

CAUTIOUS OVER THE VACCINE SCHEDULE?

Get informed before making decisions about your child's immunizations...

RITA SHREFFLER...



...is Executive Editor of *Autism File*, and a founding board member of the National Autism Association. She lives in Missouri with her husband and two children, Andrew, and Mary Kathryn, both of whom are affected by autism. ◀

RUTH E. SNYDER, RN...



...is a nurse specializing in high-risk pregnancy and natural childbirth. She is the mother of four children, two were diagnosed with autism, and is an author and advocate dedicated to improving the lives of those with autism. ◀

DAVID S. GESLAK...



...is certified by the American College of Sports Medicine, and has been developing exercise programs for people with autism for seven years. His book, *The Autism Fitness Handbook*, is available via www.eautism.com. ◀

RYAN PLATT...

...founded A Special Needs Plan, Inc. in order to help families alleviate the anxiety surrounding special needs planning through accurate information, education and services. For more details, log onto www.aspecialneedsplan.com. ◀

STEPHEN SHORE, EdD...

Stephen Shore, Ed.D., is an assistant professor at the Ammon School of Education at Adelphi University, teaching courses in special education and autism. He is the author of numerous articles, books and DVDs, and is an international presenter and consultant on educational and social inclusion, as well as on adult issues. ◀

Q My grandson, now six years old, was diagnosed with autism two years ago and my daughter-in-law is expecting another baby in a few months. I've read so much in recent years on a vaccine connection to autism, but the parents are unsure whether or not vaccines had anything to do with their son's autism. I also am not convinced of a connection but believe they should exercise caution with the schedule. Is there any information I could provide to help them decide how to handle vaccines?

A A possible connection between routine childhood vaccines and the development of autism has been discussed more and more over the past decade, with many taking a firm stance on the issue. A growing number of parents report typically developing healthy young children who regressed after a particular vaccine was administered, or following a series of vaccines given on the same day.

There's no question that the childhood vaccine schedule has become much more aggressive in this country over the years, with children today receiving as many as 48 vaccines by the age of six. Unfortunately, the cumulative health effects from all those shots have never been studied, nor has the safety of giving multiple vaccines in rapid succession with as many as nine vaccines being administered on the same day. We need to keep in mind that in very young babies, the blood-brain barrier has not been fully formed rendering the developing brain especially vulnerable to toxic assault.

Given all that, I think your recommendation to approach the vaccine question with caution is right on target. I encourage all three of

you to do as much research as possible on the current vaccine schedule in figuring out a strategy. Check out the online resources in the sidebar, and you also may want to read *The Vaccine Book: Making the Right Decision for Your Child*, by pediatrician Robert Sears, MD (Little, Brown and Company, 2007). It presents both the pros and cons of vaccines, and provides suggestions for tailoring the schedule to your child. Dr. Sears is reassuring to families making

5 ONLINE RESOURCES

- 1 SafeMinds (www.safeminds.org).
- 2 Generation Rescue (www.generationrescue.org).
- 3 Talk About Curing Autism (www.tacanow.org).
- 4 National Autism Association (www.nationalautism.org).
- 5 CDC (www.cdc.gov).
- 6 National Vaccine Information Center (www.nvic.org).

these important health decisions, steering them away from an "all or nothing" approach to vaccines.

I wish your daughter-in-law a safe and healthy pregnancy and delivery, and applaud you for your vigilance as your family considers these most critical vaccine decisions.

—Rita Shreffler

Q Is there anything I can do to help improve my child's muscle tone?

A The term muscle tone is commonly used to diagnose our children, however, it can define several different things. Children with



When it comes to
discipline, keep
in mind the old
saying, “an ounce
of prevention
is better than a
pound of cure.”



poor balance or posture, weak children, children with hypermobile joints, and children who have difficulties performing basic movement patterns all may fall under the umbrella diagnosis of low muscle tone.

Over the years I’ve seen improvement in tone by beginning with body awareness exercises via body part identification. If a child doesn’t understand the difference between their hand and their foot, how can we ask them to perform certain movements with them? So be sure to teach your child about the parts of their body first.

Second, do as many body weight exercises, and motor planning activities as possible. You have to be repetitive, patient, and understand that things can process much slower in our children, but they *can* do it. Try doing the same exercises in different sequences or routines. Third, don’t be afraid to use dumbbells when you see fit (at age five to six years old is when I start). Always begin with lighter weights—this doesn’t only help to improve tone, but also provides our children with another form of sensory integration.

—David S. Geslak

Q I’m having difficulties disciplining my son. Can you please provide some advice?

A Discipline with any child needs to be structured, consistent and appropriate. With children who have autism, we have to be more precise and individualized, because the way they process information, which includes cause and effect as well as actions and reactions, is different. This means that we also have to continue to be ready to gather more insights, information, and willing to apply new knowledge as it becomes available to us.

