

**Decipher Symptoms of Asperger Syndrome: Role of Early Intervention in
Colin Fischer**

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Abstract

Historically, few important writers have focused on the developmental disorders of their characters. In recent years, however, there has been a growing interest in representing the life of people diagnosed with neuro developmental conditions such as autistic spectrum disorders. In the novel *Colin Fischer*, Ashley Edward Miller and Zack Stentz give voice to an Aspergian named Colin Fischer. While identifying how the symptoms of the syndrome are expressed in Colin, this paper examines this complex and unique protagonist and the way in which home-based intervention plays a significant role in his personal development. Colin demonstrates how individuals diagnosed with Asperger's face multiple challenges, but there is often something in which they excel. His extraordinary memory and his skill in accomplishing diverse tasks that most people would find boring are astonishing; they focus on Colin's quiet dignity in the face of constant victimisation. The social message is that it is crucial to develop these skills in order to make the individual self-confident and successful.

Keywords: Asperger syndrome, Colin Fischer, dysfunctional characters, early intervention

Literary works are habitually concerned with the depiction of their protagonists' remarkable abilities, seldomly focusing on any developmental disorder. Yet in recent years there has been a growing interest in epitomising the life of people diagnosed with neuro developmental disorders such as autistic spectrum disorders. Gordon Bates, in the article "Autism in Fiction and Autobiography", states that "[t]hese accounts also mark a change in societal views towards those with autism, who are increasingly seen not in voiceless supporting roles or bit parts but as characters in their own right" (p. 127).

Asperger Syndrome

Asperger syndrome is regarded as a subcategory of autistic spectrum disorders. It is named after an Austrian paediatrician Hans Asperger, who "did most of his work in Vienna during the 1930s and 1940s. As a child, Asperger himself displayed many traits of the syndrome that bears his name. Shy, remote, and lonely, Asperger had a gift for languages and an astonishing memory for subjects in which he was interested and would often bore and alienate his classmates with recitations of long passages by his favourite poet" (Miller & Stentz, p. 170). The individuals diagnosed with this syndrome are usually prone to a wide range of impairments, including social and motor skills. They face difficulties with communication and also constrain themselves by self-imposing stringent rules and patterns of behaviour.

Asperger Syndrome in *Colin Fischer*

In the novel *Colin Fischer*, Ashley Edward Miller and Zack Stentz give voice to an Aspergian named, Colin Fischer. He is depicted as a fourteen-year-old boy who has begun attending West Valley High School, in California's San Fernando Valley. He belongs to a well-to-do family, his mother working as a project manager for NASA and his father designing "drive systems for unmanned spacecraft at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena" (Miller & Stentz, p. 139). It is because of his parent's educational background and social status, his health condition was identified at an early stage. Home-based intervention along with the adoption of appropriate therapy play a significant role in deciphering the symptoms of the syndrome. It also helps in bringing about an overall development of the child. In the book entitled *Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism*, Gary B. Merelov and colleagues remark:

Evaluation of AS/HFA by a psychologist, in collaboration with professionals from other disciplines (generally speech/language, occupational therapy, and medicine) provides a foundation for educational and therapeutic interventions for individuals with AS/HFA and their families. Establishing the diagnosis, identifying strengths and needs, and interpreting these to families, teachers, and other service providers are key elements of the assessment process. Evaluations should include information from parents and teachers/caregivers, observation and interaction with the client, and formal testing with specific instruments selected based on the questions and goals of the assessment. (Merelov et al., 2001, p. 69)

Symptoms and Issues

Miller and Stentz project the social and physical barriers faced by Colin in his day-to-day life at the beginning of the novel. They also touch upon Colin's remarkable qualities, such as his high level of integrity and his candidness. He obeys the values and order of society, as he is aware of the fact that breaking the rules will lead to problems. Children and adults with Asperger's syndrome appear to have a greater adherence to honesty and truth than to the

thoughts and feelings of others (Atwood, 2007, p. 117). Colin is represented as a transparent person who is remarkably honest and says exactly what he wants to say. But he does know when he is expected to tell a “white lie” to avoid offending others. He regards that the other person would be grateful for his observation and advice. He has never considered the likelihood of offending his interlocutor with comments most would classify as rude. Other children would normally restrain themselves from such comments, always aware of the other person’s thoughts and feelings.

