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Koko Dairy Free – a no sacrifice alternative to cow's milk.



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Abigail's story: "They definitely had an agenda of trying to find fault. There's a massive lack of understanding"

Abigail* shares the terrible experience of Charlotte (page 7) in being accused of causing her daughter's behavioural difficulties. "My daughter was always a bit unusual," she says. "She was very lively but unco-ordinated, though she was able to concentrate and was very bright – she could read before she went to school.

"As she got older she developed more quirks. In reception she wouldn't sit still and called out in class and wouldn't look anyone in the eye. By the time she was six or seven, she was very anxious and was having meltdowns and was scratching at her skin and hair. She was also being called 'weird' at school and left out of games.

"I was worried, but because my marriage to her father had broken down I wasn't sure whether she was upset about this and it was affecting her behaviour."

Eventually, when her daughter was eight, Abigail took her to see a paediatrician in Kent, where they were living at the time.

"She said she thought my daughter probably had ASD," Abigail says, "but she couldn't be sure, so she referred us to a hospital in London for testing.

“Why wouldn't you be close to your child and hug them? Any other mother could do that and it wouldn't be turned against them”

"By this time, having read about autism myself, I just knew my daughter was on the spectrum. The hospital did the tests and even though it was difficult to answer some of the questions because they were geared towards boys, they diagnosed 'mild' autism."

So far so good, you might think. You would be wrong, however, because it was during this process that a finger of blame was pointed at Abigail. "For part of the diagnosis they sent someone to the school to observe my daughter's behaviour," she explains. "In the report it stated that the class teacher had said she'd seen me hugging my daughter and making her upset when she had to go home with her dad and had told the

hospital representative that I had 'Separation Anxiety Disorder'.

"This event never took place," Abigail insists. "Although I got the headteacher to write to the hospital and apologise, I never got a reply.

"I was also having problems with my ex-husband and there was to be a court hearing. He wanted the children to stop going to dance lessons, so I wrote to the hospital asking them to support me and make it clear that my daughter needed to continue her lessons because they gave her confidence."

The hospital's response was not what Abigail was expecting. "They wrote in the report that I was too close to her and that I was hampering her emotional and social development," she says, and she fumes: "Why wouldn't you be close to your child and hug them? Any other mother could do that and it wouldn't be turned against them.

"They definitely had an agenda of trying to find fault. There's a massive lack of understanding of girls on the spectrum. I think society is going backwards. Mothers are not allowed to use their instincts."

* Name has been changed

centres that specialise in Freudian therapy." (See 'Charlotte's story' and 'Abigail's story'.)

Loxley-Blount adds: "In recent years there's been a lot of interest in brief therapies like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. Freudians earn their living through psychotherapy, which generally takes a long time. I think their noses are out of joint. They're fighting back."

Nature versus nurture

This is where it can get confusing for parents. What, we might ask, does a long-dead psychiatrist have to do with an ASD? Isn't autism biological, something to do with the way a person's brain develops? How can families be responsible for that?

It all comes down to the nature-versus-nurture argument, says Sue Gerrard, a former primary teacher with an MSc in Organisational Psychology. Gerrard, the mother of a ten year-old with autism, has also been involved in autism-

“Mothers are being blamed for their child's behaviour when they try to get a diagnosis”

related research in conjunction with Keele University.

"In the 1850s Darwin discovered that people's physical and behavioural characteristics are inherited from their parents," she explains. "Later, when chromosomes were discovered, it led to the idea of a genetic blueprint and that any deviation from what was 'normal' must be caused by the environment. Freud would have known about these ideas when he started out."

Freud therefore based his theories of psychotherapy, Gerrard continues, on the idea that a person's early experiences, and in particular

their relationship with their mother, would affect their future mental health and happiness.

But it's also how other people have interpreted these ideas in more recent times that causes headaches for parents, she points out. Around 1940 one of Freud's followers, John Bowlby, developed the theory of 'attachment disorder'. Put simply, this suggests that someone who has been treated badly when they're young is likely to have problems as an adult.

All too easy to label

It's a term that's banded about these days, not only by Freudians but by psychologists of all persuasions. Teachers and social workers use it, too, Gerrard says, when they aren't qualified to diagnose such conditions.

Unfortunately, people who don't know enough about autism find it all too easy, she maintains, to label autistic behaviour as an attachment disorder and once again blame the parents. >>