



AUTISM AND ALLERGIES: *Uncovering the Connection*

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL ZACHARISEN, MD
AND ERIN MCLAUGHLIN-SUTTERER

I'm frequently asked if allergies cause or contribute to autism symptoms. To assist me in this article, I recruited a co-author, Erin McLaughlin-Sutterer, a mental health therapist in Anchorage, Alaska who specializes in working with autistic children and their families.

WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a range of complex neurodevelopmental disorders typically diagnosed in early childhood that includes autism, Asperger's syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder. ASD is associated with varying degrees of difficulty in communication and social skills, repetitive behaviors, attention, differences in motor skills and learning disabilities. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the number of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder has increased over the last decade to one in 68 children. At this time, while there are many research studies and theories on autism, there is no definite understanding of the cause or a cure.

STOMACH SYMPTOMS AND FOOD ALLERGIES:

Many children with autism have been observed to have stomach symptoms when their behavior deteriorates. Parents of autistic children who have stomach symptoms often report improvement in some behaviors along with

resolution of stomach symptoms following a diet change such as going dairy free or gluten free. In a U.S. National Health Survey, respiratory, food and skin allergies were reported by parents more often for children with autism – with food allergies 4.5 times more likely in autistic kids. It's proposed that the stomach discomfort leads to stress with a disruption of the gut-blood-brain barrier, resulting in the behavior changes. Food allergies affect one in every 13 children and food intolerances occur even more often. While a food allergy is easy to assess using a skin test or blood test for IgE (the allergic antibody), both false positive and false negative tests can occur. The use of IgE blood tests for food allergies is controversial and unproven. In addition, the testing can be stressful to the patient. Non-allergic food intolerance reactions are challenging to diagnose regardless of autism status. Scientific studies on children with autism generally include small numbers of participants and are not controlled for variables. This makes it difficult to make strong conclusions. But elimination diets under the supervision of your doctor may uncover food triggers.

ENVIRONMENTAL ALLERGIES:

Allergies are common, affecting up to 30 percent (and rising) of children. Autistic kids are not exempt from allergies but may be

underdiagnosed and possibly undertreated in part due to difficulty in communication skills and sensory overstimulation.

The usual symptoms of allergies (runny nose, nasal congestion, sneezing) are uncomfortable but also frequently associated with fatigue, stress and sleep deprivation, all common concerns with ASD. These, in turn, may exacerbate behavioral issues. It is well known that there is a higher risk of allergies in a child when parents themselves have allergies.

CAN A MOTHER'S ALLERGIES AFFECT HER CHILDREN?

A study in California evaluated 407 children with autism compared to more than 2,000 other children (in the control group) and found that mothers with psoriasis, asthma and allergies during pregnancy were twice as likely to have children with ASD. This observation leads to additional questions on the cause of autism.

In medical school, I was taught that "common diseases occur commonly" and regardless of autism status, food and environmental allergies and food intolerance should be considered if symptoms are fitting. It is also important not to attribute symptoms to "allergy" when other features point to a different trigger, in an effort to avoid unnecessary allergy testing and evaluations.

Treatment of children with autism is best accomplished through a comprehensive, integrative program with therapists (mental health, physical and occupational, speech-language), pediatricians and specialists in childhood development and neurology. In time, the frustration and powerlessness experienced by families with autism will be replaced with confidence and trust as we care for this most special group. 🍎

Michael Zacharisen, MD is a board-certified allergist/immunologist and pediatrician. He has nearly 20 years of experience in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of allergy, asthma, chronic cough and recurrent infections. His practice, Family Allergy & Asthma Care of Montana, is located at 4265 Fallon Street, Suite 3A in Bozeman, and is open to patients of all ages.



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The Family Business

COTTONWOOD DAY School

WRITTEN BY AMY WOOD AND MEREDITH SCULLY

Cottonwood Day School is a new academic institution located in the heart of Gallatin County. The school was founded by Meredith Scully, a Bozeman mom of three, with a background in special education and social work. As the parent of a child with a learning disability, she felt that other parents like her deserve more educational options for their children. Familiar with such schools, Scully decided to create an educational program in the community that teaches to the specific needs of students with language disabilities.

"When you watch your child struggle," Scully explains, "you want to do whatever you can to make it better. I knew that I couldn't be the only parent in the community having this experience, and I wanted to do something about it." According to a local student advocate, this school is the first of its kind in the state of Montana.

Children with language-based learning challenges are often extraordinarily bright. It can be difficult for them to demonstrate their intelligence or engage in instruction because of the barriers these learning challenges present in a traditional classroom. In order to promote engagement and spark learning, these students must be presented with content in varying ways. Albert Einstein, a self-declared dyslexic, famously said, "Everyone is a genius, but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."

The program at Cottonwood Day School is special and unique because it recognizes the importance of engagement and alternative multi-sensory instructional practices. "Having taught for many years in a co-teaching inclusive classroom, I know what works and what doesn't," Scully said. "I believe that the best environment for all students is one that is nurturing, engaging and stimulating. A child needs to feel safe and be able to trust you. A comprehensive team approach where all service providers – teachers, speech/language therapists and occupational

therapists – work collaboratively to create a plan that addresses the unique needs of each student throughout the school day is critical to student success."

The foundation of the curriculum at Cottonwood Day School is a specialized early language and literacy intervention program based on the Orton-Gillingham approach. Orton-Gillingham is an intensive program, which is designed to be integrated into the curriculum and is the foundation of the Institute for Multi-Sensory Education. The Institute for Multi-Sensory Education (IMSE) was established to enhance the Orton-Gillingham approach to learning and provide educators of all capacities to "effectively intervene at the at-risk level and develop this population of students into successful readers, writers and spellers." Students who learn with this specialized approach can learn the skills to be successful in their academic career.

Scully developed the program's curriculum through careful research of the latest neuro-educational approaches. Not only does Cottonwood Day School provide a specialized curriculum, it also provides assessment of current performance and areas of deficit, individualized academic plans to meet the unique needs of each student, multi-sensory framework within each content area, a small teacher/student ratio and the incorporation of new technology within the classroom.

This program is appropriate for a variety of learning disabilities, including dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia. The program at Cottonwood Day School will focus on students who are in the first through third grades, and will act as an intensive intervention in a newly renovated intimate academic setting. It will also be providing an after-school program beginning in September. 🍓

For questions or information on this program please contact Amy Wood, Assistant Head of School wood@cottonwooddayschool.org, 406-586-3409 or visit www.cottonwooddayschool.org.



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