Learning to assess your child’s behavior to determine what part of it is physical should be the first step. When I ventured into the medical world I was taught how to assess

physical aspects of behaviors, and with time and practice, I learned the importance of being able to assess my children, and myself before reacting to situations that created challenges, especially with regard to behavior. Understanding that behavior is a form of communication is vital.

Individuals with autism are under an invisible attack, some more than others, it may be more dependent on a time or place. The sensory issues are always present, but sometimes we can manage them better. When

they don’t appear to be a problem at all others around us can seem to forget, and that’s why it’s important that the adults, professionals, family, and friends around us understand and can assess and intervene before a meltdown or crisis. Consistency is important, but often it’s hard to achieve—try to stay firm about what rules your family respects and follows.

Looking at the future and asking yourself, “what if my child is still doing this ten or 20 years from now?” will help you see the bigger picture. On the days that you feel as if there is no possibility of success, try what I’ve found helps me—look for good things that always happen. Knowing that the sun always rises and sets helped me to find consistency in chaos.

—Ruth E. Snyder

Q What is special needs planning, and where should I as a parent focus regarding my child’s lifetime needs?

A Special needs planning is a process to identify the financial, legal and lifetime needs for you, your family and your loved one with special needs. Special needs planning doesn’t end with the identification of these needs, but includes the necessary action steps that you need to take to ensure a bright future for everyone in your family while you’re alive and well, while you’re alive but are no longer able to be your loved one’s primary caregiver because of your own health issues, and when you pass away.

I know this is a lot to think about, and can be overwhelming, even slowing families down in getting the planning process off the ground. However, if you ask yourself the question, “If I was no longer able to care for my loved one *today*, would he be able to care for himself?” and the answer is “No” then you really need to go ahead and take that first step towards the future. I always advise that parents try to find people and professionals who can help guide them in this process, just as they have in their

10 MUST-HAVES IN SPECIAL NEEDS PLANNING

- 1 Financial
- 2 Housing
- 3 Government benefits
- 4 Caregiving environment
- 5 Future caregivers
- 6 Education
- 7 Legal
- 8 Healthcare
- 9 Recreation
- 10 Employment

child’s medical care and therapy needs. Financial planning is another critical area of care, and once you take that crucial first step, you’ll be on your way in establishing a more secure future for your child with autism.

—Ryan Platt



Q *I live in an area that doesn’t usually have extreme weather conditions, but we recently had tornadoes nearby, and as my nephew has autism I’m wondering if there are special considerations for people with autism spectrum disorder and preparing for emergencies?*

BE PREPARED IN AN EMERGENCY—Develop a schedule of instructions for when disaster strikes.

A Emergency preparedness is on the minds of many people in the autism community. There are two populations in need of instruction: persons on the autism spectrum, and first responders including police, firefighters, and Emergency Medical Technicians.

Let’s look at a possible scenario: There’s hurricane coming and an evacuation has been ordered in a low-lying area by the ocean. After people clear out, first responders go door-to-door to convince remaining people not to wait out the storm at home, as well as to help any individuals needing additional assistance.

A first responder hears a soft moaning sound from the window of a home in the area. Calls of “Anybody home? Anybody need help?” are met with a continuous moaning sound. Following his ears, he happens upon a teenage girl wrapped in a blanket, rocking back and forth while she flips through pages of a book. Repeated assurances to the girl are met with no response, and the first responder wonders if she might be deaf or in shock. The first inclination of her rescuer might be to scoop up the girl and carry her to safety. However, as some people with autism are nonverbal, may not

know how to read, and have difficulty with unexpected events, she could possibly have a meltdown in this scenario.

Prevention measures for individuals on the spectrum include developing a schedule of instructions for when a disaster strikes. Depending on the developmental level of the individual, we could use Picture Exchange Communication Systems, a combination picture and word schedule, or even just a word-based schedule. Social narratives, such as Social Stories™ (find out more at www.thegraycenter.org), and Power Cards from Elisa Gagnon’s book, *Power Cards: Using Special Interests to Motivate Children and Youth with Asperger Syndrome and Autism* (Autism Asperger Publishing Company, 2001) are also excellent resources for preparing individuals with autism for emergencies.

There are also many places for first responders to turn to gain knowledge and insights about dealing with people on the autism spectrum when disaster strikes. Highly informative instructional videos and downloadable resources prepared by Dennis Debbaudt, an expert in the field who has presented at numerous autism conferences and has also trained first responders in all parts of the U.S. and UK, are available at www.autismriskmanagement.com. I encourage you to reach out to your local law enforcement agencies and other first responders, and encourage them to access these resources.

—Stephen Shore

AD SIZE:

1/3 VERTICAL

2 1/4" x 10"