



News in Science

News in Science - Bright autistic kids 'misunderstood' - 20/02/2006

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Bright autistic kids 'misunderstood'

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Reuters

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People with autism are more intelligent and able to function better than previously believed, experts say.

But mistrust of doctors, biased tests and the internet have bred myths about the condition.

At a meeting of the [American Association for the Advancement of Science](#), researchers presented reports showing that even people with autism who do not speak can have above-average intelligence.

They also offered additional studies disputing claims that vaccines can cause autism.

"The current figures are that 75% of autistic people are mentally retarded, with the mute the most ... impaired," says Canadian researcher Dr Laurent Mottron, an autism researcher at Montreal's [Hôpital Rivière-des-Prairies](#).

But Mottron believes the wrong intelligence tests are used to assess autistic children.

Many are tested using the Wechsler scale, a common IQ test that includes questions about words and concepts learned in school.

The Raven's Progressive Matrices test measures abstract reasoning and consistently gives autistic children higher scores, Mottron says.

The average boost in score is 30 points, Mottron says, enough to put someone previously considered mentally retarded into the normal range and the average to gifted status.

Mottron was so impressed by the abilities of one autistic student, Michelle Dawson, that he made her a co-author of some of his papers.

Autism is a term used to describe a broad range of symptoms, from an inability to use language normally, to exhibiting deeply disturbed and repetitive behaviours.

Professor Morton Gernsbacher at the [University of Wisconsin-Madison](#) questioned a common idea among autism researchers that autistic people lack a 'theory of mind'. This, among other things, gives an ability to empathise with others.

Again, she says, the wrong tests are used to assess this ability.



Some children with autism really can empathise with others, researchers say (*Image: iStockphoto*)

Is there an autism epidemic

Dr Judith Grether, a California epidemiologist, says she questions the idea that there is a new autism epidemic.

She says it is impossible to find out how many cases of autism there were in the past, because many people with autism were often diagnosed as retarded, or never diagnosed.

Without that information, it is impossible to say if the number of cases has grown, she says.

"We have to do the studies to find the answers," she says.

Grether says US researchers have begun taking prenatal blood samples from pregnant women and will look for clues when and if some of their children are diagnosed with autism.

They are examining hormones, heavy metals, immune system proteins and other factors.

The studies found no link with vaccines, says Dr Irving Gottesman, a psychiatrist at the [University of Minnesota](#), but says the US [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) has initiated four studies "to tie up the loose ends".

New studies are focusing on genetic susceptibilities.

Link with vaccines

Gottesman says the studies may help to ease the fears of parents that a vaccine-autism link has been covered up.

But he says scientists are battling a plethora of websites devoted to the idea that mercury causes autism like <http://www.safeminds.org>.

Gernsbacher, the mother of a child with autism, says some parents may join these lobbying groups over the advice of doctors because they get "pat answers" to initial concerns about their children.

Many may have been told that boys develop later than girls, for instance.

"The mistrust [of government-funded studies and of their paediatricians] may have arisen from those kind of experiences," she says.

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