

Carolina Living

TODAY'S FOCUS: FAMILY

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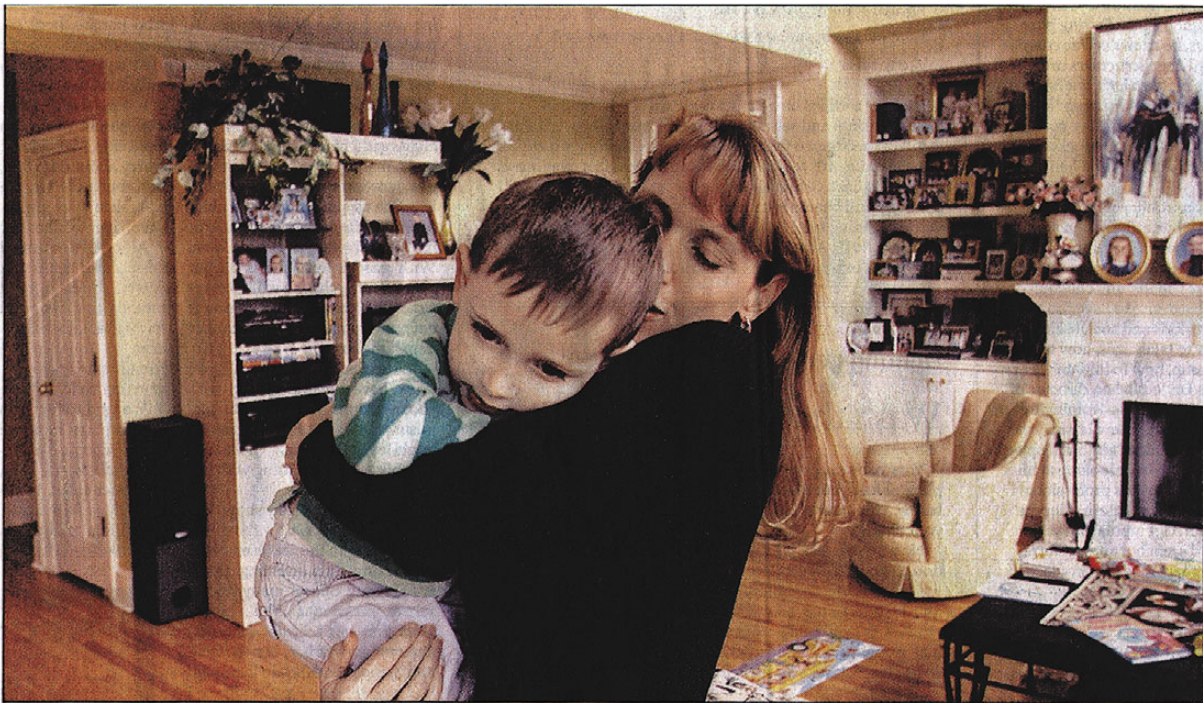
TUESDAY, APRIL 22, 2003



◀ **MERLEFEST | ENTERTAINMENT | 3E**
Ricky Skaggs is among those on the eclectic bill for annual mountain jam

COMING WEDNESDAY | FOOD
Fly in a Tuscan chef, invite friends...
Voila! A fabulous cooking party

SMALL BUT PROMISING SIGN



L. MUELLER - STAFF PHOTOS

Diet restrictions, supplements and chelation have helped Drew, says his mom, Kim Dabney. "We've just been pulling him out of a black hole," she says.

A word from Drew



The Dabneys employ Gina Sullins to work with Drew, using verbal behavior therapy to treat his autism.

His parents find hope in trying unproven chelation therapy to treat his autism

BY PAM KELLEY
Staff Writer

Little by little, mercury is coming out of Drew Dabney's body. As it departs, Drew's parents say their little boy is returning.

The 3-year-old makes eye contact again. He laughs. And one memorable day last summer, he said "Mama." His mom hadn't heard that since he was 15 months old.

Kim and Bailey Dabney are among a growing number of parents locally and nationally who are treating their autistic children with biomedical therapies such as chelation, dietary restrictions, vitamins and enzyme supplements.

The treatments are largely unproven. Some, like chelation, which uses chemical compounds to remove heavy metals from the body, are controversial and expensive.

But these parents say traditional medicine offers few answers about autism, so they've sought their own, reading books, attending conferences and networking with other parents. The treatments won't do any harm, they say, and they feel they owe it to their children to try them.

"There is no proven cure. No one has it," says Kim Dabney, who lives in Charlotte.

SEE DREW | 8E

Determined couple treats son's autism

Drew from IE

"All of us parents are out there trying to find our own solutions."

Autism diagnoses have soared in recent years. Just a decade ago, the disorder affected an estimated 1 per 2,500 children. Recent estimates are as high as 1 in 250. In 1990, N.C. public schools had 704 students with autism diagnoses. In December 2002, that number was 3,996.

Why such an increase? Experts disagree. Some say it reflects better early interventions and a broadening of autism's definition. A generation ago, some children now seen as autistic would have been diagnosed as retarded or psychotic.

