Lesley Stahl: The government recently announced that Autism now occurs in about one of every 150 American children; a new number that is adding to what was already a raging controversy, with parents groups arguing with scientists over what causes Autism; and with politicians over funding for research. In the meantime, behavioral scientists are trying to identify the early symptoms so that a diagnosis can be made by the age of one. Today, most children are left undiagnosed until they're five. Researchers at the M.I.N.D Institute at the University of California at Davis believe if they can catch it early they can change the way a child’s brain develops. They have started testing their theory in toddlers like Christian Haven.

Psychologist Sally Rogers, a pioneer in the field of autism treatment, started giving three-year-old Christian intensive therapy about a year ago, hoping to alter the course of his autistic behavior.

What was Christian’s behavior like before she met him?

Sally Rogers: Well, when we first met Christian he didn't have any words. He didn't really have any play skills. He mostly threw things on the floor.

Lesley Stahl: And she says he would throw 20-minute temper tantrums because he couldn't communicate.

Sally Rogers: He was really out of control. They had to bolt the furniture to the walls because this two year old was in danger of pulling furniture down on himself.

Lesley Stahl: Rogers worked with Christian one on one—on her hands and knees, in his face, teaching him new words and forcing him to interact with her.

Sally Rogers: Where's your tummy? Show me your tummy. Show me your nose.

Lesley Stahl: She believes that if treatment can begin this early, while a child's brain is still malleable, the results can be dramatic.

Do you think that you're actually re-wiring the brain? Do you think you're setting up new wires that wouldn't be there?

Sally Rogers: I think we certainly are creating new connections in the brain. That's what learning is.

Lesley Stahl: But are you suggesting that… this can be cured?

Sally Rogers: We don't know how to touch the biology of autism. But I do think that the behaviors that are associated with autism can be reduced to the point where they're not obvious anymore.

Lesley Stahl: Now, you can't make that promise to everybody, can you?
Sally Rogers: No, you sure can't. There's a huge range of severity in autism. There's a huge range of reactions to treatments.

Woman: Ok, which one? The red one, or the green one?

Christian: Green one.

Lesley Stahl: Christian is now able to talk with his mother Jennifer, and even a stranger like me, in multiple word sentences.