



## Top Researcher Writes on Autism for Britannica

**Baron-Cohen, others, report on causes, diagnosis and treatment of widespread condition**

**CHICAGO, April 30, 2010**—Progress in the scientific understanding of autism and autism spectrum disorder are the subject of a recently published article in the Encyclopaedia Britannica by a leading British researcher in the field.

In "[The Autism Spectrum](#)," Professor Simon Baron-Cohen of the University of Cambridge reviews recent discoveries on the causes, diagnosis and treatment of these conditions, which impair social skills, language and learning ability. The severity of symptoms varies among sufferers, those with strong cases being diagnosed with classic autism, while milder forms are classified as Asperger syndrome.

As director of Cambridge's Autism Research Centre, Baron-Cohen works at the center of the field. Among the findings he reports on is the significant genetic aspect to autistic disorders, including the higher risk of autistic spectrum conditions among siblings of affected children and abnormalities in the X chromosome that are associated with autism. The report also discusses several forms of special education that are effective in teaching social skills. One interesting method is Lego therapy, using the popular plastic construction toys, which, Baron-Cohen writes, "exploits the child's strong interest in systems (in this case, constructional systems) to encourage turn taking and social communication."

April being [Autism Awareness Month](#) in the United States, Britannica editors were also keen to highlight the encyclopedia's broader coverage of autism. It includes [a general article](#) about the disorder by Professor Gene Blatt of Boston University School of Medicine, another on "[atypical autism](#)," and a short entry on the history and definition of [autism spectrum disorder](#).

Professor Blatt's article was revised recently to incorporate current estimates of the incidence of autism and new research findings.

There have also been important developments recently in the culture of autism sufferers, who have coalesced into something akin to a civil-rights movement seeking to reduce the social stigma of their condition.

"The adult Asperger community has generated its own term for those who do not have Asperger syndrome or autism: *neurotypicals*," writes Baron-Cohen. "This is in part intended to convey that one view of autism spectrum conditions is that they are not a disease or a disorder but simply an atypical form of neurological development, akin to left-handedness. This view is less stigmatizing and makes an important political point—namely, that those individuals whose brains develop and work differently need not be judged to be inferior to the majority. They are simply 'different.'" He points out, for example, that people with Asperger syndrome are often highly intelligent.

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