

Bernard Rimland (1928-2006) [1]

By: Cohmer, Sean Keywords: [Refrigerator Mother](#) [2] [Developmental disorder](#) [3]

Bernard Rimland studied autism in children in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. His early research in the 1950s and into the 1960s led him to assert that infantile autism was a neurodevelopmental disorder, or one that is caused by impairments in the growth and development of the brain or [central nervous system](#) [4]. Rimland's assertion that infantile autism was a neurodevelopmental disorder contradicted another theory at that time that the condition resulted from emotionally cold parenting. Rimland spent much of his career as a psychology researcher for the United States Navy in Point Loma, California, but in his spare time he researched and wrote about autism, and he advocated for children with autism and their families.

Bernard Rimland was born to Anna Lansky Rimland and Meyer Rimland in Cleveland, Ohio, on 15 November 1928. At the age of twelve, Rimland and his family moved across the United States to San Diego, California. For his undergraduate and early graduate work, Rimland studied at San Diego State University in San Diego, California. He graduated with an undergraduate degree in experimental psychology in 1950, and was the first person to receive a Masters degree in psychology from the institution in 1951. That same year, he married Gloria Belle Alf. Rimland then moved east to continue his education at Pennsylvania State University in State College, Pennsylvania, where he received his doctoral degree in experimental psychology in 1954. After his graduation, the US Navy hired Rimland as a psychologist and he returned to Point Loma in 1955.

In 1956, Rimland's son Mark was born. Mark exhibited behavioral difficulty from birth. He exhibited discomfort when lifted or held, but once held, he did not want to be put down. His parents noted that he lacked any sign of affection toward them and that he communicated using repetitive speech. Physicians at the time failed to diagnose Mark's condition. Leo Kanner, then-director of Child Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, had described eleven cases of autism in 1943, so autism was a relatively new diagnosis in clinical psychiatry. Nonetheless, Rimland sifted through one of his wife's old college textbooks and found a description for a condition that fit his son's behavior—autism.

After confirming the autism diagnosis with Mark's pediatrician, Rimland fixated on autism and its causes. He began writing a review paper on autism, which eventually turned into his 1964 book *Infantile Autism: The Syndrome and Its Implications for a Neural Theory of Behavior*. His book synthesized the research available at the time and aimed to debunk the theory that autism was psychological in origin, or psychogenic, and suggested a neurological or possibly genetic origin. Rimland proposed that autism originates developmentally in the area of the brain shown to regulate alertness, an area called the reticular formation. Descriptions of autism, before and after Rimland's work, advanced the theory that emotionally cold parenting during upbringing caused autism; a theory called the Refrigerator Mother theory.

Rimland argued for potential biological causes of autism in *Infantile Autism*. Soon after its publication, Rimland won international acclaim for his book, and he received the Century Award for Distinguished Contribution to Psychology in 1962. He also began receiving letters from parents and professionals looking to him for guidance.

Like Kanner, Bruno Bettelheim, a child psychologist and professor of psychology at the [University of Chicago](#) [5] in Chicago, Illinois, argued that emotionally cold parents caused autism in their children. Bettelheim published *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* in 1967, which promulgated the theory that autistic behaviors were psychological in origin and were caused by emotional refrigeration during early development. Kanner shared Bettelheim's theory, but eventually abandoned it in 1969 at a meeting of the National Association of Autistic Children.

After he published his book, Rimland helped establish several autism activism and research groups. The first group he helped found in 1965 was the National Society for Autistic Children in Teaneck, New Jersey, later renamed the Autism Society of America. The group was formed to connect parents of autistic children and to disseminate information. In 1967, Rimland helped to create the Institute for Child Behavioral Research in San Diego, California, which was later renamed the Autism Research Institute. The mission of the institute was to conduct and sponsor research aimed at finding causes and developing treatments for autism.

Between 1967 and 1985, Rimland communicated with broad audiences to inform others about autism. He co-produced a documentary in 1967 titled *Infantile Autism: The Invisible Wall*, which described many of the behaviors typically associated with autism and included interviews with parents of autistic children. It also included an interview with Rimland in which he argued that autism likely stemmed from both genetic and environmental causes. Rimland also published several articles on autistic savants, papers that landed him a role as technical consultant for the 1988 movie *Rain Man*. The movie won an Academy Award for Best Picture and actor Dustin Hoffman received an Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role for his portrayal of Raymond, an adult with autism.

In 1987 Rimland began publishing the *Autism Research Review International*, a peer reviewed journal dedicated to autism

research. Finally, in 1995 he and others helped form an initiative called Defeat Autism Now, which claimed to treat autism through nutrition guidelines.

In the last decade of his life, Rimland focused his outreach on the US public's growing concern about vaccinations and their alleged role for causing autism. This concern partly stemmed from research by Andrew Wakefield in the United Kingdom. Scientists later discredited Wakefield's research due to charges of research misconduct. On 6 April 2000, Rimland testified to the U.S House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform in Washington D.C. that autism rates were on the rise. Rimland claimed that triple vaccines like DTP—diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis, and MMR—measles, mumps, and rubella, had been shown to cause autism, a statement that scientists later demonstrated to be false.

Rimland died of complications from prostate cancer on 21 November 2006, in El Cajon, California, survived by his wife Gloria, his daughter Helen, and his two sons Mark and Paul. Rimland's final book was published posthumously as 2008's *Dyslogic Syndrome: Why Millions of Kids are 'Hyper', Attention-Disordered, Learning Disabled, Depressed, Aggressive, Defiant, or Violent—and What We Can Do About It*.

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