Does this sound like your child?

What do the following people have in common - Albert Einstein, Alexander Graham Bell, Bobby Fischer, Henry Ford, George Washington, Mark Twain, Michelangelo, Vincent Van Gogh, Mozart, Ludwig II and Thomas Edison? Apart from being famous and having passed away, there IS something else. Perhaps if I add some contemporary people to the list you may get the clue - Bill Gates, Al Gore, Bob Dylan, David Helfgott, Robin Williams and Michael Palin.

If you haven’t worked it out - they are all people who displayed features of Asperger’s Syndrome. As we hear more of this condition in the media and educational literature, it is important to consider what the term actually means.

Asperger’s Syndrome is considered a disorder at the higher functioning end of the autistic continuum. Whereas a low-functioning child with autism “lives in a world of their own”, an Asperger’s child “lives in our world but in their own way”. People with Asperger’s can be very talented, creative and intellectual, as my list above attests.

Some common (but not exclusive) characteristics that may be displayed by the person with Asperger’s Syndrome are:

- **Insistence on sameness.** They may be easily overwhelmed by change. They are anxious and tend to worry obsessively when they don’t know what to expect. They get stressed, fatigued and are easily thrown off balance.

- **Impaired social interaction.** There may be a lack of understanding of the complex rules of social interaction. They may seem egocentric, fail to understand some jokes and often misinterpret social cues, facial expressions or tones.

- **Restricted range of interests.** People with Asperger’s may display preoccupations with unusual, intense fixations (sometimes obsessive). They may have trouble letting go of ideas and often refuse to listen or learn about things outside their limited field of interest.

- **Poor concentration.** They are often off task and distracted by any stimulus. Very disorganised and have difficulty sustaining focus in class.

- **Poor motor co-ordination.** They are often clumsy, awkward and often unsuccessful in games. Slow penmanship and clerical speed.

- **Academic difficulties.** The usually are above average in intelligence (especially verbal) but often lack comprehension skills. Their images are concrete and they struggle to think in the abstract. They have excellent rote learning abilities and usually parrot what they have read or heard. They are not good at problem solving.

- **Emotionally vulnerable.** Low self-esteem. Very self-critical and unable to tolerate making mistakes. Temper outbursts are common in response to stress and frustration. Interacting with people and coping with the demands of everyday life takes enormous effort.

Students diagnosed with Asperger’s present a special challenge in the educational milieu. Naturally, not all students with this syndrome are alike. Just as each youngster with Asperger’s has his or her own unique personality, “typical” Asperger’s symptoms are manifested in ways specific to each individual. As a result, there is no single, exact recipe for classroom approaches that can be provided individually for each of these youngsters, just as no single educational method fits the needs of all students not afflicted with Asperger’s.

The needs of students with Asperger’s are unique and challenging. Because of the various behavioural manifestations they have serious potential to affect the learning and the home environment in both positive and negative ways. In the classroom, the Asperger’s student can present a challenge for the most experienced teacher. These students can also contribute a lot to the classroom because they can be extremely creative and execute tasks in novel ways that create new perspectives. Teachers can learn a lot when they have a student with Asperger's Syndrome in their class and, like the many other individual student needs we must accommodate their needs. Understanding and catering for Asperger’s is another challenge we must negotiate. Some days will undoubtedly challenge the teacher perhaps more than they do the student!

We have a number of students here at All Saints’ officially diagnosed with Asperger’s. There are also a number who remain “undiagnosed”, yet display many of the characteristics mentioned above. It would be wise for all stakeholders - parents, teachers, clinicians and students - to try to exercise patience with one another as we all attempt to forge the best outcomes for the student. Self-education, polite advocacy, honesty and openness, seeking of professional help, counselling, guidance and (in the case of teachers) support from colleagues can only help as we attempt to take a team approach to what can be a complex, long term problem.

The research doesn’t suggest that Asperger’s Syndrome is a result of bad parenting, bad teaching or bad “anything”! It is, however, a behavioural state that requires extra parenting, teaching and support input in a world that is already frantically “busy”. We are all challenged to face up to the difficulties and be prepared to try flexible strategies so that problems can be anticipated and kept to a minimum.