

## Story Idea: *The Misdiagnosis of Autism*

**Contact:** Kimberli Meadows, 301-918-3747, [kmeadows@efa.org](mailto:kmeadows@efa.org)

“He will never advance beyond the capacity of an 18-month-old.” That’s what Sarah Kavanagh was told when her 6-year-old son, Brent, was diagnosed with autism. However, Sarah’s instinct told her to search for a brighter prognosis. What she found changed her son’s life and held the potential to help others in similar circumstances.

Brent’s peculiar behavior was a result of Landau-Kleffner syndrome, a rare brain disorder that can masquerade as autism. Eight-year-old Justin Senigar, whose incessant daydreaming was also mistaken for autism, was also later found to have a brighter prognosis when properly diagnosed and treated for petit mal seizures. In both cases, antiseizure medication was successful in helping the boys to live more normal lives. (Both stories are courtesy of ABC News *Good Morning America*.)

Seizures that appear as daydreaming spells (also known as petit mal seizures) are often misdiagnosed or treated improperly as everything but seizures. In some cases, these seizures can occur more than 100 times a day. The number of children in this country being diagnosed as autistic is skyrocketing—but are they really autistic? The lives of your viewers’ children rely on a correct diagnosis. An incorrect diagnosis can lead to them being overlooked, improperly treated, and not living up to their true potential. Epilepsy and autism can frequently look incredibly similar... and the ability of your viewers to tell the difference can change their lives—and the lives of their children.

### Story Resources

- ABC News: [The Answers to Autism May Be Inside the Mind](#).
- Science Direct: [Autism and epilepsy: Cause, consequence, comorbidity, or coincidence?](#)
- **The Epilepsy Index**, an educational Web resource for general epilepsy information, [www.epilepsyfoundation.org/answerplace/index.cfm](http://www.epilepsyfoundation.org/answerplace/index.cfm).

### Suggested Interview Questions

- What are some of the differences between epilepsy and autism?
- What is Landau-Kleffner syndrome?
- What are the different treatments for epilepsy and seizure disorders?
- How many children actually have *autism* right now? How many children actually have *epilepsy* right now?
- Can children have both epilepsy *and* autism? What are the chances for it?
- What is the prognosis for a child with epilepsy?

## **Fast Facts**

- More than 3 million Americans live with epilepsy.
- About 20 to 30 percent of children with autism develop epilepsy by the time they reach adulthood, according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS).
- Epilepsy affects people of all ages, races and ethnic backgrounds.
- Every year, 200,000 Americans will be diagnosed with seizures and epilepsy for the first time.
- With proper antiepileptic medications, most people with epilepsy can lead normal lives.

## **Interview Opportunities**

- Eric Hargis, president and CEO, the Epilepsy Foundation.
- A parent of a child with epilepsy.
- Physician Specialist.

## **About the Epilepsy Foundation**

The Epilepsy Foundation, a national non-profit with affiliated organizations throughout the United States, has led the fight against epilepsy since 1968. The Foundation's goals are to ensure that people with seizures are able to participate in all life experiences; and prevent, control and cure epilepsy through services, education, advocacy and research, so not another moment is lost to seizures. For additional information, please visit [www.epilepsyfoundation.org](http://www.epilepsyfoundation.org).