

Options shrink

Why are autism rates climbing?

Experts offer three possible answers

Shifting diagnoses

Many students who, in the past, might have been identified as learning disabled or mentally retarded, now are diagnosed as autistic instead. This shift stemmed in part from a 1998 directive from the American Psychiatric Association that broadened the definition of autism.

Genetics

Scientists suspect that the underlying cause of autism lurks in human DNA structure, possibly the result of spontaneous genetic mutations that make some children more vulnerable.

Environment

While DNA could be a basic cause, many parent advocates believe that environmental factors, such as pollution, act as triggers in increasing autism rates. New research has discounted one environmental theory — that autism is triggered by a mercury-based preservative in vaccinations.

Alice Kau, a research administrator for the National Institute of Child Health and Development in Bethesda, Md., says it makes common sense that autism rates are being boosted by shifts in diagnoses. She adds that current thinking favors a causative link between genetics and environment. She hopes that future studies will provide a clearer picture.

Kau adds that it's impossible to identify the causes of past autism increases with certainty, because studies cannot be conducted retroactively. "I wish we could put all the questions to rest, but there's just no way to do that," she said. "I think that's the frustrating part for a lot of parents and for researchers, too."

— JOHN HILDEBRAND



Sheril Feldman is battling Port Washington schools over how her son Matthew Palermo should be classified. She said she desperately needs training in order to help him succeed in and out of school.

NEWSDAY PHOTO / DAVID L. POKRESS

as autism spikes

More LI cases are pitting families vs. schools in a hunt for better care

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND

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Explosive growth in the number of Long Island students diagnosed with autism and other neurological disorders is pitting parents who seek greater help for their children against school officials struggling to contain special-education costs.

Across the Island, the number of school-age youngsters classified as autistic has jumped nearly 50 percent during the past three years alone, to more than 3,000. Figures at state and national levels have increased more than threefold over 10 years, making autism the fastest-growing impairment among American youths.

Climbing autism rates are partly offset by the fact that many students who might once have been diagnosed as learning disabled or mentally retarded now are being identified as autistic instead. Experts attribute this to improved diagnoses, and to a broadening of the definition of autism itself. Long Island students classified as learning disabled, for example, have declined by 13.2 percent over the past three years while the number considered mentally retarded has dropped by nearly 10 percent.

Districts, parents scramble

The shift in classifications has sent many school districts scrambling to find money, space and teachers to set up costly new programs. Students with autism require more intensive educational services than many students classified with other disabilities.

Many parents, for their part, voice frustration over continued shortages of programs appropriate for their autistic children.

"I've never come across a parent who didn't have to fight, whether it's in getting a diagnosis, or getting speech therapy," said Debora Harris, founder of the private ELIJA School in Levittown, which serves students severely impaired by autism.

Once considered rare, autism is now said by federal health authorities to affect one child in every 150, and is three times more common among boys than girls. Symptoms typically appear before age 3 and can include delayed speech, resistance to changes in daily routines and severe difficulties in socializing with other children.

Earlier this week, an American Academy of Pediatrics re-

port recommended that all children be checked for autism at the ages of 18 and 24 months.

The term autism covers a broad spectrum of academic abilities, ranging from children who can barely read to those equipped with college-level vocabularies. State regulations require districts to provide such students with extra services, including therapy and parent training, that often make such care particularly expensive.

Sheril Feldman, of Port Washington, says she desperately needs training in order to help her son, Matthew Palermo, 7. Matthew, who was born prematurely, has faced severe difficulties most of his young life, especially in controlling

temper tantrums.

Last year, after Matthew was suspended from school a half-dozen times, Feldman paid \$3,300 to get her son evaluated at the Lindner Center of the North Shore-LIJ Health System in Bethpage.

The center recommended a classification of autism. But the school district has continued classifying her son as emotionally disturbed, according to the mother. She has hired an attorney in hopes of winning a change in classification and training in how to cope with a child who often fights being taken to classes in the morning.

"I need a lot more — how to deal with a child who's out of control," Feldman said. "I'm

not an educator, I'm a parent."

Port Washington's school superintendent, Geoffrey Gordon, declined to comment on the case, citing legal and privacy issues. Gordon did say, however, that his district receives few complaints from parents.

"Our position has been that whatever a child needs is what we should be providing," Gordon said. His district classifies 13.6 percent of its students as having disabilities including autism — a rate higher than the Island's average.

Along with autism, a group of disabilities known as "Other Health Impairment" also is growing in numbers. The category includes many students diagnosed with a hyperactivity

disorder sometimes confused with autism because its outward symptoms are similar.

Meanwhile, numbers are declining among students diagnosed either as mentally retarded or learning disabled. Experts cite this as evidence that many students who might have been categorized in these ways in the past now are being identified as autistic instead. U.S. educational guidelines list 13 disability groups in all, and overall numbers have tapered off over the past two years after a significant rise.

