Editorial: Change of Journal Scope and Title

The title change with this issue of the journal was overdue. In a survey of our editorial board in March 1975, 93% of the board favored a change. Many different suggestions were offered, but a majority wanted to include developmental disorders in the new title. Our publishers thought it right to delay modifications, but as the evidence has become compelling they have now agreed to change the scope and title from the Journal of Autism and Childhood Schizophrenia to the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders.

We would like to acquaint our readers with the reasons for the change. First is Leo Kanner's historical thrust toward a clearer understanding of infantile autism and his emphasis on the distortions of the developmental process in this condition or group of conditions. Second is the increased recognition of the links between autism and other developmental disabilities. And third is the impressive amount of research accumulated during the past two decades which has shown that the understanding and treatment of autistic children is very much dependent on developmental factors that shape not only the normal behavior of children but also the strange and unique patterns characteristic of each autistic child. Our new title is intended to affirm Kanner's original intent to stimulate this kind of research, to follow the direction indicated by the data, and to alter the scope of publication in order to facilitate research in this new direction.

HISTORICAL DIRECTION

The field of childhood psychosis has produced many descriptions of syndromes that purport to represent a distinct disease entity. Most of these are now of primarily historical interest. They were reviewed in the first issue of this journal in 1971. Their primary contribution was to associate the syndrome characteristics with particular theoretical formulations, which had an effect on clinical formulations and treatment approaches. However, few of these syndromes received the backing of replicated empirical data.
Leo Kanner’s description of early “infantile autism” published over 35 years ago constituted a major landmark. This paper provided the first clear account of a disorder of psychotic intensity, present from the beginning of the child’s life, not preceded by a period of normal development. It was important in tying psychosis to the process of development. The paper was a model of clarity in describing objectively the clinical observations without resorting to distant theoretical inferences, as was frequently done with clinical observations in other theoretical frameworks. Kanner hypothesized that the autism syndrome represented a disease entity that expressed itself in the characteristics summarized from the 11 children he reported in 1943. However, in spite of the great volume of subsequent research, no single underlying cause has yet been discovered. On the contrary, the accumulating evidence suggests that multiple etiological factors may find expression in the Kanner syndrome. Nevertheless, the usefulness of Kanner’s original observation persists today when many of the other diagnostic formulations have faded into obscurity. This is precisely because Kanner relied on careful and systematic clinical observations rather than on theoretical dicta. His irreverence for the given truths of authority left his formulations open for modification and adjustment in accord with subsequent research findings.

In 1964, Rimland’s review of the literature up to that date pointed to the lack of evidence for the social withdrawal theory of autism predominant in the United States. His review gave renewed impetus to Kanner’s emphasis on objective clinical observation tied to direct concern for the individual child and his family. In the introduction to this book Kanner applied a German proverb both to his own work and to Rimland’s review of the available literature: “He who builds on the roadside has many masters.” He expressed the hope that passersby will stop and tarry long enough to become familiar with the structure before attempting further contributions to the understanding of the autism syndrome. In the subsequent years many such masters have appeared. From those who stopped and studied these children new and more specific knowledge has been evolved. Many of these studies have been published in this journal.

By 1971, the multiple facets of the autism syndrome were well established and recognized. The search for identifying etiology, family factors, and optimum treatment intensified. Kanner’s empirical clinical approach to the disorder opened the way to increasing scientific investigation of discrete questions in all facets of the syndrome. To facilitate this process, he was persuaded to found this journal. With the encouragement of the National Institute of Mental Health, he convened an editorial board representing a task force committed to the advancement of information and knowledge of the syndrome.