Colin is puerile in his inability to manage emotions and express empathy, but that does not mean that he is disconnected from others. He has trouble expressing love and affection, and failing to understand his mother’s feelings, he does not reciprocate her love. He feels that expressing his feelings is an anomaly. On the other hand, his parents, along with a team of therapists, worked for years to make Colin express affection for his mother without being prompted to do so. Subsequently, when he tells his mother for the first time that he loves her, she becomes overwhelmed with joy. But Colin finds it difficult to comprehend why his mother expresses extreme emotion about something that she already knows. In the book entitled *The Complete Guide to Asperger Syndrome*, Tony Attwood states that “[t]he child or adult with Asperger’s Syndrome does not recognize or understand the cues that indicate the thoughts or feelings of the other person at a level expected for someone of that age” (2007, 112). He cannot see things from his mother’s perspective. As such, he refuses to answer the questions his mother poses, as he finds it absurd to provide a commentary of the whole day, giving importance to every detail.

Colin does not like to be touched by anyone, including his parents. Nevertheless, he realises the importance of touch by reading a book and later begins allowing his parents to do so with prior notice. But he does his best to maintain distance from strangers. He ensures that he does not collide with anyone, and when his elbow accidentally brushes against someone, he says “please don’t touch me” (Miller & Stentz, p.).

Likewise, Colin exhibits eating disorders with his unusual preferences for food and its presentation. He prefers to eat crunchy foods such as apples, pretzels, carrots, and celery. On the other hand, he refuses to eat foods that are mushy, as he dislikes its texture. He says, “Cake is slimy and mushy, and I dislike foods that are mushy” (Miller & Stentz, p. 56). This is significant: “concerns about food intake or the diagnosis of an eating disorder could be the starting point for a diagnostic assessment for Asperger’s syndrome” (Atkins 2007, p. 18).

The two of the most important problems associated with Asperger Syndrome are the difficulty to involve oneself in social situations and the person’s unusual sensory sensitivities. Due to Aspergians’ limited fields of interest and low emotional attachment, they are prone to feel isolated throughout their life. Even if they have friends, it is short-lived, as they find it difficult to adjust to the relationship. Accordingly, authors Miller and Stenz emphasise how much Colin finds it difficult to make friends. When he was young, he was very close to Sandy. They went to preschool together in the car and their mothers took turns driving them back and forth each day. His mother facilitated social play at home with Sandy, and they played together often. The mother began to entertain visions of a budding friendship and regular playdates, but their friendship ended abruptly when she found “Sandy asleep on Colin’s bed, lying in a puddle of her own urine. The scream had come from Colin, whose carefully ordered space had been violated in a most horrifying way. The carpool ended shortly thereafter” (Miller & Stentz, 2012, p. 83).

Colin does not countenance anyone disturbing the order of things in his room, as order is critical to him. His room sports the black-and white photographs of Basil Rathbone and Star Trek's Mr. Spock and Commander Data; a picture of Detective Grissom from CSI also hangs on the wall. From the choice of images his father surmises that "Colin's room was a shrine not to actors he admired, but to cool, clear-headed logic" (Miller & Stentz, p. 18). The floor of his room is also littered with piles of books, magazines, toys and partially disassembled household appliances. Even if it appears to be messy, its true nature is in its details – not as it appeared, as Colin might point out, but rather neatly organized, like-with-like. There is a principle behind every pile in the room, even if understood only by Colin himself. For example, a magnetron from an old microwave sits atop a book about marsupials and several back issues of *The New England Journal of Medicine*, an organizational feat that defied even his parents' efforts to divine a connection. (Miller & Stentz, p. 18) Thus, objects that may seem trivial to others hold a significant place in his room. It is this rigid attitude that stops him from making friends.

The social naivety of the children with Asperger syndrome leads them to be exposed to different forms of bullying. The common places and situations at school where bullying is more habitual are hallways, washrooms, during sports events and in situations when the incident can go unnoticed by adults. In *The Complete Guide to Asperger Syndrome*, Tony Attwood observes that the most common ways of bullying include "verbal or physical confrontation and intimidation; injury and destruction of personal property, and derogatory gestures or comments (2007, p. 96). Colin was bullied by Wayne on the first day of school. As he describes it, "[h]e put my head in the sink, and then he put my head in the toilet and he flushed it" (Attwood, 2007,135). Yet he was reluctant to share this with his parents and teachers out of embarrassment.

Moreover, he was often teased by other children through nicknames such as "Shortbus" (Miller & Stentz, p. 46), referring "to the small yellow bus that trundled through the northwest corner of the San Fernando Valley, taking handicapped and developmentally disabled children from home to school and back again" (pp. 46–47). Colin had never opted to ride in it, but Eddie gave him the nickname in sixth grade anyway. After this, his friends started calling him "shortbus" (Miller & Stentz, p. 46).