But some other experts suspect the culprit is mercury from thimerosal, a preservative used until recently in many childhood vaccines.

While most children's systems expel the toxic metal, some can't get rid of it, some researchers and doctors say. They argue that the autism epidemic can be traced to a surge in the '90s in the number of required childhood vaccines. That surge raised the amount of mercury children received. They contend that mercury caused brain damage in those unable to expel the toxin.

Most vaccine manufacturers stopped using thimerosal about three years ago, after the American Academy of Pediatrics and Public Health Services urged its removal as quickly as possible. Government health experts deny a proven mercury-autism link, but many parents are convinced the link is there. That's why they're using chelation (pronounced *kee-lay-shun*) to get the toxin out of their children's bodies.

Drew received multiple thimerosal-containing vaccines as a baby, but his family believes the mercury in the flu shot he got at



L. MUELLER - STAFF PHOTO

Every other day, Kim Dabney rubs 11 drops of a drug compound into her son's arm. She believes that the substance helps Drew's body rid itself of heavy metals, such as mercury.

15 months pushed his system over the edge.

First, he broke out in a rash. Then the diarrhea began. His personality changed. He stopped speaking, ceased making eye contact and screamed at the slightest things - a light being turned off, a door opening.

"Drew was gone. He didn't know me," Dabney says.

The Dabneys enrolled Drew in speech and behavioral therapies often prescribed for autistic children. But Dabney's research and discussions with other parents of autistic children persuaded her to take additional steps as well. She took Drew off wheat and dairy products because she read that many autistic children can't properly digest them. She gave him cod liver oil, along with other supplements designed to help his digestive problems. It's clear the diet and supplements help, she says. "I know if I mess up on his diet for one day, he regresses."

She also began chelation therapy with an Asheville doctor, but halted it because the chelation pills caused a yeast overgrowth that created troublesome side effects.

Then, last summer, Dabney heard Dr. Rashid Buttar of Cornelius speak at a local conference. Buttar explained how he used a lotion form of chelation drugs that doesn't produce the side effects that can accompany oral drugs. He described how the treatment had helped his own son, now 4.

Since October, Dabney has been rubbing the lotion into Drew's wrist and forearm every other day. Regular analysis of the boy's urine and stool show that his body is eliminating mercury and other heavy metals. The Dabneys plan to continue until the treatment stops pulling out metals. That could take up to two years.

Every few weeks, Dabney meets with mothers of autistic

children to share tips and discuss progress. She knows at least 30 in the area who are doing chelation therapy.

Some, like Pam McCarthy, travel out of state to get treatments. McCarthy takes daughter Kallie, 5, to Dr. Stephanie Cave of Baton Rouge, La. Cave is a leading proponent of a treatment known as the DAN (Defeat Autism Now!) Protocol, which usually includes chelation, diet restrictions and supplements.

But many autism experts remain skeptical of such treatments. Lee Marcus is clinical director of the Chapel Hill office of the TEACCH program. "TEACCH" stands for the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-Handicapped Children. Many young autistic children make progress as they grow, he says, even without interventions, so it's impossible to attribute progress to these biomedical treatments.

In more than 25 years of working with autistic children, Marcus says he's seen many treatments come and go.

"Almost all of them start with a sort of reasonable hypothesis, an underlying theory for the disorder, then the treatment goes with it," he says. Initially, there's excitement, and the first cases seem like cures. "And then the next generation of cases are not cures."

Dabney, McCarthy and other parents say they're well aware of such skepticism, but they know their kids, and they can see improvement.

"You ask any pediatrician in Charlotte, they're going to say, 'Oh, that poor, pitiful, desperate woman,'" McCarthy says. "My argument is read what I've read, walk a mile in my shoes and tell me you wouldn't be doing the same thing."

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What Is Autism?

DEFINITION: A developmental disability that usually appears in the first three years of life. It's characterized by difficulty communicating and forming relationships. Some autistic children avoid eye contact, engage in repetitive behaviors, or have extreme sensitivity to certain sounds or touch. Many experts believe it stems from a combination of genetic and environmental causes. It's more common in boys than girls.

TREATMENT: Traditional treatments include speech, occupational and behavioral therapies. Less-mainstream biomedical therapies include chelation, special diets and vitamin and enzyme supplements.

RESOURCES:

- The Autism Society of North Carolina, (919) 743-0204;
www.autismsociety-nc.org.
- South Carolina Autism Society, (803) 750-6988;
www.scautism.org.
- For information about biomedical treatments, the Autism Research Institute, www.autism.com/ari.
- Also, "Children with Starving Brains: A Medical Treatment Guide for Autism Spectrum Disorder," by Jaquelyn McCandless, (Bramble Co., \$29.95).

FUND-RAISER: The National Alliance for Autism Research (NAAR) holds a walk-a-thon, Walk Far for NAAR, 9:30 a.m. May 10 at Lowe's Motor Speedway. (704) 333-0051;
www.walkfarfornaar.org.

The Charlotte Observer

For more information contact:



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