

[Leo Kanner \(1894-1981\)](#) ^[1]

By: Cohmer, Sean Keywords: [Refrigerator Mother](#) ^[2]

Leo Kanner studied and described early infantile autism in [humans](#) ^[3] in the US during the twentieth century. Though Eugen Bleuler first coined the term autism in 1910 as a symptom of schizophrenia, Kanner helped define autism as a disease concept separate from schizophrenia. He helped found an early child psychiatry department in 1930 at the [Johns Hopkins University](#) ^[4] Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. Kanner revised criteria for diagnosing autism, beginning with his article "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact" in 1943, and he helped reclassify autism as a disorder caused by defective neurological development.

Kanner was born on 13 June 1894 to Clara Reisfeld Kanner and Abraham Kanner in Klekotow, Austria. From the age of ten, Kanner strove to write poetry for a career, but no one would publish his work. Kanner studied at Sophiengymnasium in Berlin, Germany, and he graduated in 1913. He then attended the Staatsexamen and graduated in 1919, afterwards enrolling at the [University of Berlin](#) ^[5] in Berlin, Germany, as a medical student. Kanner left the university to serve in the military with Austria's army during [World War I](#) ^[6]. After the war, Kanner resumed his studies in Berlin and received his medical degree in 1921. That same year, Kanner married June Lewin. The couple had two children together, Anita in 1923, and Albert in 1931.

After a brief time as a cardiologist at the [Charity Hospital](#) ^[7] in Berlin, Germany, Kanner left Germany and its post-war inflation. He became an assistant physician at the State Hospital in Yankton, South Dakota, in the United States. Kanner had little training as a medical student in either pediatrics or child psychiatry, so he taught himself on those subjects. In 1928, Kanner worked at the Henry Phipps Psychiatric Clinic, part of the [Johns Hopkins Hospital](#) ^[8] in Baltimore, Maryland. After Kanner's three-year fellowship, Adolf Meyer, director of the clinic, in 1930 asked Kanner to direct the Children's Psychiatric Service at [Johns Hopkins University](#) ^[4], the first child psychiatric clinic in the United States.

Kanner became an associate professor of psychiatry at the [Johns Hopkins University](#) ^[4] in 1933, and in 1935 he published *Child Psychiatry*, an early US textbook on the subject. Throughout the 1930s, Kanner advocated for children labelled as feeble-minded or mentally handicapped. During World War II, Kanner helped relocate several hundred German, Jewish refugee physicians.

In 1938, Kanner began observing a cohort of eleven children in the Johns Hopkins clinic with behavior characteristics of autistic children. Those children became the first children that Kanner described with early infantile autism, which for a time, was known as Kanner's syndrome. Kanner's article "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact" details the eleven aforementioned children's preoccupation with objects, monotonous repetitions, insistence on consistency, and deficiencies of language. Kanner's 1943 descriptions of autism limited the population of children susceptible to autism based on their race, class, and parents' intelligence. His article attributed autism to certain ways in which parents raised their children. As early descriptions of autism included emotionally cold parenting as a potential cause, a public debate ensued about what became known as refrigerator mother theory through the 1960s and 1970s.

Kanner eventually rescinded his comments about parents potentially being responsible for their child's autism. Throughout the 1950s, Kanner echoed his initial observations that emotionally cold parenting was responsible for autism in children. He corresponded with Bernard Rimland through letters before Rimland published *Infantile Autism: The Syndrome and Its Implications for a Neural Theory of Behavior* in 1964, and Kanner wrote a foreword for the book in which he complimented Rimland's work. In 1967 Bruno Bettelheim, at the [University of Chicago](#) ^[9] in Chicago, Illinois, published *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self*, a book that spread the theory that parents were the major causal influence for autism. Kanner's views seemed to change, however, as he declared at a 1969 meeting of the US National Association of Autistic Children: "I hereby acquit you people as parents."

Over his lifetime, Kanner published eight books and more than 250 articles on topics in psychiatry, psychology, pediatrics, and history of medicine. He received awards including the Association for Retarded Children award for outstanding contribution in the field of medicine in 1954, the first annual award from the National Organization for Mentally Ill Children in 1960, and the Gutheil Memorial Medal from the American Association for the Advancement of Psychotherapy in 1962. Several child therapy buildings and schools have been named in his honor including ones in Oxings Mill, Maryland; Devon, Pennsylvania; one in Brazil, and two in Holland.

Kanner helped found the field of child psychiatry in the United States and he helped describe early infantile autism, a condition previously unstudied. With the help of Rimland, he helped legitimize new causal explanations in clinical psychiatry. By the

1970s, and to explain the cause of autism, scientists widely replaced theories of emotionally cold parenting with biological theories about abnormal development; researchers began looking to defects in neurological development as explanations for early infantile autism. Kanner died of heart failure in Sykesville, Maryland, on 3 April 1981.

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