

Connecting Autism and Acetaminophen

By anonymous, a mother's story

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I started working with autistic children about a decade ago. I knew nothing about autism at the time, but was very curious to learn. In the following years, a few family members were diagnosed with autism, including a sister I'm very close to. My sister is intelligent, widely read and empathetic, but she's struggled a lot in life, especially before the diagnosis, due to social difficulties and executive dysfunction.

My son was born after a year of fertility treatments. I knew he was at high risk for autism due to our family background, so I monitored him closely. His development looked normal at first (even though he was circumcised and received a few doses of acetaminophen starting from the 8th day of his life, and again at about 4-5 months).

At about eight months of age, he had a bout of teething and a cold, so I'd been giving him many doses of acetaminophen. A short while afterward I started to see emerging autism symptoms (I didn't connect them at the time to the acetaminophen, of course).

My son babbled less. His eye contact and positive affect were both reduced. It was difficult to get him to look at me and smile, when previously he would've initiated it on his own. He seemed more interested in playing with objects than looking at people. And when I would read him books and he showed excitement, instead of patting the pictures and trying to turn the pages, like he had previously done, he held his hands to the sides and moved his fingers in strange, repetitive movements. It looked like stimming to me.

The signs were subtle. He still made eye contact and smiled occasionally, so the health professionals who saw him weren't sure it was anything to worry about. I knew, however, that I wasn't imagining it, because my husband also noticed it.

I did a lot of research and read everything I could about very early intervention with babies who are at-risk for autism. While I was doing my research, I came across some of your studies: they shook my world to its foundations. I couldn't believe that I, who thought myself to be pretty knowledgeable about autism at least compared to the average person on the street, might have inadvertently given my son something that could seriously harm him. I remember how eager he'd been every time he saw the bright pink syrup in the syringe, making happy cooing sounds as he anticipated the sweet taste. What had I done? What had we all been doing? Were we unknowingly giving our children a bright, sweet poison?

I cried a lot for a few days. It's the worst pain I've felt in my life. Still, I told myself (and my husband) that we should feel no guilt. We had tried to be good parents, and had done our best, based on the knowledge we had. We'd simply wanted to spare our son unnecessary pain. I was extremely thankful to learn to this information now, so I knew how to prevent further damage. I promised myself I would get him the help he needed and that I'd try to spread this knowledge as far and wide as I could, to spare other parents from this pain. I can only hope that many more will join us