



## Autism

### Introduction

Autism, a common form of the autistic spectrum disorders (ASD), is a behavioral disorder diagnosed in early childhood in which the child has difficulty communicating with others; understanding surroundings, emotions, and word meanings; and often has an intense, focused interest in one specific thing. Despite much research, the causes of autism are not known, leaving parents in a predicament because they do not fully understand the disorder and how to help their autistic children.

### Purpose

The purpose of this research brief is to help the parents understand autism and possible treatments for the disorder.

### Parents' Beliefs about Causes of Autism

Because autism is such a confusing and misunderstood disorder, parental beliefs often differ, and parents tend to lose confidence in their autistic child's physician, according to a study done in 2006 by J. W. Harrington, P. A. Patrick, S.K. Edwards, & D. A. Brand in which 75 parents of autistic children answered questionnaires. Most parents believe that their child's autism is the effect of a specific cause. They most commonly believe that autism is caused by immunizations or genetics. Other believed causes include exposure to a harmful

environment, premature birth, complications during pregnancy, and the child's antibiotics as shown by Figure 1.

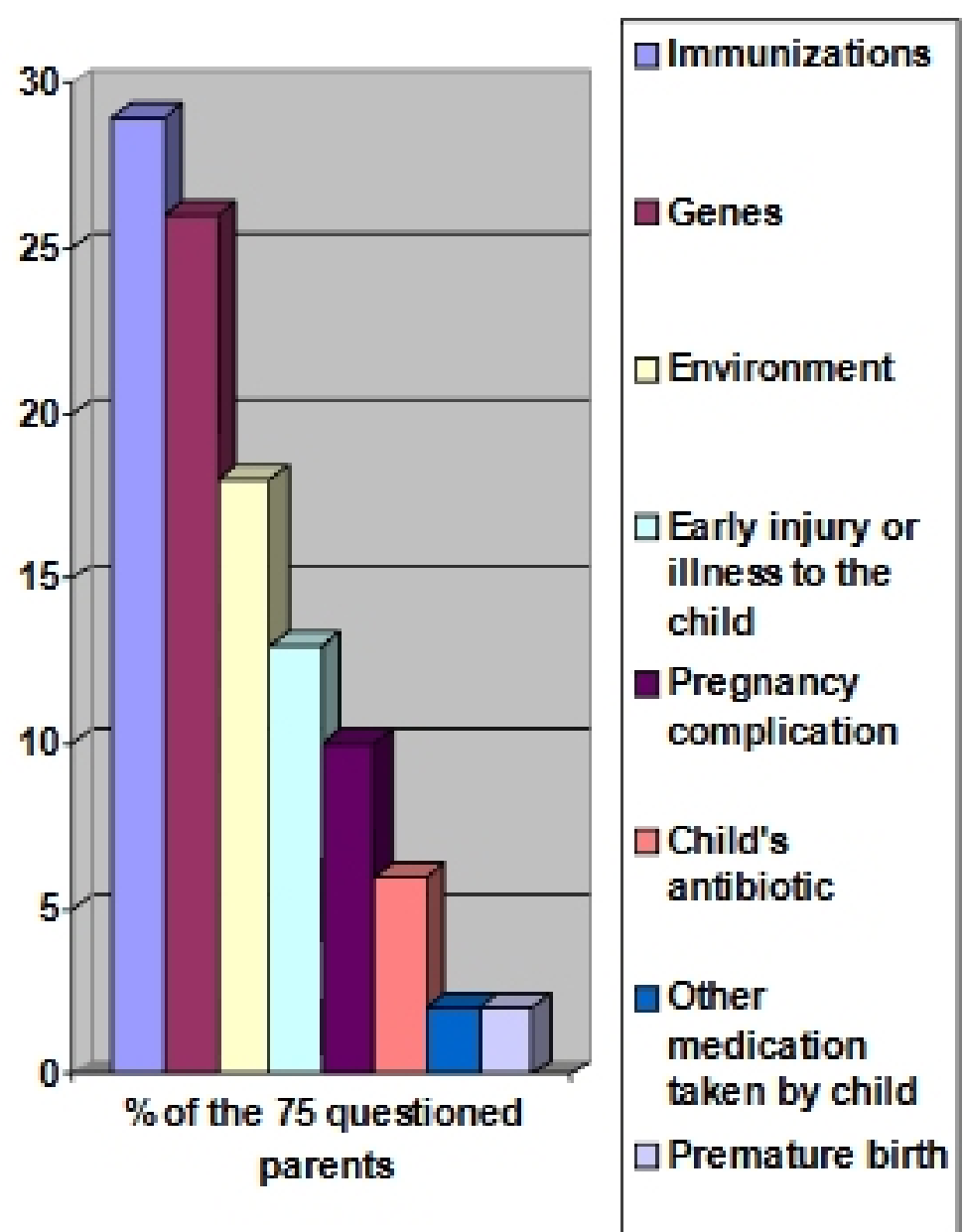


Figure 1  
*Parental beliefs about the etiology of autism*  
Note. Adapted from "Parental beliefs about autism," by J. W. Harrington, P. A. Patrick, S. K. Edwards, and D. A. Brand, 2006,

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*Autism the International Journal of Research and Practice, 10, p. 456.*

### **Things Parents have Tried to Help their Autistic Children**

- Special diets
- Calcium and folic acid supplements
- Special medications
- Complementary and alternative medicine

(Harrington, Patrick, Edwards, & Brand, 2006).

### **Methods that Actually Show Improvement in Autistic Children's Abilities**

Autistic children are different from normally developing children in that they do not seek to understand or make sense of things on their own. Instead, they have to be patiently taught different concepts. Researcher I. A. Van Berckelaer-Onnes found in 2003 that autistic children do not even seem to understand the functions of toys unless they are taught. She performed a study in which trainers sat one-on-one with 24 autistic children in 30-minute sessions twice a week for 11 weeks. Each trainer observed the child in each session while he or she played with different toys using the child's own imagination, and the trainer showed the child new ways to manipulate different toys. The children were evaluated before and after the 11-week study to determine if playing with toys and learning new ways to play with toys are beneficial to autistic children. Van Berckelaer-Onnes found that teaching children to play with toys and make sense of them at an early age is a successful way to improve autistic children's abilities to understand their surroundings. "Intervention designed to facilitate toy play will help to overcome the problems of weak central coherence, and