Roadblocks, limited services

In response to shifts in classifications, school districts across the Island are expanding classes for students with autism — many established within the past few years. More severe cases usually are referred to regional BOCES or to a dozen or so private schools specializing in autism.

Services remain limited, nonetheless, with many parents and autism advocates complaining of roadblocks in getting children classified and placed in appropriate classes.

"Parents have to navigate a hodgepodge of public and private schools," said John Gilmore, executive director of Autism United, an advocacy coalition based in Hicksville.

One sign of impediments: In recent years, the overall percentage of the Island's students placed in special education actually declined a fraction of a point — to 12.04 percent in 2004-05, the latest year recorded — even as percentages were increasing elsewhere in the state.

Many local school administrators say they have little choice but to try to restrict growth.

In part, this is to control costs. Latest state figures show that 25 percent of total instructional spending in the Island's public schools is absorbed by special education — a total of \$1.48 billion, or about \$23,000 per student. And special education's share has inched up in recent years. Comparable costs of regular education are less than \$10,000 per student.

In addition, federal and state authorities have exerted pressure in recent years on dozens of local school districts to reduce their classification numbers, in cases where rates seemed unusually high.

"You want to have the best education possible, but you have to balance that off against what people can afford," said Charles Murphy, superintendent of Sachem schools. "We do better than appropriate. But parents want every service under the sun, and you can understand why."



NEWSDAY PHOTO / DICK YARWOOD

Lisa LaVardera, right, led efforts to honor Barbara Bauer, the principal at Cantiague Elementary School in Jericho, for her work aimed at educating children with autism.

Mom shopped for school district

Lisa LaVardera couldn't be happier with the academic and emotional support supplied by the Jericho school system for her older son, who is 11 years old and autistic.

As a fifth-grader last year at Cantiague Elementary School, for example, the youngster had a full-time classroom aide, along with a behavioral consultant, individualized lessons and reduced homework.

LaVardera just wishes she'd moved to Jericho earlier. The family lived in a neighboring district until the end of the 2005-06 school year, when the mother grew frustrated with what she felt was a lack of appropriate services for a child who showed intellectual promise, despite frequent misbehavior.

At \$2,700 a month for apartment rent, LaVardera's move to Jericho has come at a price.

"I'm paying double the rent for half the space, but it's worth it," said the mother, an attorney practicing special-education law.

Like other parents, those with children in special education frequently shop for school dis-

tricts best equipped to meet their needs. And when it comes to autism, districts differ greatly in their approach to the disability and even in their willingness to recognize it.

John Gilmore, executive director of Autism United, an advocacy coalition based in Hicksville, has compared numbers of students classified with autism in districts across Long Island. He's found wide variations, with some districts classifying fewer than four students per thousand with autism, while other districts classify more than 10 students per thousand.

Autism United is pushing for a comprehensive prevalence study on the Island, to get a clearer picture of exactly how many children and adults are autistic.

Gilmore notes that districts with the highest autism classification rates — and presumably, the widest array of student services — also tend to be the wealthiest, with homes only the affluent can afford. "I'm not sure," he said dryly, "how many parents can take advantage of that."

— JOHN HILDEBRAND

Where they are Charting autism, other disabilities in LI schools **A44-45**

Students with special needs

The State Education Department keeps student data on 13 categories of disabilities. The chart below includes data from four of those categories, plus total disabilities by district. In cases where four or fewer students in a district have a particular disability,

the numbers are redacted for privacy reasons.

Two disability groups listed in the chart have shown rapid growth in recent years: autism, which hinders communication skills and social interaction, and "other health impairment," which includes atten-

tion-deficit hyperactivity disorder. Also in the chart are two disability groups with declining numbers of students: mental retardation and learning disabilities, which includes dyslexia and other reading disorders.

