

Letters to the Editor

To The Editor:

I am writing in response to your comments regarding my position on the etiology in infantile autism as expressed in your editorial, "Are they still blaming the mother?". I do not "staunchly reject the biological view of autism" as you indicated.

In a 1986 article, I state, "A critical analysis of these studies has indicated that the evidence of organic factors tends to be rather weak and furthermore has been found to be contradictory." Therefore my position is not that I reject the organic etiology of infantile autism, but rather that because of the befuddling periodical new "discoveries" reflected in the news media, which I find inconclusive, I therefore remain unconvinced.

Furthermore, to clarify my position on "blaming of the mother," I stated in my second paper that I do not subscribe to the "bad parenting" hypothesis. Neither the "nurture" school nor the "nature" school has provided the answer to the problem of causality, a problem that remains enigmatic despite formal statements often seen in the literature regarding etiology.

On the basis of my studies of the literature, I remain open to all possible avenues of research on the etiology of autism. My conclusion in the second paper reads as follows, "parental, biological, genetic, and cultural factors continue to be justified."

Victor D. Sanua
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To the Editor:

Re your article on "Gentle Teaching" (ARRI 3/3), I would like to agree with McGee's contention that aversives produce a fearful person. All the hugging in the world is not going to erase torture of electrical prodding. Prodding, to my mind, would produce a fearful, agitated human being who, when his tolerance level had reached the limit, would explode . . .

Phyllis Stewart

Editor's Note: Reader Stewart is seriously misinformed regarding the supposedly adverse effects of aversives. A number of careful and competent reviews, including a review of 60 studies by an AMA panel, show the critics of aversives have grossly exaggerated their case. A 1988 review of 274 published studies found that aversives produced 11 times as many positive as negative effects.

If her comment on the "torture of electrical prodding" refers to the SIBIS device, she is again mistaken. No one I know who has tried SIBIS, including myself, considers it painful—only uncomfortable. Self-injurious individuals on whom it has been used plead to be able to wear it, to save themselves from their compulsive self-injury.

To the Editor:

We are another family once touched by the destructive theories of Bettelheim and others of his ilk. Almost 13 years ago, a psychiatrist solemnly pronounced that our severely impaired autistic son would have had no problems had I not been a working mother. He questioned my ability to mother because I was employed—as a psychiatric nurse, no less! . . .

Karen Kelly Schutzenhofer

Editor's Note: Most of our readers agreed with our strong criticism of Bruno Bettelheim's position on autism (ARRI 3/3), see letters 3/4, but a few thought we were too harsh.

I wonder if the few who had some sympathy for Bettelheim would retain their kind thoughts were they to read Bettelheim's newest book, Freud's Vienna and Other Essays. According to New York Times book reviewer Michiku Kakutani, Bettelheim feels the word "innocence" is inapplicable to the millions who died in Nazi death camps. He has no sympathy for these victims, just as he has no sympathy for the mothers of autistic children; in both cases, he feels, the victims are to blame for their fate. The victims of Nazis, he says, were guilty of "deliberate ignorance," of unwillingness to fight for their lives, of yielding to their "death drive."

—BR

Recently published . . .

Children With Autism: A Parents' Guide, Michael D. Powers, editor; Woodbine House, 1989. Paperback, 368 pages, \$12.98.

Includes chapters on the diagnosis and treatment of autism; adjusting to life with an autistic child; finding a good educational program; legal rights of the autistic child; becoming an advocate for an autistic child; and the special problems and needs of the adult with autism. Foreword by opera singer Beverly Sills Greenough; introduction by Bernard Rimland. Includes a list of resources for autistic individuals in the United States.

The Siege, third edition, by Clara Park; Little, Brown, publishers, 1990.

An updated version of this classic account of life with an autistic child. Contains a "progress report" on Dr. Park's daughter, now a young woman, and includes updated resource lists, bibliography, photos.

Autisme et Troubles du Developpement Global de L'Enfant, (French), G. LeLord, J.P. Muh, M. Petit and D. Sauvage, editors; Expansion Scientifique Francaise, 1989.

Published in French, this collection of chapters by professionals in the fields of education, medicine, and psychotherapy explores all points of view about the causes and treatment of autism, ranging from biological to psychogenic theories.

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