OPINION

The social brain

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There's a fascinating **article about hyenas** in the *New York Times* today.

You might well ask why that deserves mention in a blog about autism. It's because, according to the article, some scientists are studying hyenas to try and understand the human brain.

One part of the brain, the frontal cortex, is thought to be particularly important for social intelligence ? for example, in recognizing others and in forging alliances with them ? one of the cardinal deficits in autism.

It turns out that like people and other primates, hyenas also live complex social lives in groups of up to 80 hyenas, in which all know each other and their status in the pecking order.

And so far at least, it looks like the larger the frontal cortex of a particular kind of hyena, the more complex the society in which those hyenas live. Who would have thought it?