

Exploring Dietary Intervention for Special Needs

By Mary Hernandez, CHC

“Seeing is believing” became my life-changing motto seven years ago when my son Luis had a dramatic “awakening” as the result of dietary intervention for autism. “It’s like a light bulb went off in his brain,” declared his pre-school teacher excitedly.



The night before, nine days into a strict gluten free/casein free diet, Luis, at age 4 years and 3 months, had called me “Mommy,” responded “Yes,” and made significant eye contact **for the first time** since his regression into autism two and a half years prior. Tears flooded down my cheeks as my little boy, who only had five words of spontaneous speech, and on-again, off-again echolalia (repeating words with no indication of comprehension), suddenly was *speaking to me* in sentences.

Luis’s sudden surge in verbal competence and relatedness transformed me from dietary skeptic to proselytizer overnight. Thus began my own passionate plunge into the study of nutrition’s impact on children with learning disabilities, diabetes, ADHD, ADD, allergies, asthma and autoimmune disorders, epilepsy and other special needs as well as autistic spectrum disorders. In the seven years since that miraculous day, I guided many other families toward improvements for their children – nourishing brain function by removing foods that harm and adding in nutrients their bodies and minds were craving.

Each Child is Unique but Some Problems are Common

Along the way, I became very aware that every child is unique and only a minority respond so dramatically to nutritional intervention as my son did. More often, progress with dietary changes is slower. Nevertheless, nutritional change brings positive advances in more than half of children on the autistic spectrum, according to a survey of over 27,000 parents. Needed dietary changes are different for each of our unique and special children, but all are at wide variance with the standard American diet. Perhaps best known is elimination of gluten and casein, but many children react to sugar, carbohydrates, processed foods, certain types of fats, food additives and dyes, pesticides and chemicals. Another common problem is the lack of protein absorption from the diet, either because of lack of enzyme production or other digestive issues. Since proteins must be broken down into amino acids which then become the building blocks for neurotransmitters, this deficiency can have a great impact on the brain. And since the brain is mostly made up of fats, having the right fats to enable neurons to communicate can make a huge difference.

A controlled study in the *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* in 2006 demonstrated that 70% of children on the autistic spectrum have long term histories of gastrointestinal problems.¹ According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, children with ASDs who undergo endoscopy, demonstrate high rates of gastric inflammatory diseases such as lymphoid nodular hyperplasia, esophagitis, gastritis, duodenitis, and colitis, and may have a type of gut inflammation that is unique to those on the autistic spectrum.² The most positive and



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immediate impact of dietary intervention seems to be for those children who have gastrointestinal issues. The Autism Research Institute reports that 2/3 of over 3000 children on the spectrum had dramatic improvements on a gluten and casein free diet.

Not Just for Autism

Those with ADD and ADHD can find help with dietary intervention. Well known pediatrician and author, Bill Sears, M.D. says half his patients labeled as “ADD” really have “NDD” or Nutritional Deficit Disorder. “Most children with ADD can either lessen their medicines or go off medicine simply by changing their diet,” Dr. Sears reported to WFTV news in Florida. “The brain, more than any other organ, is affected for better or worse by what we eat. If a child is a junk food addict, his brain is the first thing that will be affected.” A small school for children with dyslexia in England decided to go gluten free after one of its pupils made dramatic progress on the diet. Not only were the children reported to be much calmer fairly immediately, but after six months, annual reading and comprehension testing results showed 11 of the 12 boarders tested had made more than a year’s progress and, in two cases, more than three years’ progress. Of the 22 day students, 17 had made a year’s progress.⁵

Seeing similarly impressive results in my own experiences with nutrition propelled me to become a holistic health counselor – teaching parents how to be “nutrition detectives”— tracking down the food offenders that are provoking problems and determining the nutrients the brain is craving. Who knew that my son’s extreme OCD rituals and fixations could be relieved by removing tomatoes from his diet? Or that my daughter’s flat feet and onset of “knock knees” could be reversed by adding certain minerals to her daily plate? Or that one boy’s ADHD could be calmed with the removal of orange juice? Or that another could suddenly sleep through the night for the first time in years because bananas are removed from his diet? Others have found relief from daily battles with diarrhea and gut pain by removing complex carbohydrates altogether or adding in yogurt and fermented foods. I have seen children with ADHD suddenly calm and attentive with the removal of food dyes and certain preservatives.

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While much is known about allergies that cause physical symptoms like hives and sneezing, the “brain allergies” our kids suffer are just as real but much less understood. As your *Hope Magazine Online* Nutrition Editor, I will bring you those stories. I will provide you with information that can help you nourish your own child’s brain capacity, resources you can use to save money on foods for special diets and recipes that can help you feed your family healthful foods. Please write to me with questions, submit your own stories on the difference nutrition has made in your family’s life, and share your recipes, recommended resources and tips.

Our Nutrition Editor Mary Hernandez is a Holistic Health Counselor and Liaison to the Staten Island Branch of the National Autism Association NYC Metro Chapter . She lives in Staten Island, NY with her husband James, son Luis, age 11, daughter Ana who will soon turn 10, and stepdaughter Crista. She can be contacted at maryhernandez@verizon.net

Footnotes:

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2. Myers, SM, Johnson, CP, MEd the Council on Children With Disabilities Clinical Report, Management of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *American Journal of Pediatrics* (doi:10.1542/peds.2007-2362)
3. *Three studies cited:*
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4. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article444290.ece>