

## Editorial Note on Autism in Children

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### Editorial Note

Since the first cases of autism were diagnosed in 1943, certain symptoms have been singled out as characteristic of the class of disorders called by that name. They are commonly referred to as "behavioral" and in different combinations are now also being used to define a growing class of problems also known as pervasive developmental disorders (PDDs). It is interesting that all of these PDDs are commonly equated with what are also called autism spectrum disorders. As we will see in this course, autism is not only at the center of the PDDs, but in most common form, it also affects development severely and dramatically across the board, it is a pervasive disorder. Traditionally, it has been supposed that its origins are genetic. However, as we will see, this explanation is incomplete to the point of being misleading. Although the subcategories of autism spectrum disorders and all of their boundaries may be disputed, the fact that autism is central to the PDDs has never been in doubt.

In its most common form, which happens to be toward the severe end of the scale, autism is characterized by withdrawal from social relations, loss of verbal skills or failure to develop them and exhibition of repetitive stereotypical behavioral symptoms of autism, especially the tendency towards self-stimulation up to and including self-injury, for instance have generally been regarded as completely mysterious. Why would a child with autism engage in self-injurious head banging to the point of rendering him unconscious? Autism has been described as a strange and puzzling disorder with mysterious unknown causes. When asked for explanations by understandably desperate parents, the doctors have often resorted to the unsatisfying words, "We just don't know. It's a mystery."

As we look more loosely into the cases of children with autism to be considered in this course, and the common symptom they exhibit, we discover some additional common symptoms but that were passed over as if irrelevant to the diagnosis. In the early studies, it was found that at least 7 out of the original 11 cases that have been diagnosed also had serious feeding and digestive problems such as chronic vomiting, diarrhea and more frequent infections and trips to the doctor than typically developed in children. If we add two other cases of children showing symptoms commonly associated with acid reflux and chronic vomiting, then as many as 9 of original 11 cases seem to have had serious digestive tract symptoms.

Such symptoms suggest the reasonable inference that autism involves a great deal more than it's traditionally recognized behavioral characteristics. However, the symptoms involving the digestive tract would be set aside for about half a century following the initial works in 1943. Patients with a child diagnosed with autism would typically be told that the digestive problems observed in their child have nothing to do with the autism diagnosis but have some other independent cause. However, the research shows that about 70% to 80% of individuals previously diagnosed with autism, when examined after the fact are found to have disease symptoms associated with the gut. Pediatricians should know of this association but many evidently do not as is pointed out in an eloquent and powerful analysis. Interestingly, subsequent researchers and practitioners alike would tend to ignore the gut symptoms until latest research called attention to them near the turn of the twenty-first century. Also contrary to the claim, symptoms of abnormal digestion and other gut disease conditions are being seriously re-examined from many different angles by competent researchers and doctors at the present time.

Over the last several decades, the number of children being diagnosed with autism, as reported under federal law from schools across the United States receiving funding under the individuals with Disabilities act of 1990, has grown exponentially. Apparently, the rate of autism diagnosis has increased steadily from 1993 to 2006; the growth rate for diagnosis of all other reported categories of disorders over the same period was negligible by comparison. The autism epidemic is real and cannot be explained away. It is a growing health problem of great importance and is associated with political, economic and legal concerns of vast proportions. Autism is a major and growing quality of life issue; in fact, in cases of severe autism, it is no exaggeration to say that it is a life-threatening condition. Given that seizures or seizure like brain abnormalities and chronic digestive problems are involved in a majority of cases, autism is clearly more than just a behavioral condition. The search for the causes of self-injurious behaviors becomes more tractable when a holistic, systems-based perspective is taken. It has been noted from the earliest diagnosed cases that autism, tends to be expressed in violent mood swings that result in bizarre and often self-injurious behaviors such as head banging and potentially harmful practices such as feces smearing by individual well beyond the toddler stage.