— Compiled by Michael R. Ebert

NASSAU

District	Autism		Other health impairment		Mental retardation		Learning disabilities		Total students with disabilities		Enrollment
	2000-01	2006-07	2000-01	2006-07	2000-01	2006-07	2000-01	2006-07	2000-01	2006-07*	
Baldwin	17	33	62	112	12	11	135	131	478	685	5,353
Bellmore	0	8	14	27	0	0	49	26	152	123	1,217
Bellmore-Merrick	0	20	93	130	12	14	388	315	641	679	6,059
Bethpage	0	28	8	73	0	7	114	114	359	403	3,028
Carle Place	0	6	29	64	0	0	129	66	256	229	1,440
East Meadow	19	47	92	163	19	24	403	306	825	951	7,799
East Rockaway	0	8	23	35	0	0	87	115	184	254	1,253
East Williston	0	11	22	56	0	0	125	115	177	231	1,850
Elmont	11	18	39	38	11	7	192	103	504	440	4,207
Farmingdale	12	41	181	328	7	5	359	203	953	848	6,342
Floral Park-Bellrose	7	18	52	65	0	0	60	61	194	198	1,596
Franklin Square	0	11	25	29	5	0	80	58	226	197	1,913
Freeport	0	15	55	135	36	22	301	356	744	811	6,613
Garden City	17	34	60	112	7	8	210	161	448	425	4,267
Glen Cove	8	6	27	63	16	7	283	207	544	480	4,925
Great Neck	15	33	43	137	6	5	475	291	883	849	6,261
Hempstead	0	8	12	31	100	57	242	215	722	842	6,370
Herricks	5	23	85	139	0	6	203	171	493	506	4,111
Hewlett-Woodmere	10	19	67	215	0	0	247	144	455	563	3,235
Hicksville	9	26	35	98	8	14	449	327	853	803	5,363
Island Park	0	6	5	10	0	0	47	17	106	67	736
Island Trees	7	20	40	78	6	5	121	80	258	283	2,721
Jericho	7	24	54	148	5	0	163	113	308	392	3,244
Lawrence	10	32	83	163	13	7	296	311	753	945	3,308
Levittown	14	55	118	295	28	21	545	531	987	1,219	7,986
Locust Valley	5	11	33	59	0	0	205	177	350	358	2,269
Long Beach	7	17	83	129	12	9	442	252	781	542	4,219
Lynbrook	5	15	37	130	5	5	172	134	320	325	3,103
Malverne	0	12	32	53	5	9	158	143	292	302	1,652
Manhasset	7	29	56	102	0	0	132	156	328	441	2,899
Massapequa	25	101	125	179	20	16	446	267	923	936	8,259
Merrick	0	14	33	56	0	0	92	79	275	287	1,867
Mineola	0	14	16	50	0	6	243	144	447	431	2,704
New Hyde Pk-Garden City Pk	8	0	30	40	0	0	70	56	182	188	1,637
North Bellmore	10	27	51	80	0	0	74	37	318	332	2,356
North Merrick	0	8	15	69	0	0	94	39	148	155	1,317
North Shore	14	32	76	121	7	0	162	134	424	429	2,850
Oceanside	16	48	63	157	17	12	241	196	603	716	6,194
Oyster Bay-East Norwich	6	8	31	39	0	6	103	68	226	202	1,685
Plainedge	10	23	78	106	0	0	135	88	335	350	3,544
Plainview-Old Bethpage	7	39	92	226	5	0	279	248	773	812	5,077
Port Washington	8	25	115	215	16	7	289	166	706	756	4,952
Rockville Centre	8	17	116	140	11	13	170	158	469	443	3,644
Roosevelt	0	8	26	38	14	9	132	135	390	383	2,797
Roslyn	6	43	60	110	6	0	133	111	317	374	3,408
Seaford	0	18	14	40	0	0	84	135	189	314	2,672
Sewanhaka	8	35	135	159	30	33	387	437	837	1,064	8,531
Syosset	6	31	107	229	0	0	394	396	712	922	6,738
Uniondale	7	19	23	51	18	18	382	272	632	634	6,128
Valley Stream Central	0	20	35	75	15	16	293	271	487	537	4,571
Valley Stream #13	7	9	30	66	0	0	89	76	269	249	2,163
Valley Stream #24	0	5	12	20	0	0	35	27	129	121	1,055
Valley Stream #30	6	0	6	0	0	0	33	24	159	63	1,461
Wantagh	14	29	84	108	0	0	170	157	383	481	3,726
West Hempstead	9	23	23	77	10	9	144	154	302	384	2,341
Westbury	0	18	27	53	12	10	153	272	420	521	4,117
Nassau total	367	1,255	2,988	5,723	494	439	11,639	9,546	25,629	27,475	211,133

SOURCE: STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

*Actual 2006-07 district totals might be higher because numbers are redacted in disability categories with four or fewer students.

