

Shooter's profile prompts Asperger's experts to speak up

By Eric Lebowitz

In the wake of the Newtown, Conn., tragedy that left 20 first-graders, six school staff, and the shooter and his mother dead, law enforcement, journalists and the shocked American public have scrambled to understand anything about how and why the cataclysmic crime occurred.

On the morning of Dec. 14, 2012, 20-year-old Adam Lanza forced his way into Sandy Hook Elementary School — having already shot and killed his mother, Nancy Lanza — and, wielding a Bushmaster .223-caliber semiautomatic rifle, slaughtered 20 students, the principal and five other adults before finally taking his own life.

In the wake of that horrific event, with limited information available, various theories about what may have led to the massacre have been floated. Within days, reports began to surface that an unidentified family member and others who knew Lanza were aware that he had been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, a developmental disorder.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)-IV criteria for Asperger's specifies that the individual must have "severe and sustained impairment in social interaction, and the development of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests and activities that must cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning." The DSM-V, scheduled for release in May of this year, will no longer classify Asperger's as its own condition and will instead fold the disorder into the autism spectrum.

Asperger's is often described as "high-functioning autism," because many of those with the disorder have excellent verbal and cognitive skills but struggle with social cues and nonverbal communication. After seeing news reports that referenced the disorder, professionals who work with the Asperger's population expressed concern — through letters to newspapers, television interviews and online articles — that the public might begin making an association between violence and Asperger's for which there is no supporting research and data.

"When I first started to hear the reports after the shooting and they started men-



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Therapist Rob Bernstein has worked with Asperger's patients for almost four decades.

tioning Asperger's, I thought, 'Oh no, people that are not informed might make the leap that violence is a feature of Asperger's, which it absolutely is not,' said Tara Lambert, a licensed master social worker (LMSW) and educational consultant who works out of Hastings.

Rob Bernstein, an educational therapist who lives in Ardsley and works out of a

Dobbs Ferry office became similarly concerned after a conversation with his son, who remarked that in the future he might worry about being close or speaking to someone with the disorder.

Bernstein has spent nearly four decades with the Asperger's population, specializing in therapy for adolescents and young adults with the disorder. He

works with clients — like a 22-year-old who would never ask a question under any circumstances for fear of being seen as weird — to help break repetitive behaviors and make socialization easier.

"The nature of Asperger's is that there is something they lock into," Bernstein said. "That's part of the definition."

Although both Bernstein and Lambert pointed out that no link exists between Asperger's and violence, they did say that the national discussion is an opportunity to increase awareness about what life is like for young people with the disorder. Bernstein pointed out that it is often a lonely existence, as the struggle to understand social cues can render making friends extremely challenging.

"The reality is that these kids live in the real world and most kids with Asperger's are made fun of or are bullied," Bernstein said.

He added that every person with Asperger's is different and that every situation must be evaluated with that in mind.

"You have to look at context," he said. "That's the reality."

One of the major problems Lambert has observed in the coverage of the shooting is that some reports have mentioned lack of empathy as a characteristic of Asperger's. That statement can be misleading, however, because empathy comes in two forms.

One form is the ability to recognize what emotion a person is experiencing by tuning in to subtle indicators and nonverbal communication. That kind of empathy can, in fact, be difficult for those with the disorder. The other form of empathy is the ability to internalize and share what another person is feeling, regardless of how the message is communicated. Unlike sociopaths, who do not possess the ability to feel remorse or sympathy, people with Asperger's are typically quite capable of emotional empathy.

"That's really important for people to understand, and unfortunately some of the news reports I've heard have not been accurate," Lambert said. "I think it's really important for the general public to understand what the features of this diagnosis are, and what they are not. These children are more often than not the victims of violence, not the perpetrators."