



Gerald Groden: Ominous increase in autism

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There has been a dramatic increase in the number of people being identified with the frequently devastating disorder of autism.

According to the Rhode Island Department of Education, from 1992-93 to 1999-2000, the number of children with autism in Rhode Island increased by 1,090 percent. There is continuing controversy regarding the reason. Reasons put forth range from a broadening of the symptoms or manifestations included within this diagnosis, to an actual increase in the incidence of autism.

Whatever the reason(s), the numbers are of critical importance in light of the impact that this disorder has on individuals affected, their families, and the costs of education and health care.

Last July, the Autism Society of America (ASA) held its 37th National Conference in Providence.

The ASA membership, consisting of parents, professionals and supporters, has been extremely successful in capturing the attention of the federal government, particularly the National Institutes of Health, and focusing its attention and financial resources on autism. The conference opened with an announcement by ASA of the passage of the Combating Autism Act by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. The legislation would provide \$1 billion in funding for autism research.

The Rhode Island chapter of the ASA sponsored a highly successful art exhibition of drawings, paintings and photographs created by persons with autism. It has been long known that, while individuals with autism often have significant communication deficits, they sometimes excel in the visual realm. The interest generated by the art exhibit attested to this.

Researchers are eagerly attempting to discover core deficits of autism. Sally Rogers, of the University of California, in her keynote address, discussed imitation as a candidate for such a deficit. Studies suggest that imitation is specifically impaired in autism from the earliest time it can be diagnosed. Furthermore, specific nerve cells, called mirror neurons, have been discovered in the brain, which seem to be necessary for the development of imitation. These neurons do not appear to function in persons with autism as they function in non-autistic persons. Imitation is a critical skill in child development, as well as learning in general, and its impairment could explain many of the problems observed in individuals with autism. Further research into this area could provide important clues for treatment.

The Groden Center Inc., an agency that has been providing treatment and education in Rhode Island to individuals with autism for more than 30 years, gave several presentations. One addressed the center's application of the scientific findings of Positive Psychology to the field of autism. Positive Psychology has had a tremendous impact on the field of psychology. It de-emphasizes the helping professions' usual focus on the ailments of individuals and emphasizes the qualities that appear to be responsible for an individual's happiness and fulfillment, such as resilience, optimism, kindness and self-efficacy, or belief in one's capabilities. Positive Psychology is likely to improve individuals' feelings of self-worth as well as their relationships with others.

One of the most riveting moments of the conference was the final keynote address by Dr. Martha Herbert, a neurologist associated with Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard University. She cited a considerable number of studies to support alternative ways of viewing autism. She posited that autism is not only a brain disorder, but a broader, systemic disorder frequently involving the gastrointestinal and allergy/immune systems. Furthermore, she suggests that autism is not a static, immutable disorder, but at least partly a chronic disease, bearing similarity to Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases. Were we to better understand the nature of the chronic-disease aspects of autism, we might be more successful in treating it medically.

Additionally, Dr. Herbert offered ideas about the role of genetics in autism. She suggested that autism may not be the result of specific genes producing autistic symptoms. Rather, she believes that autism may result from a combination of certain genes that are particularly vulnerable to environmental insults, such as chemical toxins. When exposed to these toxins, these vulnerable genes are transformed into genes that produce, or help produce the symptoms of autism. She feels that this formulation is consistent with the apparent dramatic increase in autism.

Dr. Herbert has cited reports that most people carry traces of hundreds of chemicals in their bodies, and that multiple environmental toxins are present in breast milk.

Her presentation was provocative, and appeared to contain elements that offered both encouragement and concern to members of the audience. If confirmed through further research, her findings could serve as a dire warning to humanity. Like the canary in the coal mine, the increase in autism maybe a warning to the world of the potentially disastrous consequences of poisoning the environment in which life developed, and upon which life depends.

Gerald Groden, who holds a doctorate in psychology, is co-director of the Groden Center, in Providence, and an adjunct associate professor of human development at Brown. The center was founded by Mr. Groden and his wife, June Groden, who also has a doctorate in psychology, in 1976.

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