

Autism and Deficits in Attachment Behavior

Morton A. Gernsbacher,¹ Cheryl Dissanayake,²
H. Hill Goldsmith,¹ Peter C. Mundy,³
Sally J. Rogers,⁴ Marian Sigman⁵

¹ University of Wisconsin at Madison, Madison, WI 53606-1611, USA. ² La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria 3083, Australia. ³ University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL 33124-0721, USA. ⁴ University of California Davis Medical Center, Sacramento, CA 95817, USA. ⁵ University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1759, USA.

A. MOLES ET AL. REPORTED A “DEFICIT in attachment behavior in mice lacking the u- opioid receptor gene” (Reports, 25 June 2004, p. 1983). They stated that their results “may indicate a molecular mechanism for diseases characterized by deficits in attachment behavior, such as autism,” an assumption recapitulated in Mary Beckman's news story “The mice that don't miss mom: love and the u-opioid receptor” (News of the Week, 25 June 2004, p. 1888) and other news coverage.

However, the basis for D'Amato et al.'s speculation that autism is “characterized by deficits in attachment behavior” was a 24-year- old theoretical treatise (1), which subsequently failed to be supported by numerous empirical investigations. In 1984, Sigman and Colleagues first demonstrated that young children with autism behaved no differently in their response after separation from and reunion with their primary caregiver than did children with other developmental disabilities (2). Following Sigman's seminal study, every laboratory experiment investigating attachment behavior with young children with autism has replicated the initial finding, demonstrating unambiguously that children with autism are as securely attached to their mothers as are their peers (3-8).

Given the striking lack of empirical evidence to support D'Amato and colleagues' speculation that their results are relevant to autism, we urge considerably greater caution.

References

1. J. Panksepp. *Trends Neurosci.* 2, 174 (1979).
2. M. Sigman et al., *J. Autism Dev. Discord.* 14,231 (1984).
3. T. Shapiro, M Sherman, G. Calamari, D. Koch, *J. Am. Acad. Child Adolesc. Psychiatry* 26,480 (1987).
4. M. Sigman, P. Mundy, *J. Am. Acad. Child Adolesc. Psychiatry* 28, 74 (1989).
5. S. J. Rogers, S Ozonoff, C. Maslin-Cole, *J. Am. Acad. Child Adolesc. Psychiatry* 32, 1274 (1993).
6. L. Capps et al.. *Dev. Psychopathol.* 6, 249 (1994).
7. C. Dissanayake, S. A. Crossley, *J. Child Psychol. Psychiatry* 37, 149 (1996).
8. C. Dissanayake, S. A. Crossley, *J Autism Dev. Disord.* 27, 295 (1997).