

# “make a face”

The Connections Program at Canisius Offers Hope to Children with Asperger's Disorder



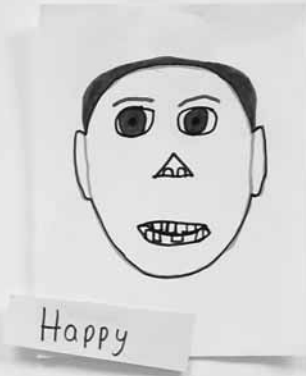
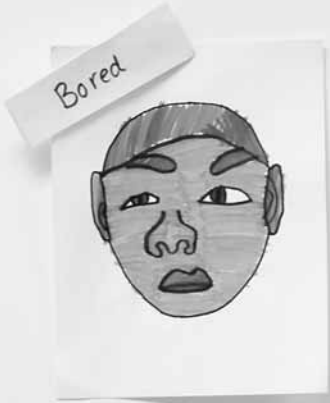
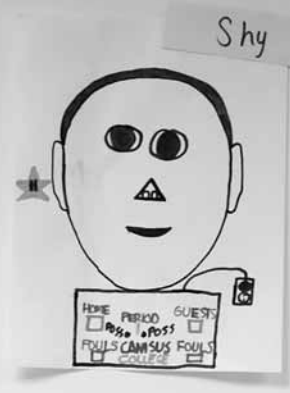
← Vincent

surprised



← Erick

sad



← George

angry

eleven year-old diego has a wealth of knowledge about dinosaurs that he is more than willing to share with anyone who will listen.

He knows the anatomy and physiology of each species and the time periods they roamed the earth. But while Diego can easily rattle off little-known facts about the Tyrannosaurus Rex or Stegosaurus, a simple give-and-take social interaction with classmates can be difficult for him. That is because Diego has Asperger's Disorder (AD), a high-functioning form of autism characterized by a lack of social skills, the inability to recognize emotions in others and narrow, often obsessive interests.

Diego and other AD children sometimes find it difficult to make friends. Some, like Diego, shy into a corner; others stand out in a crowd. Either way, they often become ripe targets for bullies.



To learn more about the Connections program or program research, visit:

[WWW.ASDRC.ORG](http://WWW.ASDRC.ORG)



Christopher Lopata, PsyD  
Director, Graduate Special Education  
Co-Director, Connections

Because the diagnosis is so new (the American Psychiatric Association officially recognized AD in 1994), there is a distinct lack of sound, empirical research and proven treatment options. But the new Connections treatment and research program at Canisius gives children like Diego, and their parents, good reason to be optimistic.

Established by Christopher Lopata, PsyD, director of graduate special education at Canisius and Marcus L. Thomeer, PhD, adjunct professor of graduate special education at Canisius and director of behavioral systems at Summit Educational Resources in Tonawanda, NY, Connections facilitates the social development and communicative skills of AD children, through the use of highly structured and targeted activities.

“We provide children with Asperger’s Disorder much needed treatment in social skills,” explains Lopata. “At the same time, we test treatment configurations to determine which lead to the greatest social growth and the greatest reduction in Asperger’s characteristics.”

Sometimes referred to as the ‘little professor’ or ‘geek syndrome,’ AD was first identified in the 1940s by Viennese pediatrician Dr. Hans

Asperger. Since that time, very little has been proven about the disorder. Those who study AD believe its cause is genetic; four out of five people with AD are male; and if you have one child with the disorder, the chances of having another are about two-and-a-half times greater than the general population’s.

Because of the recent explosion in the amount of diagnoses, current prevalence estimates vary. According to Lopata, the commonly cited rate is approximately 3.6 cases per 1,000 individuals. That translates into nearly 3,000 people (adults and children) in Western New York and 450,000 nationwide who are diagnosed with Asperger’s Disorder.

Unlike children with more severe forms of autism, those with Asperger’s Disorder have excellent verbal skills, average or above average intelligence and appear to develop normally in early childhood. Indications of the disorder emerge in second or third grade, around the same time that parallel play in normal children progresses into interactive play. Children with AD, however, turn inward and focus much more on their particular area of interest, often at an extreme level.

