

SPECIAL REPORT

Common Myths About Autism and Why You Shouldn't Believe Them



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There is so much information out there that **it can be very difficult to determine what is true and what is not.** It seems that in the realm of autism in particular, there are many myths, rumors, and misinterpretations that are viewed as truth. Here are some common myths you may have heard—and why you should **think twice** before believing them:

1. **Autism is a mystery to the scientific community.**

While the causes of autism have not yet been definitively identified (although a variety of genetic and environmental conditions appear to be factors), autism itself is not a mystery. We know that the connections between various parts of the brain that allow the brain to function in an integrated way are not as they should be. Recent neurobiological research has shown that in individuals with autism, **some parts of the brain are significantly under-connected while other parts are over-connected.** This lack of proper connectivity leads to the patterns of strengths and deficits we see in individuals

with autism. There are a number of other factors involved as well; but this connectivity issue has been consistently demonstrated in the research.

2. There is a limited “window of opportunity” early in a child’s life where change can happen; and if you miss that window, your child’s chance to make progress is gone.

This is perhaps one of the most damaging myths in the realm of autism. It’s absolutely NOT TRUE! **The human brain has the capacity to grow and change throughout our lifespan.** This is a well accepted and demonstrated scientific fact; yet with regard to autism, there is this idea that children cannot make progress beyond a certain age. It may be easier to work with young children as opposed to older children, and the brain may be more open to neurological changes at a young age; but the fact remains that individuals have the potential to grow new brain connections and make progress at any time and any age.

3. If people with autism can just get through school, they will be okay.

We'd all like to think that if an individual can make academic progress and get through high school, then they will be able to have success as adults. Unfortunately, the research has not shown this to be true. What few outcome studies have been done show us that the majority of adults with autism (including those considered "high functioning" or with average to above-average intelligence) are not living independently, do not have jobs that allow them to financially support themselves, and do not have meaningful peer and family relationships. The statistics are sobering, and point to the fact that **what we have traditionally done as far as treatment for these individuals is not leading to a satisfying quality of life in adulthood.** We must look beyond treatments aimed at improving intellectual progress and getting through school, as that is clearly not all that is required for a successful adult life.

4. Peer contact will solve the social problems of a person with autism.

Again, this is another attractive idea that is not supported by research. It is a popular strategy to place individuals with autism in situations where they are surrounded by non-autistic peers, in the hopes that the interaction will resolve their social deficits. In reality, if placing people in situations with typical peers solved the problem we wouldn't have people with autism! While it may be appealing to think that having consistent exposure to peers will somehow "rub off" on the person with autism, this is just not the case. These experiences can be enjoyable and beneficial for people with autism in other ways, but **the issues that create their social deficits go much deeper** than what can be resolved by consistent opportunities for interaction with peers not on the spectrum.

5. Every treatment out there should be tried—the more the better.

This is the equivalent of "throw things at the wall and see what sticks." While many families go through an initial phase of seeking out anything and everything that may possibly help their child, what often results in a stressed out family and child. The reality is that

more is not necessarily better; and **parents need to carefully select treatment options that reflect their values as parents, enhance their understanding of their child’s personality and needs, and provide the information and research to support any treatment being considered.** Every person with autism is unique in both the presentation of their autism as well as other co-occurring conditions that may be present. Likewise, each parent and family situation is unique. Slow down and allow yourself to take the time to make treatment decisions that make sense to you and that will work for your child and family. Remember—there is no research to support that trying everything is effective or that more is always better!

6. People outside of the family should provide treatment—the “experts” can do more good for children with autism than their parents.

There seems to be the notion in the realm of autism that parents are not well suited to address their child’s needs. Once a diagnosis of autism is given, a common recommendation is for parents to find other people who are “experts” in autism treatment to work with their child. In essence, **this treatment plan strips parents of their**

rightful role as parents; and it implies that if they really want their children to make progress, they must turn them over to others who “know better.”

First of all, whether a child has a diagnosed condition or not, parents know their children best and **it is developmentally most important for children to have close meaningful relationships with their parents**. Secondly, who are the “experts” to whom parents are told to entrust their child’s development? Are they teachers with some training in autism, or college-age students who have taken a course on behavioral principles, or therapists who claim to specialize in autism treatment? How is it that any of these people are more important in a child’s life than his or her parents and family?

The bottom line is that **parents must be the most important people in a child’s life**, and they must be the ones who are experts about their child. This is not to say that parents of children with autism should automatically know how to treat their autism. Unfortunately, kids don’t come with training manuals! What it does mean is that treatment approaches must include parents as the primary people in the child’s life, and must provide them information and guidance to

support their interactions with their child. **Parents must be empowered to understand and guide their child if meaningful progress is to occur.**

You now have some important information about why you cannot believe everything you hear about autism and treatment. *The next step is for you to contact professionals who can continue to empower you with the information and strategies you need to make a difference for your child and family.* Our team at Horizons will provide you with the most current research-based information regarding autism and treatment. **Call us at (616) 698-0306 or send an email to info@horizonsdrc.com.** We look forward to helping you make a positive difference in your child's life no matter what his/her age!



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