thus to establish more normal perceptual and representational development, as well as the development of symbolic play," (Van Berckelaer-Onnes, 2003, p. 418).

Another early intervention method is to allow autistic children to attend preschool and kindergarten with normally developing children, rather than restricting them to more solitary environments. Being a part of the same classrooms as normally developing children of about the same age, seems to help their social interaction skills (Jahr, Eikeseth, Eldevik, & Aase, 2007).

The Stronger Families Project, a parent workshop that was followed by ten home-based intervention sessions, showed significant differences in autistic children's communication, social, and symbolic abilities (Keen, Rodger, Doussin, & Braithwaite, 2007). Sixteen two- to four-year-old autistic children, all in different homes, were evaluated by their own parents before and after the Stronger Families Project was conducted. After the program, parents noticed much improvement in their autistic children.

### **Beneficial Things Parents can do for an Autistic Child**

- Tell your child's physician about any symptoms of autism immediately to expedite diagnosis and treatment. Even ask to be referred to a specialist. If your physician is not willing to listen to your concerns and beliefs, find another physician who will work with you and your child.
- Set time aside each week to sit one-on-one with your child exploring different toys to help the child's ability to perceive new concepts. This should facilitate the child's cognitive development.

- Allow your child to attend preschool to interact with other children. This should help with social skills.
- Attend parent workshops, and have a specialist come to your home to help you learn how to work with your child.

### Overall Recommendation

Early intervention seems to be the key to improvements in autistic children, so start working to help your child as soon as possible.

### A New Way to Check for Autism so that Parents are able to begin Early Intervention Programs

To determine the behavioral differences in children without autism, autistic children, and mentally retarded children, researchers performed a 15-minute study on elementary school children playing during recess just by observing them. The researchers watched each of the children from a distance and scored different behaviors of the children on a checklist as either present or absent (Ingram, Mayes, Troxell, & Calhoun, 2007). The researchers found that the behaviors of children with autism differed greatly from those of the mentally retarded and the normally developing children, although, the two latter groups did not differ much from each other in social behaviors. The checklist test was 94 % accurate in diagnosing the children with autism. Therefore, using the checklist designed by Ingram et al. (2007) can help diagnose children with autism at an early age by merely observing them play on a playground with other children.

### Audience

This research brief is intended to be supplemental reading material for parents of autistic children.

### References

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