SUFFOLK

District	Autism		Other health impairment		Mental retardation		Learning disabilities		Total students with disabilities		Enrollment
	2000-01	2006-07	2000-01	2006-07	2000-01	2006-07	2000-01	2006-07	2000-01	2006-07*	2006-07
Amagansett	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14	0	109
Amityville	10	19	13	108	23	19	228	300	472	640	2,838
Babylon	7	22	40	23	7	6	105	54	271	179	1,893
Bay Shore	11	31	132	153	22	9	320	262	847	676	5,843
Bayport-Blue Point	11	20	25	46	5	0	162	130	305	324	2,522
Brentwood	14	32	59	176	49	37	1,624	1200	2,575	2,380	16,837
Bridgehampton	0	0	0	5	0	0	14	16	25	21	146
Brookhaven-Comsewogue	8	30	43	68	8	5	293	248	590	587	4,052
Center Moriches	0	11	11	22	0	0	118	88	214	185	1,480
Central Islip	10	23	58	108	40	27	626	233	1,192	833	6,220
Cold Spring Harbor	0	15	49	41	0	0	74	95	189	190	2,112
Commack	16	40	118	278	0	0	382	299	797	969	7,760
Connetquot	24	41	147	269	20	35	760	557	1,173	1,101	7,132
Copiague	5	12	38	107	38	33	233	257	652	740	4,738
Deer Park	8	28	61	118	6	6	181	156	489	522	4,524
East Hampton	0	13	33	77	0	0	164	98	236	253	1,977
East Islip	18	40	25	40	32	25	265	192	467	457	5,223
East Moriches	5	7	9	12	0	0	47	33	96	95	774
East Quogue	0	0	0	6	0	0	9	18	46	36	448
Eastport-South Manor	0	28	15	99	6	0	112	188	177	518	3,855
Elwood	0	17	31	43	10	0	73	83	193	203	2,616
Fire Island	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	43
Fishers Island	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	5	11	5	72
Greenport	0	0	10	10	0	0	58	40	98	70	661
Half Hollow Hills	39	144	195	314	31	26	648	517	1,214	1,258	10,224
Hampton Bays	0	7	26	46	0	5	125	123	207	258	1,755
Harborfields	5	26	64	126	0	0	168	189	379	494	3,722
Hauppauge	6	25	58	103	6	9	289	197	483	451	4,103
Huntington	28	37	60	132	8	14	243	207	551	558	4,324
Islip	0	12	57	60	0	0	206	138	439	321	3,539
Kings Park	10	42	60	117	0	5	198	228	410	605	4,200
Lindenhurst	13	43	105	193	10	7	517	490	935	1,025	7,221
Longwood	22	76	34	127	36	21	823	827	1,486	1,489	9,584
Mattituck-Cutchogue	0	15	16	31	0	0	41	90	109	163	1,588
Middle Country	35	78	58	77	40	25	1,021	751	1,685	1,529	11,420
Miller Place	7	27	27	86	0	0	208	186	352	418	3,155
Montauk	0	0	0	7	0	0	57	22	64	40	325
Mount Sinai	7	17	51	61	0	5	125	123	272	293	2,573
New Suffolk	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
North Babylon	10	34	150	367	24	13	347	362	791	973	4,976
Northport-East Northport	39	70	54	155	0	0	394	354	782	840	6,594
Oysterponds	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	13	7	110
Patchogue-Medford	17	30	136	253	20	26	841	409	1,443	1,069	8,744
Port Jefferson	5	6	9	16	0	0	66	58	129	115	1,350
Quogue	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	113
Remsenburg-Speonk	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	6	18	6	193
Riverhead	9	24	70	112	10	16	373	146	859	510	4,772
Rocky Point	18	36	34	93	10	5	218	266	471	557	3,562
Sachem	31	92	326	523	30	36	748	467	2,051	1,890	15,387
Sag Harbor	0	12	11	56	0	0	91	61	147	177	884
Sagaponack	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
Sayville	5	16	44	76	0	9	158	125	439	385	3,505
Shelter Island	0	0	0	6	0	0	25	15	30	29	266
Shoreham-Wading River	16	30	41	83	5	7	104	139	332	409	2,764
Smithtown	23	56	181	297	11	15	344	347	1,266	1,203	10,775
South Country	12	18	32	103	46	27	371	259	748	569	4,614
South Huntington	13	60	148	188	16	20	284	246	741	742	6,061
Southampton	9	17	44	14	8	9	146	64	271	159	1,669
Southold	0	5	23	54	0	0	62	79	113	151	1,011
Springs	0	0	10	12	0	0	32	28	69	67	585
Three Village Central	34	93	119	175	19	9	447	428	925	1,049	7,949
Tuckahoe	0	0	0	0	0	0	19	12	35	27	342
Wainscott	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
West Babylon	8	17	43	87	0	0	416	292	598	538	4,747
West Islip	13	52	68	164	9	14	267	232	687	773	5,692
Westhampton Beach	0	14	31	44	5	0	134	77	228	194	1,791
William Floyd	19	63	148	289	47	30	774	511	1,719	1,566	10,170
Wyandanch	0	5	19	49	11	15	235	135	465	393	1,963
Suffolk total	600	1,750	3,469	6,522	668	610	17,435	13,770	35,098	34,284	262,223
Long Island total	967	3,005	6,457	12,245	1,162	1,049	29,074	23,316	60,727	61,759	473,356