A new study linking labor induction to increased autism risk made the news last year. This latest study on the connection between induction and risk of autism comes out of Duke University, and was reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association. The researchers studied records of more than 625,000 children born in the 1990s. They found that children born to mothers whose labor was induced, augmented or both had a 27 percent increased risk of autism, compared with children born to mothers whose labors were not induced or augmented.
We shouldn’t react to the news by casting blame or feeling guilt. With new awareness comes an understandable tendency to veer in the direction of feeling angry, ashamed, and similar negatives that keep us stuck. With new awareness also comes power, which is worth us taking a deep breath, steadying ourselves, and taking our heads out of the sand about autism risk and how we do birth in America.

My colleagues Michel Odent and Sarah Buckley have been writing about this concern for years; I reported on it in my book, Parenting for Peace. Dr. Odent cautions us (with respect to our tendency to anguish over these reports) that when reading about such studies, we cannot be thinking of our own families, our friends, or our neighbor’s cousin’s autistic son. In his latest book, Childbirth and the Future of Homo Sapiens, Odent emphasizes that these are population-based (epidemiological) studies that reach conclusions in terms of tendencies, risk factors and statistically significant differences amongst huge numbers of people. It is not appropriate or valid (although it is always tempting) to apply these autism risk findings to specific individual cases.

The Duke study did not determine whether it is the act of induction/augmentation itself, or the medications (Pitocin, Syntocinon) used for induction/augmentation that underlies the link to heightened autism risk. Researchers also noted the more complex possibility that certain medical conditions during pregnancy that can lead to the need for labor induction or augmentation might contribute to the autism link.

That said, many stories about the study zero in on the issue of synthetic oxytocin. In one article published by World Net Daily, a Missouri-based midwife poses a key question: “Could it be that bombarding an infant’s oxytocin receptors with far larger than normal amounts of synthetic oxytocin could destroy or ruin their oxytocin receptors?”

Birth is the ultimate first impression, and it includes the wiring of brain circuitry that persists throughout our lives. It is part of the fundamental basis of an individual’s social-emotional functioning. Many of my colleagues and I have long been asking this same basic question about autism and other psychosocial disorders: What happens to the brain’s oxytocin circuitry when we disrupt its sensitive wiring window around birth by giving synthetic oxytocin to induce or augment labor?

Here’s a taste of the discussion I included in the birth chapter of Parenting for Peace:
Birth and the Future of the Human Family

Contrary to what most women in labor are told by doctors, drugs injected into the spine do cross the placenta: Epidural effects on the baby revolve primarily around maternal hypotension and can result in reduced circulation, which may lead to fetal depression or a “sleepy” baby, just one of the myriad effects of the cascade of interventions and complications that often follows epidurals.

Among the many unintended effects of birth interventions on children, a new study has identified Pitocin as a “significant risk factor” for developing later ADHD, and researchers are currently exploring Pitocin induction and epidural as possible factors in the complex causal tapestry involved in autism. Physician and primal health researcher Michel Odent has adopted a revealing new lens by looking at the central feature of conditions such as autism—what he terms “an impaired capacity to love.”

When he used this novel perspective from which to survey a wide range of supposedly disparate research—on juvenile violent criminality, teen suicide, and autism—he found something striking: “[W]hen researchers explored the background of people who have expressed some sort of impaired capacity to love—either love of oneself or love of others—they always detected risk factors in the period surrounding birth.”

Odent suggests that up until now in our human history, it has been evolutionarily advantageous to develop the capacity for aggression. How best to do that? Make birth more difficult! He points out that this was well known in such warrior cultures as Sparta, where they made it a point to disturb the natural birth and postpartum process, knowing it would result in more aggression later in life. Given the violent demands of their world, they deliberately cultivated in their new citizens an “impaired capacity to love.”

But today’s world poses very different demands: Its sophisticated complexities call for a robust capacity to love. Whatever evolutionary survival advantages difficult birth might have conferred in the past are not only no longer useful, they may be our undoing. The challenges faced by coming generations will require a level of cooperative interdependence never yet seen on a large population scale in human history.
Risks of Induced Labor

Written by Marcy Axness, Ph.D.
Monday, 01 September 2014 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2017 09:39

Just as the paleontologist and priest Teilhard de Chardin long ago predicted our cyber-united world, he also predicted we would reach the moment that is upon us right now: the moment in human history when it is critical that we cultivate and harness the energies of love.

The lasting first impressions at birth play a fundamental part in that cultivation. And while we shouldn’t feel shamed or guilty over the new findings from Duke University, we would be wise to let them inform the choices we make going forward—as individuals and as a global family.

This article appeared in Pathways to Family Wellness magazine, Issue #43.

View Article Resources.

View Author Bio.

To purchase this issue, Order Here.