



# Cold war

Even in our supposedly enlightened times, and even in the environs of a renowned London hospital, the outmoded Refrigerator Mother theory of 60 years ago still seems to be clinging on with an icy grip. As Fiona McNeill reports, mothers are still being blamed for their children's condition

## Charlotte's story: "I was told that my own 'difficult childhood' meant I was unable to bond with my daughter"

One mother who has fallen foul of a misdiagnosis of 'attachment disorder' is Charlotte\*, who has a daughter, Amy\*.

She says: "I originally asked for my daughter to see a counsellor when she was six years old because she was struggling with behavioural issues and anxiety.

"She did display some traits of ASD before this time, but her excellent communication skills began to deteriorate to the point that she was simply making noises rather than speaking to anyone, other than myself."

Charlotte says that Amy saw a counsellor a few times. However, a psychiatrist with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) eventually diagnosed her with 'severe Asperger's Syndrome' in 2007, when she was aged 7.

Amy completed the ADOS assessment in 2009 with a CAMHS psychologist and the result was still 'Autism Spectrum Disorder'. However, the psychologist queried emotional issues within the family.

Charlotte says she believes this was "because I had cried seeing my daughter struggling so much during the assessment. She suggested that we may be 'emotionally enmeshed'."

The situation got worse. Charlotte recalls: "In 2010, CAMHS wanted to change the diagnosis to Attachment Disorder because she was 'not improving'. The fact was that my daughter really struggled in clinical settings and would not co-operate with anyone while in the CAMHS clinic – she would try to leave the building, climb out windows, etc. My daughter only behaved in this way in new environments that triggered her anxiety.

**“She still suffers from anxiety, still feels she is 'different', still struggles with daily life”**

"I was told that my own 'difficult childhood' meant I was unable to bond with my daughter. And because I was emotional and had my own anxiety (I have since been diagnosed with ADHD) I had exposed my daughter to extreme emotions, which had caused her 'attachment disorder'.

"I made it quite clear that I thought their theory and opinions were nonsense, which, of course, made them

even more convinced that I had no insight into my own child's difficulties."

In January 2013, Amy was admitted to a well-known London hospital. "Other parents there told me that this hospital would not ever consider agreeing to a diagnosis of ASD, as they wanted to reduce the amount of ASD diagnoses," she says.

"The chief psychiatrist there told me that they didn't think my daughter had ASD because she could show empathy. They said her difficulties must be because of me and my parenting, but that I should not blame myself.

"I was accused of 'trying to find a diagnosis' for my child and subjecting her to unnecessary assessments, although they had all been requested by CAMHS! My daughter also has problems with her tummy (considered to be psychosomatic) and painful joints (also considered to be psychosomatic) and I was criticised for trying to find out the cause of her discomfort.

"The final hospital report says she has traits of various conditions, but is 'subthreshold'. She still suffers from anxiety, still feels she is 'different', still struggles with daily life."

\* Names have been changed

With our understanding of autism continuing to advance, it seems incredible to look back 60 years to when the condition was blamed on 'Refrigerator Mothers'. These were women whose supposed lack of maternal instinct was thought to have triggered behavioural problems in their offspring.

Autism is now acknowledged as a neurological disorder that may have an environmental and/or genetic component. Nevertheless, some people report that, even today, mothers of autistic children are still being accused of causing or contributing to their children's behaviour.

Jan Loxley-Blount is a former special needs teacher with a post-graduate qualification in child development. She is also the parent of a grown-up son with Asperger syndrome. She runs Parents Protecting Children, a support group for families who



Fiona McNeill is a journalist who has written extensively for newspapers including *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. She is also the mother of two children, one of whom has Asperger syndrome

have been wrongly accused of exaggerating or inventing their child's condition. Many people who come to her for help have children on the autistic spectrum.

### Culture of blame

Loxley-Blount believes we are seeing a kind of backlash against autism, and mothers in particular, which reflects the mood of the time. "It's the coming together of lots of things," she says. "We live in a culture of blame. The growing understanding of ASDs has triggered a knee-jerk reaction in some people, who prefer to see difficult behaviour as the result of poor parenting."

Crucially, however, it's the attitude some psychologists take when diagnosing autism, she maintains, that can be so damaging to families. Where the practitioner leans towards the ideas that Sigmund Freud

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pioneered at the beginning of the last century, Loxley-Blount asserts, they will be much more likely to blame it all on mum.

"I've had a number of reports about one well-known hospital in London where mothers are being blamed for their child's behaviour when they try to get a diagnosis of autism," she says. "This hospital has strong links with two training >>