

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK/Bernard Rimland, Ph.D.

Are they still blaming the mother?

A few months ago, speaking to an audience of parents and professionals, I mentioned in passing the name of Bruno Bettelheim. After my talk, several young women—probably recently graduated special education teachers—approached me with a question that surprised me: "Who is Bruno Bettelheim?"

In the late 1950s, when I started my studies of autism, everyone with an interest in autism knew exactly who Bruno Bettelheim was. His books and papers were required reading for college students. The mother of a newly diagnosed autistic child who inquired at a public library for any available books on autism would invariably be directed to the library's only works on the subjects: the writings of Bruno Bettelheim. Reading Bettelheim, the mother would learn, to her horror and dismay, that her child was biologically normal, and that *she* had produced autism in her child by extreme, albeit subconscious, emotional mistreatment. Bettelheim claimed the mothers treated their children psychologically like the Nazis treated concentration camp inmates, thus producing apathy, despair, dejection—and autism.

Bettelheim was by no means alone in espousing such views. In those days, blaming the mother was the only game in town. Every textbook proclaimed autism to be an emotional disorder. The treatment was obvious—psychotherapy, endless, expensive psychotherapy for the parents and the child. Schooling? No way! "Your child's a mental health problem, not a special education problem."

The publication of my book *Infantile Autism: the Syndrome and its Implications for a Neural Theory of Behavior* in 1964 brought about a decisive and long-overdue change in this picture. The early book reviews expressed disbelief that anyone could challenge the prevailing beliefs about the cause of autism. Yet, by 1979, author David Katz could write, "Around 90% of the people in the field agree that Rimland blew Bettelheim's theory to hell."

Good and welcome news, but is the Bettelheim influence really gone? Not quite. A great many professionals, trained in the '50s, '60s, and early '70s, still hew to what they were taught: mother did it!

Several times each year, over the past several decades, the Institute for Child Behavior Research has mailed off information on the biological basis of autism to parents confronting backward school districts and insurance companies, in various parts of the U.S., which continue to defend the proposition that autism is an emotional disorder.

The problem is especially widespread overseas. Many of our papers, especially *Freud is Dead*, have been translated into numerous languages, and distributed worldwide.

In 1987, this Institute sent information on

the biogenicity of autism to the Kunin family in Minnesota, in support of their legal struggle against an insurance company which offered reduced payments for medical expenses on the grounds that autism, as a *mental* disorder, did not warrant full reimbursement. The case was won by the family, thus nailing down even more firmly than ever the biological position (ARRI Vol. 2:4).

It seems to most of us that the battle is won, and, in general, it is. Even some avid and highly visible proponents of the psychogenic view have changed their views and now advocate a biogenic position.

Nevertheless, in many people's minds, the issue is far from settled. I cannot forget the mother who phoned in tears not long ago to say that a social worker had recommended a "parentectomy" as the best treatment for her autistic child. Another young mother was recently told by a (now former) friend, "You don't seem to be the sort of mother who would produce an autistic child."

This week I learned of a New York City mother of a young autistic child who, when she protested the child's psychiatrist's statement that her child was "severely emotionally disturbed," was told firmly that "I have yet to see any convincing evidence that autism has a neurological basis."

There was more than ample evidence for the biogenicity of autism when I wrote *Infantile Autism* in the early '60s. Now, with the consistent findings of cerebellar abnormalities in MRI and post mortem research, the evoked potential and biochemical work, the case is even more compelling. Further, as I pointed out in 1964, children who are neglected or even abused become unhappy, not autistic, so by what logic can one infer psychological mistreatment produces autism? The answer is simple: None!

Only a few—perhaps 1% or 2%—of the hundreds of papers on autism we review yearly in writing the ARRI give serious consideration to the emotional illness theory. Most of these are written out of residual ignorance by professionals whose learning ended several decades ago. One scholar who has considered the matter, and who staunchly rejects the biological view of autism, is Victor Sanua, of St. John's University, who insists that the psychogenic theory has been discarded prematurely. I admire Sanua's stout defense of his beliefs, although I certainly do not agree with him.

A much more serious challenge to the currently prevailing biogenic view comes from the many parent and professional supporters of holding therapy. While holding therapy has thus far relatively little support in the U.S., there are many practitioners of holding therapy in Europe, including Great Britain. A basic premise of holding is that in autism and many other behavioral problems of childhood, the mother-child bond has not been firmly established, and

that forcibly holding (hugging) the child will correct the problem.

To the credit of holding therapists, they have departed from the tradition of psychoanalysts by attempting to provide some, albeit limited, documentation of the efficacy of the treatment, beyond isolated case histories. There is a great deal of professional literature—books and journal articles—much of it based on substantial samples of children, which is cited in support of the efficacy of holding therapy. The critics of holding therapy are not persuaded: "Where are the control groups?" they ask; "Where is the hard evidence?"

The controversy is bitter in England, where a two-part BBC special on holding therapy roused the ire of the National Autism Society. There is no doubt that the

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David Katz, 1979

controversy on holding will soon reach our shores. Martha Welch's book *Holding Time* barely mentions autism and the BBC special has not yet aired here, but a Brooke Shield film, "Backstreet Strays," reportedly presenting holding therapy as an effective treatment for autism, is scheduled for release before long, and that will surely provoke a heated response from parents resenting the implication of parental guilt.

Forcible holding may in fact benefit autistic children. Witmer presented a case history suggesting that as long ago as 1919. But if holding therapy helps, must it be assumed that it helps by strengthening mother-child bonds, or that weak mother-child bonds are at the root of autism? Decidedly not.

As readers of ARRI are aware (see Vol. 1:3 and Vol. 2:4), holding provokes many strong physical, physiological responses, which could account for any benefits that might accrue, quite apart from the emotional bonding hypothesis preferred by the holding therapy advocates. Holding induces adrenaline surges, vigorous exercise, proprioceptive and vestibular stimulation, opioid production, the intense focusing of attention, and myriad other responses, so why be so quick to blame Mom—again. If the proponents of holding therapy recognized that it may be a form of physical treatment, and presented it with no implications of blaming parents for weak bonding (or whatever), the evolution and evaluation of the method could proceed with much less rancor.