

Early Signs of Autism and the Interactive Parent-Infant Treatment Model

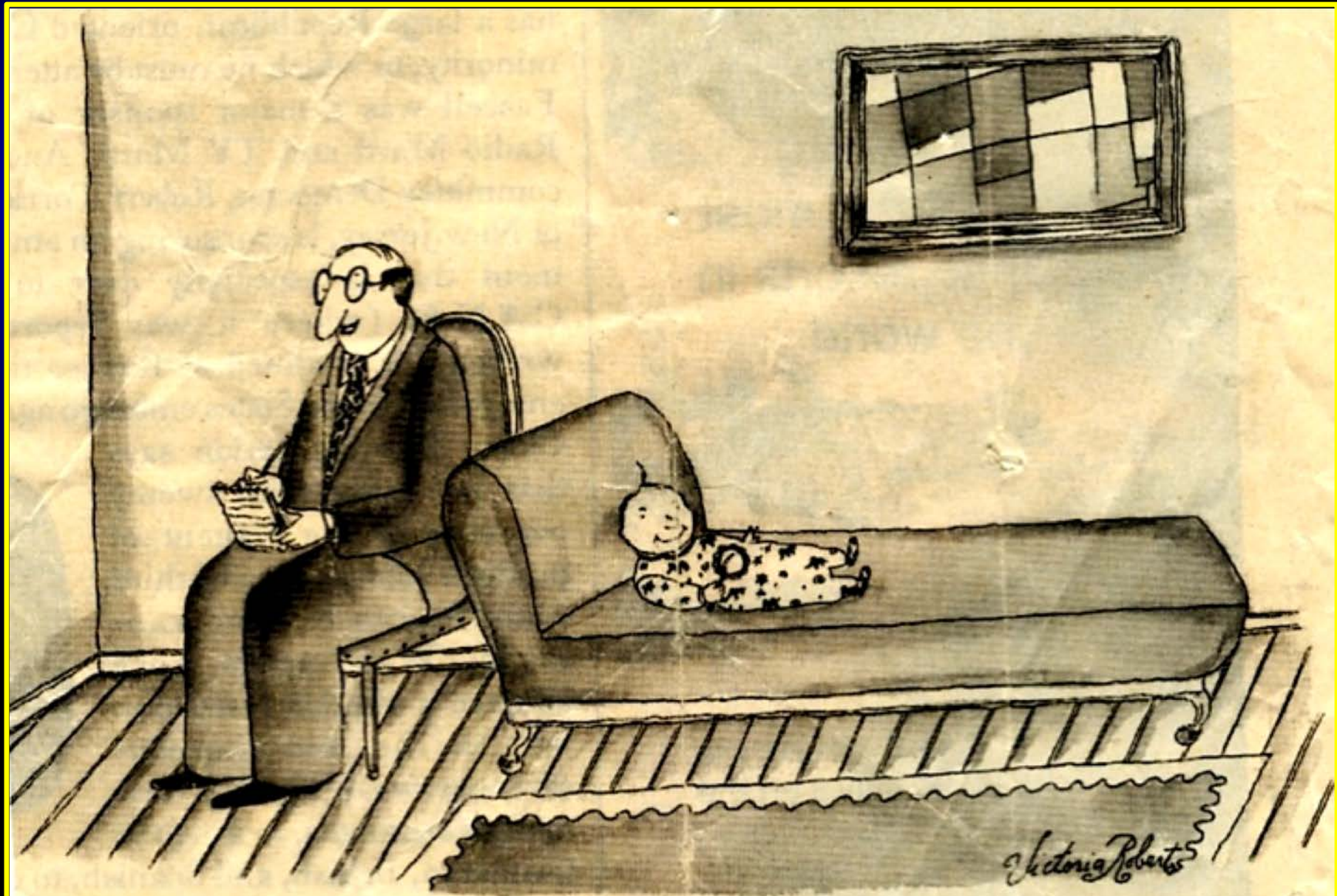


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I Disturbi Dello Spettro Autistico

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"I wish I'd started therapy at your age."

What are the earliest signs of Autism Spectrum Disorder?



Infants who are confusing social partners are disorienting for parents

- Infants who do not move in synchrony to the sound of the parent's voice
- Infants whose facial expressions do not brighten when they see their parents
- Infants who do not mold comfortably into the parent's body or take comfort in physical contact
- Infants who do not use gaze to regulate interaction



Many researchers are looking for biomarkers and behavioral indicators located in the infant

Is interactional synchrony the best lens for seeing the earliest signs of Autism?



Parents and infants find meaning in preverbal systems of affect cuing and sensory – motor responses

- Create shared experience
- Support mutual regulation
- Form internal working models of relationship
- Provide secure physical and emotional base for exploration

Prodromal signs of Autism change the dynamic system

Interactional Synchrony:

- communication of subjective inner states
- behavior in dyadic context

Failures of mutuality or attunement lead to:

- Physical withdrawal or parental overstimulation
- Shutting down of sensory seeking through gaze
- Flight and freeze responses
- Dis-coordination of rhythmic motor and vocal activity



Key research variables in the study of interactional synchrony

- Child initiation
- Infant attentiveness
- Affective vitality in the relationship
- Parental sensitivity

The baby's behavior affects parental sensitivity

- Hard to imagine what the baby wants or needs
- Parent can't figure out how to follow the lead of a child who appears rejecting or aimless
- Parent has to work against their own feelings of failure or inadequacy to parent this baby



The trajectory leading to ASD diagnosis

The infant self-protectively shuts out unmanageable stimuli

Sensory and motor constrictions are rarely the obvious explanation to the parent

- who feels emotionally rejected and confused
- who withdraws from contact just in the moment the infant needs parental co-regulation most



The treatment approach

- Attention to matching the rhythms and intensity of affect, movement and sound
- Repair of the disrupted moment of engagement lies in the choreography between the parent and infant.
- Interpret the infant's sensitivities and constrictions to the parent

Synchrony and the Interactive Flow

- Rhythmic repetitions
- Ongoing attunement to affective states
- Contingent responses to infant communicative signals
- Temporal aspects of intensity, shape and rhythm
- Respect for differences in sensory reactivity



Affect Attunement

- Choreography between infant and parent is based in a rhythmic dance of sound and motion.
- A sensory-motor affective cross modal parental gesture that matches the vitality affect of the infant
- The parent does not show the baby what he did, she lets him know she can feel what it is like to be him.
 - Stern (1985)
- Parental attunement produces more gazing and positive vocalizing than maternal imitation.

Markova and Legerstee (2006)



Match the Infant's rhythm

- Change how parent uses space and intensity of affect
- Slowing down in body and voice
- Lowering the body, lowering voice tone
- Tolerating waiting for the baby to recover his movement toward the parent.



Pitfalls in intervention strategy

- Increase the stimulation or become bigger, louder and more intense
 - leads to shut down
- Bring in extraneous objects to distract the infant from distress
 - leads to distraction by the object, but disengagement from the parent.
- Overlook the parent's histories or life circumstances

The work of the therapist

- Understanding the constrictions interfering with the infant's sensory and motor systems
- Interpreting to the parents what is being observed and speculating why the infant is struggling with his or her responses
- Lending vitality affects to the parent through parallel process

The work of the therapist

Maintain attention to:

- the internal world of the infant and the parents
- the cultural and community context
- our own self-reflection

The work of the therapist

- Offer insight and support the parents' needs
 - Regain emotional vitality and self-esteem
 - Enable repair of missteps in interaction
- Sustain an empathic connection to the baby
- Baby is supported by the parent's attunement and capacity for co-regulation.



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www.kidsattuned.org



www.dirime.com