half a century, the school has made the education of high ability students with such difficulties its special interest and area of expertise.