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Television Viewing and Autism . . . a Link?

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Researchers at [Cornell University](#) are reporting a “statistically significant relationship” between autism and early television viewing in children. The best summary of the findings is available at [Slate.com](#) in an [article](#) by Gregg Easterbrook.

As Easterbrook explains:

The researchers studied autism incidence in California, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Washington state. They found that as cable television became common in California and Pennsylvania beginning around 1980, childhood autism rose more in the counties that had cable than in the counties that did not. They further found that in all the Western states, the more time toddlers spent in front of the television, the more likely they were to exhibit symptoms of autism disorders.

The Cornell study represents a potential bombshell in the autism debate. “We are not saying we have found the cause of autism, we’re saying we have found a critical piece of evidence,” Cornell researcher Michael Waldman told me. Because autism rates are increasing broadly across the country and across income and ethnic groups, it seems logical that the trigger is something to which children are broadly exposed. Vaccines were a leading suspect, but numerous studies have failed to show any definitive link between autism and vaccines, while the autism rise has continued since worrisome compounds in vaccines were banned. What if the malefactor is not a chemical? Studies suggest that American children now watch about four hours of television daily. Before 1980—the first kids-oriented channel, Nickelodeon, dates to 1979—the figure is believed to have been much lower.

Then:

The Cornell study makes no attempt to propose how television might trigger autism; it only seeks to demonstrate a relationship. But Waldman notes that large amounts of money are being spent to search for a cause of autism that is genetic or toxin-based and believes researchers should now turn to scrutinizing a television link.

This study [[see complete text here](#)] is indeed a potential bombshell. The very fact that the emergence of cable television and the VCR is correlated with the dramatic rise in cases of reported autism is most interesting. The researchers were clear to stipulate that correlation does not prove causation, but the link appears to be most suggestive.

We know that television is a powerful medium. The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) has [advised](#) parents of children under age 2 not to allow *any* television exposure.

The experience of watching television is passive rather than active. The child’s imagination is not required to provide the images — the screen does that for them. Television does not encourage active thought nor does it develop the attention span. Many researchers suggest that the experience of viewing television can affect the cognitive and neurological development of the child.

Christian parents should be concerned about the influence of television in the lives of their children, young and old. The possible link with autism is suggestive and fascinating, but the influence of television is of importance to all parents — not only those dealing with autism. We cannot allow the television to function as a surrogate parent or substitute teacher.

We discussed this issue on Monday's edition of *The Albert Mohler Program*. Listen [here](#).

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