Brains in crisis

Conditions of the brain are on the rise. In 2014 the CDC announced that 1 in 68 children is autistic\(^1\); antipsychotic prescriptions for children have risen sharply in the last 10 years making them the largest class of prescription medication\(^2\); 1 in 6 children has a learning disorder, rates of depression and mental illness are on the rise.

Many families consider medications that alter learning and social behaviour to be “lifesavers”, helping to alleviate stress at home and helping their child function better at school. However, for many children medications are ineffective, they do not represent a permanent solution, and many parents are uncomfortable with the potential side effects, which can include, heart attack and stroke\(^3\), diabetes\(^4\), obesity\(^5,6\), personality changes and skin problems\(^7\), and metabolic syndrome\(^8\). Furthermore, there are no studies available to tell us about the possible long term effects of psychotropic drugs on the developing brain.

**Better Brains Series**

Creating a framework  Part 1
Focus on Stressors  Part 2
Focus on Nutrients  Part 3
So what do I do now?  Part 4

This is part ONE of 4 articles that focus on what you, as a parent, can do to support your child’s brain health. Some of the conditions arising in children that involve brain function include: Attention Deficit Disorder (with or without Hyperactivity), Asperger’s, Depression, Anxiety Disorders, Sensory Processing Disorder, and Autism.

Access the entire series at www.jesssherman.com
The good news is that there is a lot you can do for your child, at home, without medication, to support brain function and behaviour.

In the Better Brains series of articles I offers parents who are seeing signs of issues such as autism, ADHD, sensory processing disorders, fatigue, anxiety, and depression, dietary and lifestyle strategies that can help their children function better.

Before diving into the strategies you can use to support your child’s brain function, let’s step back and take the 100,000 foot view of things.

Brain Function... it’s a whole body thing

I am trained as a Holistic Nutritionist, and as such, I have been taught to see the body as a complex interconnected unit. The brain, like every part of the body, does not exist or function in isolation. So we can not talk about healthy brain function without also talking about the whole body, including the internal and external factors that affect its health.

When we look at the body as a whole, we see that when a brain is not functioning well, there are usually other areas of the body that are also not functioning well; areas that might seem very separate or distinct from the brain itself.

For example, many children with autism also experience digestive disturbance⁹. Might there be a connection between gut health and brain health? Turns out there is. Many children with ADHD also experience allergies and autoimmune disease¹⁰. Might there be a connection between brain health and immune function or digestion? Turns out that again, there is. Many children with Asperger’s also have high levels of toxic metal in their hair samples. Might there be a connection between brain health and the body’s detoxification system? Again, turns out there is.

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Sorting through the various connections between seemingly unrelated symptoms can be daunting and confusing at first. It’s a huge puzzle. As all good puzzle builders know, it’s best to be systematic and just keep trying until you find pieces that fit. The miraculous reality is that when you can unravel the clues and correct underlying imbalances, the body, in many cases, becomes able to self regulate. And when it can self regulate, it functions better. Not only the brain will function better - the entire body will function better.

A biological approach

Exploring connections and correcting underlying imbalances is called taking a “biological approach to neurological symptoms”. It is an approach taken by biomedical doctors in the treatment of autism, by orthomolecular doctors and holistic psychiatrists in the treatment of mental illness, and by holistic nutritionists. Some pioneers of this approach have been Abram Hoffer, Bernard Rimland, and Martha Herbert. The Autism Research Institute, the International Society for Orthomolecular Medicine and the Institute for Functional Medicine are three organizations that continue to help this approach evolve.

When we understand that the brain does not exist in isolation from the rest of the body, we can understand that the body’s internal and external environments affect its function.

With the understanding that the brain is connected to and influenced by the rest of the body, we can break down the factors that affect brain development and function into five categories:
1) Genetic predisposition to a variety of imbalances
2) Nutrient Deficiencies
3) Stress
4) Toxins
5) Digestion
Subsequent articles in this series will dive more deeply into how these factors adversely affect the brain and what you can do to relieve those effects.

**Will this work for your child?**

It’s important to understand that no one therapy or intervention - conventional or alternative - has a 100% success rate when it comes to any condition. Your child is a unique puzzle. He might be a 60 piece puzzle, he might be a 6000 piece puzzle11. You won’t know until you start trying things and learn to better understand his uniqueness.

Food and lifestyle are two pieces of this very complicated puzzle. Making positive changes here will help 100% of the time and they have no adverse side effects on the health of your child. This is why, in my opinion, attention to diet and lifestyle should be a part of any treatment plan.

When you choose to leverage the powerful affects of food and lifestyle, you are taking a profoundly positive step towards health.

I do not have all the answers, and I’m not going to tell you it’s easy. This approach requires changing patterns and habits, it means re-evaluating priorities, it means investing time and money, it takes persistence and dedication - but going down this road will bring you and your family a new experience of overall health and vitality that, once experienced, propels many families forward all by itself!

In the next article I’ll outline for you a two-step process you can take to support your child’s neurological health.

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**The brain is downstream…**

**5 factors that affect the brain**

**Genetic factors**

There is some evidence that some neurodevelopmental issues in children might be genetic. ADHD, autism, and depression all seem to have a genetic component. However, we also know that certain biochemical processes, nutrients, and toxins play a significant role in gene expression. Controlling these factors can decrease the part genetic plays in your child’s health.

**Stress**

Social, environmental and physical stressors result in the circulation of various chemicals in the body that can lead to poor brain function.

**Digestion**

There is a solid connection between what goes on in the gut and what goes on in the brain. Poor digestion can lead to deficiencies, increased toxic load, immune dysfunction and hormone imbalances.

**Toxins**

Exogenous (externally sourced) and Endogenous (created in the body) toxins can affect brain development and function.

**Nutrients**

Nutrients make up the very fabric of our bodies. They are also critical players in the process of detoxification. A deficiency in certain nutrients can result in poor brain function.

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**About the author**

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[www.jesssherman.com](http://www.jesssherman.com)
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11. I credit Dr Kurt Woeller for this great metaphor. Autism, The Road to Recovery. 2012.