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Don't ignore autism — attack it

By [Lee Benson](#)

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Dr. Bryan Jepson would appreciate it if everyone would stop what they are doing for just a minute and pay close attention to the following statistic:

- Twenty years ago, the number of school-age children diagnosed with some form of autism was one in 5,000.
- Today, that number is one in 150.

"There is this explosion of autistic kids," says Bryan. "We're in the middle of a huge epidemic. This should be at the absolute top of the priority list."

The problem is, it isn't.

"Everything gets more attention than autism — diabetes, leukemia, HIV, muscular dystrophy, you name it," laments Bryan. "West Nile virus gets way more notice and funding. People just do not think about autism."

As a 1995 graduate of the University of Utah medical school, Bryan knows better than most what he's talking about. As a med student, he remembers barely hearing about autism, which was presented as a fairly rare genetic disorder that affects neurology, rendering its victims to a life in an unbalanced mind vacuum, a la "Rain Man."

"The thinking was, if you have it, you have it," says Bryan. "And because it's a genetic disorder, there's no cure. That's still the general thinking today."

But autism sure isn't behaving like a genetic disorder — not with odds that have moved from one-in-5,000 to one-in-150 in just two decades.

"You can't have an epidemic with a genetic disorder," says Bryan. "It is not possible."

But while the epidemic is the bad news, it could also be the good news — if people everywhere would recognize that since autism can't be dismissed as something you're born with, that means it can be treated medically and, with sufficient research, money and caring, it could ultimately be defeated.

Bryan Jepson didn't figure out the truth about autism without a compelling reason. His 6-year-old son Aaron was diagnosed with autism when he was 3. Laurie Jepson, Bryan's wife and Aaron's mother,

immediately began reading up on the disorder. In her research, she came across the revolutionary idea that autism can be fought instead of merely tolerated. At first, Bryan, because of his medical training, was skeptical. But the more he learned, the more he became convinced that autism needs to be looked at as a disease instead of a sentence.

Two and a half years ago, with the assistance of his friend and neighbor, business consultant Alan Mendel, Bryan Jepson started the Children's Biomedical Center of Utah, the first facility in the Intermountain West to attack autism not just behaviorally, but as a treatable disease.

The nonprofit CBC, located near the freeway in Draper, is open all day on Wednesday and selected mornings as Bryan continues to work his day job as an emergency medical physician at Jordan Valley Hospital.

But with time, the hope is that the CBC will be open for business all day every day, as will many other such facilities, and the tide will be turned against a disease that so far has enjoyed the upper hand.

"We have to face reality," says Al Mendel. "Autism is going to break our social bank if we don't. In a way it already is. No one keeps track of the emotional and financial impact on families that leads many times to bankruptcies and broken homes, but it is already huge. This is a problem that affects us all."

To learn more, log on to the CBC Web site at www.cbcutah.org. Volunteers and reinforcements are needed. Now. The war has been under way for a while, we just haven't known it.

Lee Benson's column runs Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Please send e-mail to benson@desnews.com and faxes to 801-237-2527.
