

DIAGNOSING AND TREATING AUTISM DISORDERS

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Aworried mother arrives at your rooms tugging her small child along behind her. He enters without making eye contact. Constantly restless he climbs on and off the furniture before running around the room in circles. He's making a strange humming sound and you notice he's unusually pale. You try to talk to him but there's no answer. His parents' eyes tell it all – sheer desperation, looking to you for answers.

Given that the CDC's (Center for Disease Control) 2018 research shows that 1 in 59 children have an autism disorder, the above is possibly a scenario many of you are familiar with. The issue however is how well versed are you in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to make a correct diagnosis?

WHAT IS AUTISM?

Diagnosed under the DSM V, the Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis covers a wide range

of conditions. The common challenges are social skills, repetitive behaviours, speech and nonverbal communication. What is often quoted when speaking about ASD is that "If you've met one autistic person you've met one autistic person" – no case is the same.

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WHY THE HIGH RATE OF DIAGNOSIS?

More and more research is pointing to environmental factors and simply the toxic world we currently live in.

LOOKING FOR ANSWERS

When Ilana and Martin Gerschlowitz's 20 month old,

previously healthy baby David, was diagnosed with autism they were in a total state of shock. Making the rounds of medical professionals from GPs to various specialists they were basically given the same answer 'Goodbye and good luck'. For lawyer Ilana this was simply not good enough and she embarked on an intense campaign to find answers she knew had to be there. "I simply refused to accept there was nothing we could do and to see my baby in constant physical pain with no way to communicate was more than I could bear."

THE GUT/BRAIN CONNECTION

After lengthy research and attending conferences in the United States they began to see light at the end of the tunnel. "We learnt of the gut/brain connection and started to treat David's condition medically, which showed immediate improvements."

This proven connection, now researched worldwide, shows a nervous system link in

autism, which opens a whole new direction in the search for potential treatments that not only ease the physical pain but help ease the behavioural issues, by targeting the gut. "Treating the gut flora can lead to improvement in challenging behaviours for children with autism. Fecal transplant studies currently underway in the US are showing good results in behaviour and alleviation of autism symptoms by recolonising the dysregulated gut flora. Immune support on top of treating gut and brain inflammation is key to unlocking the autistic child trapped in their own world with no way of communicating their pain," explains Gerschlowitz.

THE ROLE OF NUTRITION IN TREATING AUTISM

Another area that proved invaluable for Gerschlowitz was that of nutrition and eliminating any food allergies. "Initially this involved putting David on a gluten-free, casein-free, soya-free and sugar-free diet. It was difficult for him and us, particularly 15 years ago when there were very few alternatives in South Africa. Although this did help a great deal, his test results continued to show yeast and bacterial overgrowth. It took years of anti-fungal treatment and treatment for bacterial

(clostridia) to address the problems in his intestinal tract."

OPENING DOORS WITH ABA

"Once we had David's medical problems under control we could look at treating his behavioural problems," explains Gerschlowitz. "This was when we found the Center for Autism Related Disorders and Applied Behavioural Therapy (ABA) in California, which not only helped us treat David, but saw us being able to completely reverse our third son Aaron's (born

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10 years later and diagnosed at 18 months) autism.

World authority on autism, Dr. Doreen Granpeesheh, Founder and CEO, Center for Autism and Related Disorders, says "It has always been my belief that autism is a whole-body illness. When a child is physically ill, treating the illness becomes a priority. Unless the physical illnesses are treated it becomes difficult, if not impossible to apply behavioural

interventions at all. ABA can only succeed if the child is healthy enough to receive it.

"ABA is evidence based treatment for children with autism, endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the US Surgeon General. Not only that but unlike South Africa, it's covered by medical insurance in 50 States. This is a life changing, medically necessary intervention," adds Gerschlowitz.

EDUCATING THE MEDICAL PROFESSION ON AUTISM

For Gerschlowitz and many other South African parents faced with an ASD diagnosis the biggest problem is where to turn, without being dismissed with a diagnosis of a psychiatric condition and given Risperdol. The first and most common treatment currently given in South Africa.

US based Dr Daniel Rossignol MD FAAFP set up his organisation (medmaps.org) to 'Prepare medical professionals in delivering the best possible care to children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and other special needs conditions. "Parents are searching for qualified practitioners who can help their children reach their full potential. MAPS (Medical Academy of Pediatrics Special Needs) helps provide direction. With so much junk science being





pushed on these vulnerable families they turn to us with their questions, concerns and hopes for a better life. And we, as concerned physicians must be prepared," says Rossignol.

EARLY INTERVENTION – THE KEY TO SUCCESS

"When we tell people that our youngest son's autism has been completely reversed, I can see the scepticism in some people's eyes. However when they see the educational psychologist's school readiness report, that shows Aaron has an 'average' IQ, all doubt is gone. Today he attends a mainstream school and has a whole world of possibilities in front of him. Something very few children given an autism diagnosis can look forward to. The simple reason for this is early

diagnosis. At The Star Academy, which we opened 10 years ago to teach ABA, we see parents of misdiagnosed children on a daily basis, many too old to have the chance Aaron did. This is why early diagnosis is vital and the key to a successful prognosis. **MHM**

Checklist for signs of autism

- Lack of eye contact
- Not responding appropriately to greetings or when their name is called
- Not engaging in pretend play
- Preferring to play alone
- Doesn't play peek-a-boo by 8 months
- No babbling by 12 months
- No back-and forth gestures such as pointing, showing or imitation like waving bye-bye by 12 months

- No words by 16 months
- No meaningful, two-word phrases (not including imitating or repeating) by 24 months
- Any loss of speech or skills at any age
- No sharing of enjoyment or interest
- Not engaging in pretend play
- Becoming distressed by minor changes in routines
- Performing repetitive movements such as hand flapping or rocking
- Playing with toys in unusual ways e.g., spinning or lining them up
- Having unusually strong attachments to particular objects
- Limiting conversations to very specific topics
- Exhibiting oversensitivity to sounds or textures
- Being a picky eater
- Experiencing plateaus or delays in skills development
- Losing previously acquired skills
- Displaying challenging behaviours such as aggression, tantrums and self-injury
- Appears to be in their own world
- Doesn't follow any - or follows too few receptive instructions
- Repetitive movements with objects or posturing of body, arms, hands or fingers
- Hyperactive and unable to sustain their attention when compared to their peers

Ilana Gerschlowitz's new, best-selling book "Saving my Sons – A Journey with Autism" is now available at all good bookstores throughout SA.