Autism Diagnoses are Rising, but Why?

There is little debate that the number of children being diagnosed with autism has been rising sharply over the past 40 years. Compared to historical rates around 1975 of 1 in about 5,000, it is now estimated that 1 in 68 children (and 1 in 42 boys) meet diagnostic criteria for autism. The question is, why is the number of autism diagnoses rising? There are two possible answers: 1) an actual rise in the number of new cases, and 2) increased surveillance, lower standards for diagnosis, and more public awareness.

The latter hypothesis was recently investigated by researchers at Pennsylvania State University. They examined state-by-state enrollment information about school special education services from 2000-2010 for over 6 million children. They compared the number of children who qualified for services because of autism versus for other reasons, such as intellectual disabilities.

The researchers found that the number of children in special education because of autism rose 331% from 2000 to 2010. This was no surprise. During the same time frame, however, the number of children receiving services for what was labeled an intellectual disability dropped. Further, the drop in cases of intellectual disability alone could account for nearly two-thirds of the increase in children with autism. The total number of children with any kind of neurodevelopmental disability stayed roughly the same over this time period.

The authors of the study concluded that their data support the idea that the often-mentioned rise in autism is mostly due to doctors tending to diagnose children with autism rather than an intellectual disability or learning disability. It may be that the label “autism” is now preferred over the label of “intellectual disability,” causing a spike in the number of reported autism diagnoses.

Obviously there is room for some middle ground here. While this study cannot rule out the possibility that there are more “true” cases of autism than in the past, evidence does seem to be mounting that at least a significant portion of this increase is due to other factors.

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New words

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Discussion Questions

1. What hypothesis did the researchers investigate?

2. In the article, how is autism different from a learning disability or an intellectual disability?

3. Which group of children increased in percentage from 2000-2010? Which decreased? Which stayed the same?

4. Why do doctors seem to be diagnosing more children with autism?

5. Who is the audience of the article? Why do you think that?

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