
TURNING THE CORNER ON AUTISM

Autistic children have long baffled the medical community. Often precocious in their early development, they suddenly and inexplicably retreat from the world to such a degree that they lose much of their cognitive, speech and social skills within a year. Yet neurologic exams reveal no clues.

Now, Duke pediatric neurologist Dr. Robert DeLong has shown in a pilot study that some types of infantile autism may arise from an inherited, early-onset form of manic depression. If confirmed in follow-up studies, the illness may be treatable with drug therapy. Studying autistic children who tested normally on neurological exams, DeLong found that more than a third of the patients had a strong family history of depression or manic depression – a dramatically higher rate than found in the general population.

DeLong suspects that when manic depression strikes in early infancy, it blunts a child's cognitive, social and emotional development irreversibly, so that the child's brain never develops the framework in which to build communication or social interaction skills. When it appears later in childhood, it may damage the fragile neural network that is still in its formative stages. DeLong is continuing his research, exploring what he says is, "the first time we have been able to implicate a neurochemical disorder as the cause of autism among children who don't display any physical signs of brain damage."

Published in News at Duke Med, Winter, 1999