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### Autism: Know the signs

Concerned parents have been asking pediatricians many questions about autism after seeing and hearing an overwhelming number of news reports on this complex and confusing disorder. They want to know what autism is, if there is an epidemic, and what children are at risk.

Autism is one of the more severe forms of behavioral disorders within a group of developmental conditions termed *Pervasive Developmental Disorders* (PDD). It is estimated that between two and five children in every thousand fit PDD criteria.

Whether they are bright and academically successful, or have severe cognitive challenges, individuals who exhibit severe developmental speech delays, significant communication or language deficits in association with severe social skill deficiencies beginning in early childhood may meet autism spectrum criteria if they also lack flexibility in thinking and behavior.

Pervasive Developmental Disorder encompasses a broad spectrum of developmental disorders including classic autism on the severe edge of the scale and Asperger's disorder and what is called PDD, NOS (Not Otherwise Specified) on the milder end.

Boys are affected more often than girls, with symptoms usually first noticed between 18 and 36 months. Autism can occasionally be recognized in infancy with children who don't display happiness and mutual affection or other signs of normal attachment. A significant number of parents report that their children have developed normally, only to lose ground and acquire the symptoms at a later stage of development.

Diagnosing autism is tricky, since 10 percent of all children experience some type of developmental delay and, within normal variation, each child develops new skills at his or her own pace. In addition, to the best of current medical knowledge, autism is a behavioral developmental disorder without a known

biologic cause, making prenatal testing ineffective and early diagnostic screening and testing difficult.

Efforts to determine an early diagnosis, however, are exceedingly important since intensive, highly structured early intervention targeting behavior and language development can have a dramatic impact on optimizing social skills and cognitive development.

Autistic children usually have communication problems affecting their use and understanding of language. Frequently, they may appear to make normal early language gains, but their communication may be weighted with imitated or repetitive speech patterns, rather than meaningful expression.

Such children also tend not to engage in *typical* play activities. They frequently don't interact with adults or children, can't experience pretend behaviors with their toys, and frequently use toys for other than their designed purposes. Without apparent cause, autistic children frequently display characteristic symptoms such as hand flapping, pacing, spinning, and twirling.

More than 25 percent of autistic children have average to above-average intelligence, and with early diagnosis and intervention, all have the potential to lead productive lives. It is very important that parents be aware of the autism spectrum and the confusing and complex manner in which it is displayed.

While parents may be uncomfortable or fearful of voicing their concerns regarding autism, it is essential that they talk to their pediatrician within a month or two of observing significant delays or behavioral changes, rather than waiting to see whether their child will "outgrow" their disturbing behaviors.

Worried parents may want to use a questionnaire called the M-CHAT (Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers), developed by Robins and Fein, which is readily available on the Internet. This is a screening tool only and is not used for making a diagnosis. Although administered by parents, a physician or other professional must score the test.

There are no foolish questions when it comes to a child's health or development. Parents with concerns regarding development or other childhood issues should make an appointment with their child's pediatrician as soon as those concerns arise.

Feel free to contact me at NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital, 57 Highland Ave., Salem, MA 01907 or at [ebailey@aap.org](mailto:ebailey@aap.org) with your questions or comments.

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