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Recent burst of discussion around autism may fuel advances in research

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The Buzz This Week

April is World Autism Month, linked to the United Nations-sanctioned Autism Awareness Day on April 2. The 2025 theme for the latter is *Advancing Neurodiversity and the UN Sustainable Development Goals*, underscoring how inclusive policies and practices can create positive changes for neurodiverse individuals and contribute to global sustainability goals, such as access to quality education and health and wellbeing for all.

In the US, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a new *Surveillance Summary* on April 17, which found that in 2022, 1 in 31 in children were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) by the time they were 8 years old. This is up from 1 in 36 children in 2020, and 1 in 150 in 2000. While screening and diagnosis capabilities improved over that period, as has societal awareness, these factors alone don't fully account for the magnitude of this increase.

Studies suggest that a constellation of factors lead to the disorder. Some studies have identified up to 200 genetic mutations and variations that are believed to be related to autism, particularly in early brain development. Other research suggests that older age of parents—particularly that of fathers—can increase the likelihood of having a child with autism. Environmental factors and maternal conditions such as gestational diabetes may also play a role.

Childhood vaccination has been cited as a potential cause of autism after a now-retracted 12-child study conducted in the 1990s suggested a possible connection. Since then, extensive research has repeatedly disproven this spurious finding.

Why It Matters

Discourse over the causes of autism has ballooned in the last month, in part because of the latest prevalence data released by the CDC, as well as [comments recently made](#) by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. While many may bristle at his remarks, some in the autism community welcome the opportunity to bring the disorder to the forefront of national conversation. As Jill Escher, President of the National Council on Severe Autism, stated in a recent NPR interview, “We have to have serious discussions about causation. We have to have serious discussions about revising policy to meet the needs. We should not be romanticizing autism. ... We still have so many unanswered questions about what might be causing it and what we should be doing about it.”

While autism has captured the attention of the public and researchers in varying degrees over the past couple of decades, misconceptions and misunderstandings of the disorder persist.

For example, some envision a person with severe limitations (such as being nonverbal, unable to learn basic concepts, or requiring assistance with toileting and hygiene) when autism comes to mind. The CDC reports that 25% of those diagnosed with autism do have severe symptoms, clinically referred to as “profound autism,” but there isn’t a single manifestation. Many “on the spectrum” are highly functioning individuals, leading independent lives.

[Growing evidence](#) suggests that early diagnosis can lead to earlier interventions, such as [applied behavioral analysis](#) (ABA) or [sensory integration therapy](#) (SIT), and a better quality of life. The science around evaluation and diagnosis of the disorder has come a long way, but much remains to be understood. Hopefully, the bubbling up of this topic will increase support for further research and expansion of supportive programs for people with autism and their families. Someday this may also lead to a clearer understanding of causation that can reduce prevalence.

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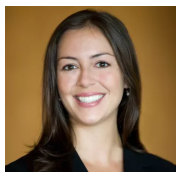
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