

Study of possible causes and factors for the increase in children with developmental disorders: changes in diagnosis, social acceptance, or the fetal environment?

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Education, medical institutions and welfare services have been confronted with increasing numbers of children with developmental disorders.

A fact-finding survey of Japanese schools has shown that the number of children with developmental disorders has been increasing since about 1996.

A number of factors have been identified as causes of the increase in the numbers of children with developmental disorders, including the following: the view that there is a "continuity" between normal development and developmental disorders, which has arisen together with changes in diagnostic criteria; changes in the societal acceptance of developmental disorders, which have arisen as knowledge of this condition becomes increasingly widespread; and change in the fetal environment, which can be inferred from the increase in low birth weights. In fact, birth weights in Japan are falling. The percentage of natal babies with a birth weight less than 2500 g have been increasing since around 1980. One cause of the fall in birth weights is thought to be maternal malnutrition. Exposure to this causes epigenetic changes in the fetal brain, with the risk of development being adversely affected.

In this article, the author examines the increase in children with developmental disorders and factors thought to be the cause thereof.