“We ordinarily make our diagnosis on these kids at eight, nine or 10 years of age,” says Richard L. Simpson, PhD, a nationally-known expert on Asperger’s Disorder and a professor of special education at the University of Kansas. Simpson co-authored a diagnostic scale used by clinicians across the country to diagnose children with AD. “It is only then that the social peculiarities are identified and some of the pragmatic, social language components show up.”

Among these peculiarities, says Lopata, is the inability of AD children to interpret non-literal statements.

“Kids with AD take phrases such as ‘it’s on the tip of my tongue’ or ‘I’ve got my eye on you’ literally,” explains Lopata. “They don’t realize it’s just a figure of speech.”

This is where Connections intervenes. Children attend the six-week summer program for six hours a day, five days a week. The program is intensive but the activities are designed to engage the children and hold their interests.

“Each activity has a therapeutic purpose,” says Lopata. “Nothing is there just for fun. But the best part is that the kids are having such a good time, they don’t even realize that it’s work.”

“Are we changing their behaviors in their day-to-day lives? YES!”



“Before, he was a lot more solitary. Now he actually goes outside and plays with children in the neighborhood, which he never did before.”

- Sue, Andy's Mother

Marcus L. Thomeer, PhD  
Adjunct Professor, Graduate Special Education  
Co-Director, Connections

Each day is composed of four 70-minute treatment cycles. Each cycle includes 20 minutes of intensive social skill instruction based on Skillstreaming. Skillstreaming was developed by the late Syracuse University Professor Arnold Goldstein, PhD, and involves instruction, modeling, role-playing and feedback. The last 50 minutes of each treatment cycle consists of a therapeutic activity in which the children practice social skills and emotion recognition, or work on expanding their interests.

For example, to address the inability to associate facial expressions with particular emotions, the children are asked to name an emotion, draw the facial expression associated with that emotion, and then talk about how that emotion can make a person feel physically. To reinforce this skill, students watch the popular children's movie *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, because the characters in the film exhibit a wide array of facial expressions. A Connections counselor pauses the movie at critical points and asks the children to explain what the character is feeling, how they know what the character is feeling and

how that character might be feeling physically.

“We are actually teaching, at a cognitive level, the physiological reactions to particular emotions,” explains Lopata.

Another therapeutic activity pairs children in teams to construct a popsicle-stick structure. The catch? Each child may only use one hand. The exercise forces children to communicate with one another and work cooperatively toward an end result.

“The idea is to teach them the appropriate social skill, provide them with multiple opportunities to practice that skill and set up contingencies that they have to exhibit those social skills,” says Thomeer. “We want the kids to have fun but we want to make sure they are learning something. Are we changing their behaviors in their day-to-day lives?”

According to the parents of Connections participants, the answer to this question is a resounding “yes.”

“This is the first time I can really see significant, long-term changes,” says Diego's mother, Idalia, whose son has attended several different AD programs across the country. “In just six weeks at Connections,

his consciousness has been raised.” Idalia adds that Lopata and Thomeer are the first Asperger's professionals she has encountered “who really ‘get’ these kids.”

Sue, of East Amherst, has a similar story. Her 11-year old son, Andy, attended the Connections program the past two summers.

“Relatives who had not seen Andy in a couple of years could not believe he was the same kid,” says Sue. “Before, he was a lot more solitary. Now he actually goes outside and plays with children in the neighborhood, which he never did before.”

Sue is especially grateful for the weekly parent-training sessions offered throughout the program, which teach her how to give Andy reinforcement and support at home, should he suffer a setback. She recalls one particular occasion in which Andy attempted a social interaction at school.

“He said, ‘Mom, I followed all the steps, I waited my turn to talk, I made eye contact, I introduced a new topic but they didn't want to talk to me.’ I praised him, I told him that he did everything right and it didn't work this time but that he would be successful another time.”

“Our ultimate goal is to build the foundation blocks for these children.”



Vincent practices his social skills in a game of TROUBLE with Connections Counselor Lilianne Smith '05.

