

A letter from Bruno Bettelheim

Editor's note:

Recently, two mothers of autistic children independently mentioned to me that they had spoken with Bruno Bettelheim—leading proponent of the “refrigerator mother” theory of autism in the 1960’s—and that his opinions about the cause of autism had changed over the years.

Intrigued, I wrote to Bettelheim and asked if he would be interested in clarifying his current position for our readers. His reply:

Dear Dr. Rimland:

I am glad to inform you that my view about the cause of infantile autism is still the same which I stated in my *The Empty Fortress*, namely that it is the consequence of the impact of early experiences on a genetic endowment which predisposes to the development of an autistic reaction to it [sic]. What the nature of this predisposition is remains as of now unknown, despite the fact that a variety of theories are suggested, none of which seems valid to me.

Since I am and always was convinced that to make parents, particularly mothers, feel guilty about whatever their contribution to the environmental factors may be only hampers their ability to deal constructively with their child's disability, I always tried to be helpful to them, since having an autistic child is a terrible misfortune. Nowhere in my writings did I blame parents, since, as a psychoanalyst I am convinced they did as circumstances—usually beyond their control—forced them to do. The task of a psychoanalyst is to understand with empathy and sympathy. This I did. Why, otherwise, would a considerable number of parents have entrusted their autistic child to me? And this in quite a number with very beneficial results.

It was your group [Editor's note: the Autism Society of America, which I founded in 1965] which claimed that my objective findings are tantamount to blaming mothers. You and your group seemed to derive great satisfaction from doing so, and since I am convinced that these parents need any comfort they can get, I did nothing to disabuse you and them . . .

Bruno Bettelheim

Editor's response:

Bettelheim's position is illogical and unconvincing. Since Bettelheim acknowledges a "genetic predisposition," what merit is there in also assuming the need for maternal rejection? How can he be sure the genetic (or other biological) predisposition was not in itself sufficient, without blaming the mother as a contributing cause? He can't. Besides, in his Empty Fortress (1967), he wrote: ". . . I believe . . . that the source of the [unbearable] anxiety is not an organic impairment but the child's evaluation of his life as being utterly destructive" (page 392).

Bettelheim's pious words clash sharply with his vitriolic condemnation of mothers as hating, smothering, or indifferent monsters who drove their children into autism by totally rejecting them as human beings. His comparison of the mothers with SS guards in Nazi concentration camps was not done casually. Many pages of his Empty Fortress are devoted to this hideous analogy. He writes of the "destructive intents of the mothering person" as being a "reality" (page 71). The "essential difference" between the plight of these prisoners . . . [and a child with autism] is that the child never had a chance to develop a personality" (page 68).

I reject Bettelheim's position that he didn't blame parents nor try to make them feel guilty. ("Don't feel guilty, it's not your fault you are a bestial person who drove your child into autism.") I have spoken with literally dozens of parents of autistic children who told me they have been cruelly berated by Bruno Bettelheim, despite his claim to be accepting and non-judgmental.

Bruno Bettelheim has deliberately and repeatedly caused grievous harm to families already in anguish. He well deserves the negative opinion of himself and his work which is virtually universal among parents and others in the field of autism.

Bernard Rimland

Letters

To the Editor:

Congratulations on the fine editorial by Mary Callahan titled "Autism and Allergies: To the Parents of Kids Like Tony."

My own son Alistair has autism which has been brought about by food/chemical intolerance/allergy. I run a group for children like Alistair, and to date we have about 120 children in the group, all of whom have virtually the same history.

My story is very much like that of Mary Callahan's in that at first I thought my son was the only child to have this devastating problem. None of the doctors I saw believed my story. Then I saw a doctor who actually had seen a number of such children, whom he called a subgroup of autistics, whose autism was actually triggered by allergies. Our major problem at the moment is that here in England, only a very few doctors realize that allergy can actually trigger autism.

Most of the children in our group are wheat-affected (late onset autism), but there are also some who are milk-affected (early onset). These are the main allergens, with many others on top.

Interested parents and professionals in the United Kingdom are invited to write to:

Brenda O'Reilly
Allergy-Induced Autism
Support and Self Help Group
3 Palmera Avenue
Calcot, Reading
Berks RG3 7DZ, England
Tel: 0734 419460

Editor's Note: This is one of many enthusiastic responses to our editorial on "Allergies and Autism."

To the Editor:

I am the mother of a 29-year-old autistic son, and the author of the children's book about autism, *Please Don't Say Hello*.

For the past two decades I have studied Yoga as a way of improving life for my son, for others, and myself, with gratifying results. Those interested in learning more about this approach are welcome to write me.

Phyllis-Terri Gold, Ph.D.
6 Arleigh Court
E. Northport, NY 11731

A BRIGHT IDEA!

This is your next-to-last issue of the ARRI for 1989. Why not re-subscribe NOW for 1990? (See subscription form on page 7.)

ARRI is planning a 1990 issue on residential care. We would like to hear from professionals who have conducted research on any topic involving community homes, institutional settings, and/or farm settings.