Some of Colin's friends were aware of his aversion to sounds that are unpleasant. He especially could not tolerate loud noise and he "wincing a little at the sound—too high, too shrill, and too staccato. The first time Colin heard a school bell had been three years earlier. He had shrieked with terror at the unexpected cacophony and continued to shriek until the bell finally stopped ringing" (Miller & Stentz, p. 22). He learned to control his reaction to the noise with a great deal of effort by taking deep breaths and counting silently to dispel his fear of sound.

Knowing that Colin dislikes the shrill sound coming from it, some of his friends, who wish to interrupt the lesson, place a mobile phone in the classroom. His friends incite him to have an emotional outburst, but Colin controls himself by counting numbers. Moreover, his friends provoke him continuously by interrupting him with the song "The 1812 Overture" (Miller & Stentz, p. 33). Meanwhile, he "heard laughter and whispered conversation all around him and found it distracting. Frustrating. His heart pounded in his chest, cold sweat beaded on his forehead. The fire inside had rekindled, and it was building" (Miller & Stentz, p. 34).

Colin's efforts to answer in class was continuously thwarted by the unpleasant loud and shrill sound continuously coming from the cell phone. He finds it difficult to bear the noise any longer and starts barking "like a dog. Louder and louder, so focused on his barking he didn't

notice Mr. Gates discover and shut off the offending phone. He didn't notice the stares in his direction from around the room. He didn't notice Rudy Moore's mouth open wide in deep laughter, showing off his shark teeth with his dead eyes" (Miller & Stentz, p. 34).

Colin did not realise that he has collapsed himself to the floor while barking and closes his ears tightly with his hands. He squeezes his eyes shut gasping for air as the rest of the class laughed and pointed out at him. It was too much for him to bear and so barked continuously. Meanwhile, Mr. Gates approaches the school office for help. Tony Attwood states that

Covert bullying, because of the havoc that often ensues, can also be used to avoid a class activity or examination. When I was examining the circumstances regarding several disruptive classroom incidents involving a child with Asperger's syndrome, I was told by the child's classmates that they encouraged his emotional outbursts. Since the teacher would then be preoccupied with taking the child to the school principal for punishment, they could successfully avoid having to do a class test or exam. (2007, p. 98)

Bullying is not limited to school. Even at home, he is bullied by his brother, Danny. He has a superficial relationship with his brother, and it is made evident when Danny expresses animosity and hatred: "I HATE YOU, COLIN, YOU'RE A RETARD AND I HATE YOU—" (Miller & Stentz, p. 146). But Colin maintains his self-esteem by remaining calm and self-controlled. He does not react to his insults and feels it as inappropriate and unreasonable to react to something that is not true. He responds in an assertive and constructive way by saying that "Mental retardation is defined by having an IQ below 70 to 75. My IQ is . . ." (Miller & Stentz, p. 146). His IQ actually ranges "between 155 and 180" (Miller & Stentz, p. 146). Marie, his occupational therapist in fact asks him not to disclose this to anyone as they may think he is bragging of an IQ value that is much higher than "normal" persons. Atwood shares her own clinical experience:

[T]he comments most frequently used as an act of verbal teasing or abuse when the target is a child with Asperger's syndrome are 'stupid' (or 'retard'), 'psycho' and 'gay'. These comments, intended to be derogatory, can be observed in the interactions of typical children but can have more significance for children with Asperger's syndrome. Such children value intellectual ability as one of their strengths, which can be a constructive form of compensation for low social self-esteem if they are not successful in social situations. (2007, p. 95)

Skills possessed by people on the spectrum are unique. In the book *Autism Spectrum Disorder*, Sicile-Kira observes that "there are three basic types of specialised minds: the visual thinking mind; the music and mathematical mind; and the nonvisual numbers and language translator mind" (2014, p. 12). She states that teachers and parents should not stop at deciphering the symptoms; they should work on utilising these strengths.

