



## Biological Psychology NewsLink

To accompany *Biological Psychology, Fifth Edition*

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### Socially Awkward? Check Your Genes

By Michael Torrice Some people can read your face and know you've had a bad day. Others seem oblivious. Now, researchers have pinpointed a genetic explanation for why some people are better empathizers than others. Empathy is crucial for our everyday social interactions. Neuroscientists have focused on a possible role for oxytocin, a hormone that seems to help us get along. Human volunteers trust others more to dole out money fairly when under the influence of the hormone, for example. And recently, scientists have linked a variation, or polymorphism, in the gene that codes for the oxytocin receptor to autism, a disorder defined by impaired social interactions. Neuropsychologist Sarina Rodrigues of Oregon State University in Corvallis and colleagues decided to look for a connection between this polymorphism, called rs53576, and empathy differences in the general population. To measure empathy in 192 college students, the researchers used a standard evaluation called the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test. Each subject looks at images of a movie still cropped to show only the actor's eyes. For each image, the researchers display four words, such as "playful" or "comforting," and ask the students to pick the word that best matches what the person is thinking or feeling. Autistic patients score poorly on this test, and past studies have shown that people who receive a snort of oxytocin perform better than those who receive a placebo. © 2009 American Association for the Advancement of Science

**See also:** [Chapter 15: Emotions, Aggression, and Stress](#); [Chapter 7: Life-Span Development of the Brain and Behavior](#)

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### A Powerful Identity, a Vanishing Diagnosis

By CLAUDIA WALLIS It is one of the most intriguing labels in psychiatry. Children with Asperger's syndrome, a mild form of autism, are socially awkward and often physically clumsy, but many are verbal prodigies, speaking in complex sentences at early ages, reading newspapers fluently by age 5 or 6 and acquiring expertise in some preferred topic — stegosaurus, clipper ships, Interstate highways — that will astonish adults and bore their playmates to tears. In recent years, this once obscure diagnosis, given to more than four times as many boys as girls, has become increasingly common. Much of the growing prevalence of autism, which now affects about 1 percent of American children, according to federal data, can be attributed to Asperger's and other mild forms of the disorder. And Asperger's has exploded into popular culture through books and films depicting it as the realm of brilliant nerds and savantlike geniuses. But no sooner has Asperger consciousness awakened than the disorder seems