

Book review: on website 'as teens' (http://www.asteens.co.uk/bookreviewlawrence_asdisorder.html)
21 / 09 / 2010

'Explaining Autism Spectrum Disorder' by Clare Lawrence, is intended to be a brief and accessible introduction for anyone who wishes to learn more about the basics of Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Lawrence meets her objectives admirably and for the busy, stressed individual has provided a book that is blessedly short but extremely informative getting quickly to the point without unnecessary extras.

In the Introduction Lawrence explains that ASDs are relatively common and throughout history many unusual thinkers, who also had problems in social situations, quite probably had Aspergers. We are given a definition of (ASDs) with a brief history of how the differing terms evolved.

Lawrence is a teacher and one of her children has Aspergers, so she is well qualified to write this book. I am immediately in tune with Lawrence as she makes it quite clear from the outset that ASD is a difference and that difference is often only a problem in a rigid society. She acknowledges that those with ASDs do have difficulties which distress them but she also understands that many have enormous gifts and highly desirable human qualities.

Lawrence briefly outlines the diagnostic criteria 'The Triad of Impairment' which, for anyone new to autism, is an essential prerequisite. I liked her use of real life examples which helped to explain and clarify the criteria. I was pleased to see that 'Unusual Sensory Processing' was addressed with examples which help to illustrate the point but also enliven the text throughout.

In the first chapter Lawrence explains why many with ASDs fail to do well in exams despite often being very able. I feel that she might have added that many will not co-operate with the exam syllabus if they find the material inaccurate, inane or are unable to see the point of the exercise. Many children I know deliberately sabotaged their chances well before the exams by refusing to co-operate and engage in what they see as 'idiotic' tasks.

In chapter two she looks at the varied picture of autism and breaks down the societal, somewhat stereotyped, image. It is important to do this because if we are truly to meet each individual's needs, we cannot see the condition as a cliché and offer blanket solutions. To some extent understanding autism is impossible - the condition is not quite tangible, resisting attempts to tie it down with a simple 'one

size fits all' definition. Language difficulties, neologisms, eye contact, special interests, depression/anxiety and anger are all covered with some amusing examples.

I find her style and dialogue extremely easy to read and uncomplicated, in the best sense of the word. Lawrence issues straightforward and specific advice to common concerns such as how to help someone who is anxious or angry. I found all her answers to be clear, encouraging and insightful. There is plenty of meat to this book but with no unnecessary fat.

In chapter three 'What Can We do to Help' she starts from the premise that we all need to fully comprehend the condition if we are to stand any chance of helping, rather than hindering, them. ASDs are not curable but if the individual issues are identified and understood everyone will benefit. The emphasis throughout this chapter is on the reader gaining knowledge, tools and creative approaches born out of taking a fresh and different look at the problem. The reader is urged to use their understanding to help them to communicate more effectively and to support the person with ASDs to reach their potential. Our responses to life, beliefs, view points are actually as habitual and ingrained as the person with ASDs, so it is just as important to look at ourselves and change, as it is to encourage the person with ASDs. Lawrence takes us through the diagnosis, explaining the process and helping parents who are resisting getting a diagnosis/label, to see the benefits. She also covers friendships and accepting ASD.

In chapter five 'What about School and work' Lawrence considers how everyone involved, whether parent, teacher or peers, can help play an integral role in success. She identifies key areas which need to be dealt with for successful outcomes and covers motivation, understanding the environment, flexi-schooling, crisis management and becoming part of a team.

In the conclusion Lawrence notes that many life experiences for people on the spectrum have not been positive, happy or successful and this book aims to educate people so that more of the next generation of ASD people fare better.

This should be one of the first books read by anyone wishing to understand and help those on the spectrum. I think it is a great read for busy parents and teachers. I liked it very much and would not hesitate to recommend it.

Anna Van Der Post
As Teens