**INFORMATION  
ON ASPERGER'S  
DISORDER :**

[www.autism-society.org](http://www.autism-society.org)  
[www.aspergerinfo.com](http://www.aspergerinfo.com)  
[www.aspergerssyndrome.org](http://www.aspergerssyndrome.org)

**BOOKS :**

**Asperger's Syndrome:**  
A Guide for Parents  
and Professionals  
*Tony Attwood and Lorna Wing*

**Asperger's Syndrome:**  
A Guide for Educators  
and Parents.  
*Richard L. Simpson and  
Brenda Smith Myles*



Connections Counselor Sarah Harvey inputs research data.

That support not only heartens Andy in his efforts but it encourages him to provide the same reassurance to first-time children in the program.

“Andy knows the drill and is like the leader of the group. He encourages the other children to participate,” says Lilianne M. Smith '05, a 2004 Connections counselor, who decided to pursue a career in school psychology after seeing, first-hand, the vast improvement of children in the program.

Like Smith, the majority of Connections' counselors are undergraduate psychology students at Canisius. Their main responsibilities are to conduct pre- and post-tests and log their findings. The work enables students to receive course credit and valuable hands-on experience with Asperger's Disorder, in a research-based environment.

“We monitor the counselors closely throughout the whole process because the program is research-based,” says Lopata. “For many of them, it is their first clinical experience but they learn an extremely structured and intensive research protocol that they might not be able to get anywhere else.”

Preliminary research of the program proves

Lopata and his AD professionals are on the right track. Pilot data from the 32 children who attended Connections in 2003 and 2004 shows significant improvements in their behaviors.

“We saw big jumps in their social skills and a reduction in their Asperger's symptoms,” notes Lopata. Although the sample size is too small to prove anything definitively, Lopata believes that following next summer's program, they will have the additional data needed to validate Connections' success.

But the true validation of the program's success will come when these children function as successful adults. To do so, they will need continued practice and follow-up treatments throughout their elementary and high school years. If properly treated, Simpson says, AD children develop into well-adjusted adults able to find a career (oftentimes in their narrow areas of interest) and a spouse. If left untreated, warns Simpson, they may become vulnerable to bad influences and crime because of their desire to fit in socially.

“This is a population of individuals that, as we learn more about them, we realize we better stay on top of; we better give them lots of continued support,” says Simpson.

For these reasons, Lopata and Thomeer hope to expand Connections into the elementary and high school systems, and to develop a dedicated parents' program.

“We want to teach teachers how to recognize Asperger's and reinforce the necessary social skills,” says Thomeer. “Academics are important but these kids need to know how to get along in the world.”

Elizabeth Farrell McCuen MS '97, an elementary school counselor for the Lakeshore School District, adds, “When we work with children with AD characteristics, our goal is to help them develop socially, emotionally and academically in the best possible way.” McCuen notes that children respond when they feel there is a consistent effort on their behalf. “What the Connections program does is bring together family, school, community and agency and this concerted effort is so important to the well-being of the child.”

As researchers like Lopata learn more about Asperger's Disorder, the number of diagnoses will increase, as will the demand for services. To date, Connections functions with limited funding and in-kind donations: Canisius College provides the space; Summit

Connections Counselor Adam Kehrer helps support the social interactions of AD children, as they play a game of Don't Break the Ice.



donates clinical and administrative support; and some private donations have been made. But in order to expand Connections, continue the research and make it affordable to those in need, the program needs grant funding from agencies such as the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the U.S. Department of Education and private foundations. Last summer, the tuition for Connections was \$950, which funded the counselors' stipends. Lopata and Thomeer reduced tuition by one-third from the previous summer but want to continue to lower the cost so that more children with AD can be served by Connections.

"Our ultimate goal is to build the foundation blocks for these children," adds Lopata, who believes the Connections program is a significant start at improving the quality of life for people with Asperger's, their families, their schools and communities.

Quality of life has already improved for Diego. Connections led him out of the corner and onto the playground, where he talks about more than just the Tyrannosaurus Rex.



← Miles

happy

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