In fact, Miller and Stenz focus on Colin's remarkable characteristics. They also suggest some of the ways in which Colin could overcome his inability to understand social situations and conventions by highlighting the support rendered by his mother and his occupational therapist. For instance, Colin dislikes to visit new places and hesitates to be a part of the social gathering mainly because of its crowded conditions, smell and noise. So, as a part of his therapy, his therapist Mrs. Fischer begins to take him to the shopping mall in Woodland Hills. Initially, she drives into the mall's parking lot, where they would sit until returning home. Later, she

convinces Colin to walk to the front doors and touch them. But the “automatic glass doors presented a terrifying and impassable barrier for nearly a year, until his mother produced an article from the Internet that satisfied Colin he was in no danger of being chopped in half while crossing the threshold” (Miller & Stentz, p. 94). It is with the timely intervention and the persistent efforts of Mrs. Fischer that Colin was able to overcome his fear of new places. He has learned to “deal with them by closing his eyes, breathing through his mouth, and allowing the discordant voices to melt into white noise” (Miller & Stentz, p. 43–44). He subsequently began to feel that the mall offered him familiarity and comfort.

Similarly, when other children enjoy exploring the social world, children diagnosed with this syndrome specialise themselves at least in one specific field of intellectual or artistic interest. This special interest provides them with intellectual pleasure. Colin has exceptional memory and reasoning skills. He is a walking encyclopaedia who exhibits an unusual learning style with remarkable knowledge in specific areas of interest such as maths, rockets, and so on. He also has extraordinary knowledge in “certain areas—game theory, for example, and the history of the U.S. space program—but he also has trouble grasping things a five-year-old would know automatically, without trying” (Miller & Stentz, p. 6). So, when his friends were finding it difficult to learn maths, Colin considers it as his favourite subject in school. He regards that maths “was true of all subjects. To learn a thing was to know a thing; to know a thing was to understand a thing; to understand a thing was to face it without fear” (Miller & Stentz, p. 32). Colin’s interest towards Maths has inspired him to transcribe every word taught by his Algebra teacher, Mr. Gates. He enjoys the clear-headed logic involved in the learning of the subject. He takes up research projects even when they are not assigned. He takes an active participation in class and shows interest in answering the questions posed by his teacher. The novelists remark that:

Unlike most of his peers, Colin knew what math was for. He understood why it was useful to calculate the time two trains pass if one leaves Chicago at three P.M. headed east and another leaves New York at four P.M. headed west. The answer to the word problem was immaterial, but the calculation was of critical importance because it allowed one to learn about trains. Trains were very interesting to Colin and worth learning about. (Miller & Stentz, p. 32)

Colin gives importance to minute details even during stressful situations. He watches his classmates with “the detached interest of an anthropologist, recording in his Notebook the movements of the nerds, the popular girls, the jocks, the goths, the emo kids, and the most curious of all, the gangsta-wannabes” (Miller & Stentz, p. 54). This helps him in dealing with stressful situations and regulate his anxiety. Also, he depends on reading detective novels as an effective technique to relax.

Colin also employs relaxation techniques that include breathing exercises and muscle relaxation; these calm him down and help control his emotions. He also uses the trampoline, as it helps him “to relax, focus and think” (Miller & Stentz, p. 17). He feels “reassured by intermittent weightlessness, he was free to imagine himself unbound by earthly concerns. Up-down, up-down, up-down...usually for hours, and always alone” (Miller & Stentz, p. 17). Accordingly, Tony Atwood states that “Children and adults with Asperger’s syndrome appear less able to release emotional energy slowly by relaxation and reflection, and usually prefer to fix or release the feeling by an energetic action” (Miller & Stentz, p. 160).

Colin adopts different kinds of tools and actions as an effective energy management strategy. He indulges in appropriate and safe energy releasing activities so that he can use his energy in a constructive activity. So other than bouncing on the trampoline, the only real physical activity that brought him joy was running, “Colin loved to run. He learned to love it the first time he closed his eyes and felt the wind on his face, his body in motion, the sweat evaporating off his skin. Running made Colin feel alone and alive” (Miller & Stentz, p. 45).

However, in addition to the problems in social interaction, Colin also experiences certain motor vulnerabilities. Other than running, he had a persistent dislike of gym class and playgrounds. “Regardless of his current physical discomfort, Colin had a long-standing dislike of gym class and playgrounds. Putting aside the usual dangers of overly personal contact, the distasteful smells, and the unsettling, almost animal sounds of human play, Colin did not consider himself particularly coordinated” (Miller & Stentz, p. 45). He finds it difficult to induce coordination between different parts of his body. He can neither throw the ball nor catch it at the right time. He generally has poor awareness of the movement of the body in space and he also lacks the ability to participate in group activities. He explains to his gym teacher that, “I’m diagnosed as high functioning, but I still have poor social skills and sensory integration issues that give me serious deficits in areas of physical coordination” (Miller & Stentz, p. 44). So his parents and his therapy team suggest him to excuse himself from PE classes. However, eight years of occupational therapy has helped him to follow instructions on where and how to move the ball.

