

SPOTTED

Spotted: Maladjusted foals; Kanner controversy

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13 FEBRUARY 2015

WEEK OF FEBRUARY 9TH

Back to basics

Why invest in basic science? A group of young researchers from the University of California, San Francisco **won a national video competition for their awesome answer**. The four-minute flick shows how basic biological processes, such as the one that protects bacteria from viruses, can lead to treatments for diseases such as diabetes. It's a powerful reminder that complex puzzles — autism included — are easier to solve when you have the edge pieces in place.

Revisiting Romania

A study in the February *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* **revisits a group of orphans raised in Romanian institutions**. Previous research showed that these children were more likely to have cognitive impairments than orphans raised in foster care. The new study builds on those findings, showing that institutionalized children are also more likely to develop restricted and **repetitive behaviors** and deficits in social communication. The prevalence of autism among these children, however, is just 5 percent — only slightly higher than the 3.5 percent prevalence in the foster care group. It's a chilling natural experiment, but one that

lead researcher **Charles Nelson** hopes will shed light on environmental risk factors for developmental disorders.

Measles mayhem

As a news organization dedicated to reporting about autism research, we deliberately avoid writing about vaccines. As far as we're concerned, there's no connection and the case is closed. That said, it's impossible to ignore the fact that fears about autism are at the heart of the current **measles outbreak**. Perhaps it's a good time for researchers, journal editors and publishers to reflect on how this all started and make sure it never happens again. A minority of so-called 'anti-vaxxers' can't possibly bear the blame for such an epic feat of scientific fraud.

Gender problem

Yet another study **comparing boys and girls with autism** finds no differences in their symptoms or skill sets. The study, published 30 January in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, is the latest effort to pin down gender differences that seem obvious to the naked eye. We've **covered the conundrum before**, and perhaps **Cathy Lord** said it best: "I don't think we can say there are no differences; they're just overshadowed by bigger things."

Kind robots

An **article in *The Guardian*** looks at the relationship between Anthony, a boy with autism, and Zeno, his robot companion. Zeno is the “brainchild” of RoboKind owner and former Disney imagineer David Hanson. The article explains how robots may one day help to diagnose and treat autism. We’ve written about how **robots can spark social play** in children with the disorder and could even **fill in for therapists**. It’s a long way off, but Zeno appears to be an exciting step in the right direction.
