

Autism Research Review

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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Reviewing biomedical and educational research in the field of autism and related disorders

Autism world loses a giant: Bernard Rimland, Ph.D.

Autistic children and their parents said goodbye to their best friend and greatest champion on November 21, when Dr. Bernard Rimland, founder and director of the Autism Research Institute, passed away at the age of 78.

Dr. Stephen M. Edelson, the new Director of ARI, says, "Dr. Rimland will go down in history as the person who ended the 'dark ages' of autism and spearheaded the fight to bring hope and help to autistic children. When he began his work in the field of autism in the 1960s, psychiatrists blamed parents for their children's autism, institutionalized those children, and 'treated' them by drugging them into submission. Today, autistic children receive effective educational interventions and biomedical treatments that bring about dramatic improvement and often even recovery. At every step of this revolution, Dr. Rimland led the way—and at every step, he had to fight tooth-and-nail against an establishment determined to maintain the status quo."

Dr. Rimland's nearly fifty years of work on behalf of autistic children began with a single child: his own son, Mark Rimland, born in 1956. In the introduction to the most recent version of the Defeat Autism Now! (DAN!) treatment manual, Dr. Rimland wrote, "Mark was a screaming, implacable infant who resisted being cuddled and struggled against being picked up. He also struggled against being put down. Our pediatrician, Dr. Black, who had been in practice for 35 years, had never seen nor heard of a child like Mark. Neither Dr. Black nor I, who at that time was three years beyond my Ph.D. in psychology, had ever seen or heard the word 'autism.'"

It wasn't until Mark turned two that Dr. Rimland's wife, Gloria, remembered reading in college about children with symptoms like their child's. Digging through a dusty box of Gloria's textbooks in the garage, Dr. Rimland saw the word "autism" for the first time. That discovery was the first step in a quest that covered nearly half a century.

Dr. Rimland's battle to help autistic children began in the early 1960s, when psychoanalysis reigned and professionals believed that autism stemmed from a "refrigerator mother's" subconscious rejection of her child. Treatments, prescribed by leading authority

Bruno Bettelheim and other psychoanalysts, included having children kick and spit on statues representing their mothers.

Knowing that Mark was a greatly loved child and that the "refrigerator mother" theory was both wrong and destructive, Dr. Rimland set out to discover all that was known about autism. He scoured libraries for articles on autism, including foreign articles he had translated, and found, as he noted later, "not a shred of evidence" to support the hypothesis that bad parenting caused autism.

What he discovered, instead, was powerful evidence that autism was a biological disorder—a fact that seems obvious now, but was revolutionary at the time. He outlined this evidence in his seminal book *Infantile Autism: The Syndrome and Its Implications for a Neural Theory of Behavior*, published in 1964. The book changed the autism world forever: it won the Century Award for distinguished contribution to psychology and, as one reporter put it, "blew Bettelheim's theory all to hell." For parents, the nightmare of being blamed for their children's terrifying disorder was over.

Most people would be content to rest on their laurels at that point, but Dr. Rimland was barely getting warmed up. He'd revo-



lutionized an entire field, but he still had no way to help his own son. So he founded the National Society for Autistic Children (NSAC), now known as the Autism Society of America. Through this group, parents of children with autism—a very rare disorder, at the time—could offer each other moral support and practical advice about which therapies worked and which didn't.

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Stephen M. Edelson, Ph.D., named Director of ARI

Stephen M. Edelson, Ph.D., has been named Director of the Autism Research Institute (ARI). Formerly the Associate Director of ARI, Dr. Edelson also is the Director of the Center for the Study of Autism, which will be combining forces with ARI.

"It is a huge honor and a tremendous responsibility to follow in the footsteps of Dr. Rimland," says Dr. Edelson, who has collaborated on many of Dr. Rimland's most important research projects. "Our goal will be to continue and expand all of his efforts, with particular focus on the Defeat Autism Now! (DAN!) Project. In his last year, Dr. Rimland laid out an ambitious blueprint for bringing DAN! to autism families around the world, and fostering intensive research aimed at finding immediate, effective treatments for autism. Our mission will be follow through on this plan."

Dr. Edelson, who has been involved with ARI's research activities since the 1980s, began his studies of autism in 1977 at UCLA as a student of Dr. O. Ivar Lovaas, whose pioneering work in behavior modification has revolutionized the educational treatment of autistic children. Dr. Edelson (no relation to DAN! doctor Stephen B. Edelson, M.D., in Atlanta, Georgia) received his Masters and Doctorate in Experimental Psychology at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, where he studied cognition and perception in children and adults. After completing graduate school, he was an Assistant Professor at Pitzer College, one of the Claremont Colleges. He is the co-author, with Dr. Rimland, of *Recovering Autistic Children*.

For more information, see Dr. Edelson's editorial on page 3 of this issue.