When his Physical Trainer, Mr. Turrentine, demonstrates the free throw stance and later asks him to model the posture, Colin exactly mirrors his teacher’s position. He depicts every variable involved in making or missing a shot in his diagram as he possesses a uniquely visual thinking mind.

In his Imaginary Notebook, Colin draws a schematic of the asphalt court, overlaid with a complicated force diagram depicting every variable involved in making or missing a shot. He includes every conceivable factor, from the distance between himself and the hoop, to the estimated strength of the breeze he feels on his face. Satisfied that he understands the parameters of the problem, Colin extrapolates the diagram from his imaginary Notebook to a mental image of himself and the hoop in three-dimensional space. Colin throws shot after shot in imagination, testing his calculations, finally arriving at the precise combination angle, velocity, and spin that sent the ball careening into the basket. (Miller & Stentz, p. 50)

It is at that moment that he experiences a strong surge of new feelings which he had not experienced before. He realises that he does not want to lose the match. He tries to compose himself and resist all the distractions that would stop him from concentrating on the game. In this regard, Sicile-Kira asks

Would Beethoven have created his Ninth Symphony? Would Einstein have come up with his theory of relativity? Temple Grandin (who has designed one-third of all the livestock-handling facilities in the United States) believes that her talent for solving concept problems is due to her ‘ability to visualize and see the world in pictures,’ which can be attributed to having ASD. (2014, p. 22)

In addition to his uniquely visual thinking mind, Colin also has remarkable language and communication skills. Asperger described these boys as “little professors” (1944, p. 39) as they talk often at great length about the topic of their interest. However, he finds it difficult to comprehend facial expressions and gestures. He has difficulties in comprehending the

nonverbal and pragmatic aspects of communication and fails to interpret the emotions of the speaker based on the modulation of their voice and nonverbal cues during conversation. Thus, he maintains a notebook to record the emotions associated with each facial expression. He refers to his notes to infer the feelings of the people around him. He is “more like an alien anthropologist stranded on Earth, with no choice but to master the local social codes and try to pass as human, or perish” (Miller & Stentz, p. 8). In the article entitled “Asperger Syndrome: An Overview”, Fred R. Volkmar et al. comment that “Affectively, Asperger noted that these children had difficulties in dealing with their feelings, often tending to intellectualize them, and had poor empathy and difficulties in understanding social cues” (Miller & Stentz, p. 5).

Colin usually maintains a blank expression, so it is very difficult for his parents to know what he is thinking: “the hardest facial expression for another human being to read is a perfectly blank face” (Miller & Stentz, p. 27). This is because people with Asperger syndrome process faces as if they were mere objects without observing the facial signs and the context to which they are associated. They hardly interpret the emotional expression of the speaker. Thus it is that Colin uses the same speech patterns for both telephone and face to face communication.

Colin rarely uses filler words in his conversation, prompting Marie to advise him that people insert filler words when they engage in a discussion. She also orients him regarding the importance of engaging in a discussion by involving interesting observations and interjections. She similarly spends several days trying to teach him how to distinguish between a rhetorical question and a normal question, “She had drilled Colin for hours in the difficult art of distinguishing literal statements (‘You look nice today’) from metaphorical, idiomatic ones (‘You make a better door than a window’)” (Miller & Stentz, p. 87).

Conclusion

The individuals diagnosed with this neurological disorder have multiple challenges, but they often have something at which they excel. They have very good memory and are good in accomplishing many tasks that most people find boring. The novel stresses that it is crucial to develop these skills so that Aspergians can be successful. This can be achieved only when parents and caretakers decipher the symptoms at an early stage. The child can be analysed based on various factors, including the communication of emotions, body language, the ability to narrate events of the day, understand the nuances of language, the nuances of social interaction and healthy food habits. The novel indicates that instead of isolating a child diagnosed with the neurological disorder, an inclusive education should be provided. In the article “Nurturing Development: Treating Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder”, Carol Korn-Bursztyn suggests that “When children can interact and imitate gestures and words, and engage in nonverbal problem solving, attendance in an inclusion program or in a general education preschool program with an additional teacher or aide is recommended (2011, p. 100). The support rendered by the mentors along with relevant treatment and medication will help children like Colin to lead a successful life.

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