

Language disorder: gene link to autism?

Children with specific language impairment (SLI), also known as developmental language disorder, appear normal except for their difficulties in learning to use or understand language. However, researchers have noted that many children with SLI exhibit symptoms similar to those of autistic children. Four new studies bolster the SLI/autism connection: two reveal that children with SLI often show increasing signs of social and cognitive impairment as they grow into adulthood, while two others suggest that SLI and autism may share a genetic link.

Patricia Howlin and colleagues report on a group of 19 autistic subjects and 20 subjects with developmental receptive language disorders. The subjects, initially assessed when they were 7 to 8 years old, were re-evaluated in their early 20s. Not surprisingly, the autism group continued to show greater impairment in behavior, social skills, and independent living skills than the language impaired subjects. "However," the researchers say, "problems in all these areas were also common in the language [impaired] group. Many still lived with their parents, few had close friends or permanent jobs, and ratings of social interaction indicated abnormalities in a number of different areas." Overall, 65% of the language-impaired subjects were rated as having moderate social problems.

In a separate study, the same researchers evaluated the cognitive and language skills of their autistic and language-impaired subjects. They report, "Although the language [impaired] group were less severely impaired in their social use of language, many showed a number of abnormal features in this domain." In addition, while the two groups were matched for IQ when they initially entered the study as children, the verbal IQs and receptive language scores of the autistic group improved significantly more over time than those of language-impaired group.

Howlin et al. say their findings "demonstrate the very persistent problems experienced by individuals with developmental language disorders, and their need for much greater help and support than is presently available."

Chromosome 7: a common link?

A possible clue to the association between SLI and autism comes from two new gene studies—one linking SLI to a specific region of chromosome 7, and another identifying a

genetic abnormality in the same area in an autistic individual. Reviewing the studies, Susan Folstein and Raymond Mankoski cite other evidence pointing to a genetic similarity between the two disorders: studies show that there is a greater-than-expected prevalence of language disorder in families with autistic children, and of autism in siblings of children with SLI. "Thus," they say, "it is tempting to speculate that the two conditions have some genes in common." That possibility, Folstein and Mankoski say, would be consistent with current models of autism, which suggest that numerous genes, in different combinations, may confer susceptibility to the disorder.

References available upon request. Send SASE to ARI, and ask for "language disorder" references.

Letters to the Editor

(continued from page 6)

Casein, No Gluten, Sugar Optional Cookbook, is available from ARI for \$9.95 plus \$2.00 shipping (Calif. residents add \$.75 tax).

Good News: LA bans mercury!

To the Editor:

Louisiana has just become the first state to discontinue the use of mercury-containing vaccines! I couldn't persuade the director of the vaccine programs to drop the thimerosal-containing vaccines because he argued, "The autism/vaccine connection has not been proven."

I then emailed him this question: "Regardless of the 'possibility' of a connection between autism and vaccines, could you please explain to me how you could personally uphold the delivery of a neurotoxic substance into a child with a developing brain?"

He replied at once: They would stop the use of thimerosal-containing vaccines!

Shelley Reynolds
Baton Rouge, LA

Editor's Note: Great going, Shelley! Shelley is one of the wonderful moms who helped put on the Autism Awareness Rally in Washington last April. An even bigger rally is planned for 2001. Watch this space!

A subscription to the ARRI
is an excellent gift
for parents and teachers of
autistic children!

Letters to the Editor are welcomed.
We reserve the right to edit letters for
length and clarity. Letters should not
exceed two pages in length, including
references.

Concerns rise over mercury in vaccines

(continued from page 2)

using vaccines with thimerosal until mercury-free vaccines are available. Vaccine critic Sallie Bernard, a parent of a child who became autistic following a vaccination, says, "They feel that having vaccines available is more important than working

The CDC and FDA came under fire in June from a Congressional committee that issued a scathing report charging both groups with allowing members with ties to drug companies to play major roles in approving new vaccines.

with manufacturers to eliminate [mercury]. We disagree."

The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunizations Practices (ACIP) and the FDA's Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee (VRBPAC) also came under fire in June from a Congressional committee which issued a scathing report charging that both groups allow members with ties to drug companies to play prominent roles in making decisions about vaccine approval. The Congressional committee called for the removal of advisory board members with financial stakes in vaccine production, and for increased public participation in the FDA and CDC committees' vaccine approval process.

References available upon request. Send SASE to ARI and ask for "mercury" references.

Notice: Fenfluramine (Pondimin)/Redux Settlement

Under a recent settlement, people who believe they have been injured by Pondimin (the brand name for fenfluramine, a drug sometimes prescribed to autistic children in recent years) or Redux (the diet drug fenphen), are eligible for financial compensation. The settlement offers a variety of benefits depending on whether, and to what extent, the person who took the drug suffers from heart valve regurgitation—a serious medical condition linked to the use of Pondimin or Redux. To obtain information, call 800-386-2070, or log on to <http://settlementdietdrugs.com> and request an information packet.