

# Coping with Autism

Dr. Lon Jones, DO

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The first researchers looking into autism decided it was caused by “the refrigerator Mom”. Mothers were cold and withdrawn and didn’t give their children the love and care they needed to develop properly. The outrage of loving and caring mothers put that to rest in short order and we have gone on to look at safe and scientific elements like immunizations with mercury, genes, and obesity, despite the clear lack of association between immunizations and autism, or genetic characteristics, or body habitus in this epidemic. If it is a genetic problem there should be genetic markers, but it’s too complex for that.

Nor do we look at primitive cultures where the problem doesn’t exist, nor at our own Amish peoples, where it is minimal if that. While we look intently at what differences there are in comparing the brains of autistic and normal children we do not look at how the normal development of autistic children may have been disrupted. Nor is there any consideration for how we may intervene in that development to limit the problem. Researchers at Cornell looked at television, and at the hypothetical link between rainy weather and time in front of the tube, as significantly related, but that gets back to blaming parents.

But the links may leave us no real alternative. Autism is characterized by a brain that doesn’t process normally. Their sensory perception is compromised. The Sally & Ann test, for example, is with two dolls, each with a container, and a marble in one of the containers. While Mom exits the room the marble is switched to the other dolls container. When the autistic child is asked where Mom will look for the marble he does not process the fact that Mom missed out on the switch and should look in the original container. One of the first areas of development noted to be different was the facial recognition area. When autistic children watch TV they do not focus on faces as normal children do and scans of this area of the brain in autistic children show structural differences. Indeed, the Denver program for the treatment of autism includes the holding of the child’s head to insure eye contact and facial alignment when talking to the child. Many have correctly concluded that autism may be a problem in a brain that has for some reason developed the facial recognition center in a disturbed manner. The questions that we should be asking are how this kind of injury happens, when does this area of the brain develop, and what happens when it doesn’t.

Facial recognition is one of the earliest tasks of the neonate; it is usually done when the nursing mother holds the child on her breast and aligns her face with that of the infant. It’s part of bonding and infants that are nursed have less autism. Bottle feeding can accomplish the same thing if the en face position is held. This facial recognition is the foundation for all further neurological development in the child. So what can happen to disturb it?

While there is no question that mothers care and love their children there is also little question that they are often distracted from the task of looking at their infants faces. The demands of other children, the telephone, the texting, the twittering, Facebook, blogging, television programs, all distract from the process of building this foundation in the infant’s brain. Doing prospective studies to check out this link would be both unethical and cruel. But educating parents, both fathers and mothers, of the overwhelming importance of this neurological development and encouraging them to devote time to this task would do the same thing by eliminating the epidemic.

Television especially needs to be controlled because the rapid changes in faces can easily overwhelm and exhaust the infants developing facial recognition center. This is likely why the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no television exposure until age two.

Correlations such as noted above where autism is not a problem in the undeveloped world are hard to pin to causes because the connections are likely far more complex than we can see, but when one finds a link like facial recognition and its foundational importance in the infant's developing brain we need to ask some question. In this case we need to educate some parents. Leave the TV and computers off when babies are awake; they need your attention far more at this early stage of their development than do your friends. Even parents working at home, while they are available to provide more facial recognition opportunities, report the tendency to put in more hours in their own businesses than they would working for another and admit to frequently giving only partial attention to their children while they work.

The major problem is that autism research is focused on genetics and few geneticists are that familiar with early child development. All that is needed is a PR and educational focus on giving the infant the stimulus it needs for optimal development in the early months of life and watch what happens with the incidence of autism.