



AMERICAN
SPEECH-LANGUAGE-
HEARING
ASSOCIATION

June 2, 2008

John McCain 2008
P.O. Box 16118
Arlington, VA 22215

Dear Senator McCain:

As the leading organization for this nation's professionals who work in the field of communication disorders, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) takes very seriously its responsibility to equip policy-makers and parents with accurate information and the perspective that have been gained from the front-line work of ASHA members.

In this regard, we are aware of recent media reports about your interest in the causes of autism, a communication disorder that is on the increase and that is addressed daily by many of ASHA's 130,000 members.

But it is not only the first-hand experience of our members that makes us care deeply about what national leaders think about autism. It is also reasons like these:

- As discussion around autism has intensified, the condition has increasingly become a magnet for false assertions and controversial treatments.
- Policymakers, including our new president, will play a pivotal role in decisions affecting children with autism and their families.
- Interest in empowering policy-makers and families with solid, evidence-based information, whether it pertains to vaccines, speech-language treatment, or any other type of medical care or educational programs.

To be sure, presidential candidates have the potential to shape policy and influence public health. They need facts to guide their decisions, set research and funding priorities, and make sure that parents are informed, not misled, by the information at hand.

A key lesson that has been learned from the daily work of our member speech-language pathologists—namely, the importance of evidence-based practice—can help guide the autism conversation. While we very much applaud your interest in health issues of great concern to Americans, we also urge you to strongly consider the critical need for evidence-based decision-making.

Autism is a neurologically-based disorder that affects verbal and non-verbal communication and social interaction. Consequently, speech-language pathologists are often the first professionals to recognize that a child has autism as parents seek them out for help when their child is not talking, responding, or interacting with others.

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The incorporation of the principles of evidence-based practice in clinical decision-making is a vital part of what speech-language pathologists offer moms, dads, and the children themselves. This approach integrates high-quality research evidence with practitioner expertise and client preferences and values.

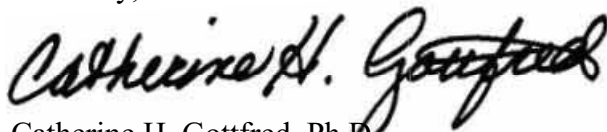
The need for an evidence-based approach is only growing. With more children being diagnosed with autism, the role of speech-language pathologists with diagnosis (typically as part of a team), assessment of communication and intervention becomes increasingly important to help meet the needs of this growing population. Luckily, there is increasing awareness of the value of early identification and intervention, which the evidence has shown to make clinically significant improvements.

Science is critical to the enlightenment and facilitation of decisions regarding healthcare and public policy. Unfortunately, parents who think that vaccines cause autism may not have their children get the vaccinations they need, a choice with serious potential health risks. Moreover, these parents are making this choice even though the scientific evidence supporting it is quite weak and indirect.

When our member speech-language pathologists see families in desperation, grasping out for ineffective or unproven treatments, they realize how critical it is to advocate for care that is based on science. Because it is possible that the development of communication and social skills may decline or fail to improve if a child does not receive the best available treatment based on scientific evidence, it is crucial that professional associations, governmental agencies and others provide a voice of reason and support patient-oriented research to further our knowledge-base regarding both the causes of and effective interventions for autism. Speech and language skills have a strong influence in other areas of development, such as reading, analytic thinking, and educational success in general. Consequently, communication improvements resulting from effective, scientifically validated treatments improve social interaction, reading ability, behavior and academic performance.

ASHA stands ready to offer you its considerable expertise in communication disorders, and we welcome you to contact us. Autism cases are on the increase. Our ability to address the needs of children and families, as well as the needs of our educational system and society depends largely on the commitment of our leaders to furthering patient-oriented research and shaping policy based on the evidence. As you help lead the way toward meeting the many challenges facing our nation with respect to autism, we urge you to do everything you can to ensure that the way is informed by an evidence based approach.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Catherine H. Gottfred". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Catherine H. Gottfred, Ph.D.
President