

THE INTEGRATIVE HEALTH COACH by John Davidson

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THE AUTISM EXPLOSION

I'm tempted to shout FIRE IN THE HOLE!

“Fire in the hole” is a warning that will be familiar to many of my readers. It originated with miners, who needed to warn their fellow miners that a charge had been set and that an explosion was about to go off in a confined space.

Why would I shout that?

The United States Center for Disease Control announced on December 18th that autism disorders increased by 57% in just four years.

Just two decades ago, doctors were diagnosing autism at the rate of one child in 5000.

Now it is diagnosed in one boy in 70, and one in 315 girls.

This is an explosion, compared to which swine flu is of almost no consequence.

Yet, the medical response to autism is mysteriously and relatively absent, while the entire country mobilizes against a flu virus.

Why is that?

The answer is simple. We can understand flu and its cause, even if there is a serious debate about how to respond to it.

Autism is regarded as a mystery. When something is a mystery, medicine and science take two approaches. One is to study it, if there is money available.

The other approach is to pretend that it doesn't exist.

Explosions are not a good thing to ignore.

So what is autism?

Autism is generally regarded as a brain development disorder characterized by impaired social interaction and communication and by restricted and repetitive behavior. These symptoms begin early, generally before three years old.

What is missing from this description of symptoms is any indication of what causes autism.

The U.S. government, through the CDC, essentially sidesteps this question by simply contending that we are doing better diagnosis these days and that the numbers have, in reality remained constant over many decades. Most people actually familiar with autism say this is not true.

Efforts to link the uptick in autism with the advent of huge numbers of vaccinations starting in the 1990's have failed to catch the attention the government, which continues to point to absence of convincing evidence of the relationship.

The answer to that argument is that the relationship between vaccinations and autism has never really been studied in a controlled comparison between children who have been vaccinated and those who haven't.

So the CDC position doesn't really talk about cause. On the other hand, there is a large group of doctors, parents, and authors who do.

The best thinking at this time suggests that there is no single cause of autism, although a single factor might be the cause with a particular child.

For example, it is pretty clear that mercury can cause autism, even if not all autism involves mercury.

What is apparent is that fetuses and infants are very vulnerable to a whole host of factors that have the potential to interfere with development.

Those who see autism as a growing epidemic summarize these causes as “environmental.”

By pointing to the environment, these people are saying that the causes of autism come from outside the child, rather than from genetic factors present at birth.

That is not to say that genetics do not play a role. While it seems unlikely that gene scientists will find an “autism” gene, we do know that genes adapt and mutate in response to environmental factors.

And we know that each of us carry genes that are more vulnerable or susceptible than other genes to particular environment influences, which is why I may be more sensitive to milk than you.

Because the environments to which each of us is exposed are very different, it is apparent that the particular causes of autism in a particular child will be pretty individual.

On the other hand, when the environment is just overwhelming, it matters little what part of the genetic structure is vulnerable.

Since we can't control genetic structure in the first place, it makes sense to focus on the environment.

My own list of environmental factors contributing to the epidemic of autism spectrum disorders -- and to learning disorders, which I regard as related symptoms -- suggests the overwhelming nature of the problem that infants now face in our culture.

Starting in earnest during the last century, people streamed off farms and into growing urban environments. Industrialization gained steam and found its stride. In so doing, our culture separated people from the process of growing food and made us increasingly dependent upon processed foods. Pesticides and petrochemical pollutants poured into the environment. The advent of technology brought electromagnetic fields into prominence.

Children are the most apparent victims of this cultural sea change, for the simple reason that they are the most vulnerable. We have fed them foods full of chemicals and depleted of nutrition, and pounded their systems with pollutants, including electromagnetic fields that interfere with their own – upon which normal development is absolutely dependent. Sound pollution is rampant and significant. Stress is at an all time high since the last world war. The use of pharmaceuticals of all kinds is far more prevalent than ever before.

All children are affected by this perfect storm of emerging issues.

Which children are most affected – to the point that their conditions are diagnosable – is fairly random, just as the degree to which they are affected is dependent upon where they happen to be standing and how vulnerable they are in the first place.

There is no magic pill for this. This is about how we are living. Its about junk food, school food, cell phones, telephones, computers and a consumption lifestyle that occurs no where else in the world.

How we are living is creating this explosion.

Other explosions will follow as general health continues to decline in response to the environmental conditions we have created. Children are the canaries in the mine.

If any social issue made me want to scream, it would be this one.

FIRE IN THE HOLE!