

a sensitive subject

STUDY SHOWS A MOTHER'S SENSITIVITY LEVEL CAN AFFECT AUTISTIC KIDS' LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

BY DARCY CLINTON

According to a 2007 report published by the Centers for Disease Control, the prevalence of autism spectrum disorders in the United States is 1 in 110 children or almost 1 in 94 if your child is a boy.

Researchers Daniel Messinger, an associate professor in the department of psychology at the University of Miami College of Arts and Sciences, and Jason K. Baker, a postdoctoral fellow at the Waisman Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison, are working on research they hope will empower parents to provide

the best care possible for children with an autism spectrum disorder.

Weston resident Gabi Brecher has two children, Sharon, 6 and Dylan, 5. Dylan received an autism diagnosis when he was 20 months old.

"There's so much information to sort through and figure out when you are looking for answers," she said "Every child and family has different needs. As parents, we always want to do what's best for our children and help those around us see our child as a person, not a diagnosis.

Promising New Research

Baker and Messinger conducted a study of 33 children between the ages of 18 and 36 months to determine how a mother's sensitivity may promote language development in toddlers with emergent autism spectrum disorders. Baker said their findings indicated

that children whose mothers showed more sensitive teaching behavior early on did much better in the area of language development.

Fort Lauderdale mother Wendy Carroll participated in the study with her youngest son, Brian, 5. Brian and her other son, Colin, 7, both have autism.

"A child with autism may look at a bird and become fixated on a tiny dent in the bird's beak," Carroll said. "I view parental sensitivity in this situation as knowing the best way to help my children see the entire bird. That might mean talking about its color, feathers, eyes — all the parts of the bird that make it whole."

Baker stressed that parenting doesn't cause autism. The definition of sensitivity in the study does not address the amount of love or trust in the parent-child relationship.

"We measured interactive behavior, not the relationship," Baker said. "All the parents



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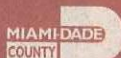
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in the study appeared to have positive relationships with their children. What we were interested in figuring out was how parents' moment-to-moment behavior might scaffold certain areas of their children's development."

Carroll hopes parents take Baker's message to heart.

"What we are doing instinctively as parents on a day-to-day basis helps our children, even if we don't receive an immediate response," Carroll said. "Through participation in the study I was able to ask questions, acquire additional methods and tools to help my children develop skills necessary to achieve all they can."

Early Diagnosis

A newborn baby's brain will triple in size from birth to 2 years of age and could present a window of opportunity for children at a high risk for developing autism.

"We don't always know which intervention is best for a given child," said Boca Raton pediatrician Dr. Paul Christakis. "I feel it is worthwhile to look hard and to look early for signs of autism. Clues to autism are now rec-

ognized as young as 9 to 12 months of age."

It's not clear what causes autism, but genetics and environmental triggers may play a role in the development of this disorder. One or several neurological disorders may be seen in children with autism, which is the reason why medical professionals describe autism as a spectrum disorder.

Can Early Intervention Really Help?

"For some children, early intervention can reduce the communication difficulties, social impairments and disruptive behaviors seen with this disorder," Baker said. "Some things that develop easily in children with typical neurological development don't come as naturally for children with autism.

Experts disagree about the long-term benefits of early intervention for children with autism. Baker and Messinger said intervention studies have shown great results overall, but there are some children who do not appear to benefit in the same way as others.

They stress that this is a small study and a first step.

"Moving forward, we'd like to see more

SENSITIVE STRUCTURING BEHAVIORS:

- Strike a balance between structuring your child and engaging with him around his interests.
- Work on skills that are just above the level of knowledge that your child currently has.
- If the goal you are working on seems too complex for your child, break down tasks and happily accept behaviors that move your child closer to the goal, working slowly toward the ultimate goal.
- Provide a rich language environment, and encourage your child to express himself through speech.
- Use positivity to engage your child, to increase his motivation and to maintain his attention.

parents come in with children of different ages and see other researchers conduct studies surrounding the benefits of a positive parent-child interaction," Messinger said. "Even small changes in language development have the potential to improve the quality of daily living and communication for children with autism."

Carroll agrees. "I see this as a message of hope."

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