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As cases rise, autism remains a misunderstood disorder

In the United States, one in every 150 children is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), so concerned parents are asking questions with increased frequency.

The term autism spectrum disorder is used to describe children with specific, serious, biologically-based delays in social skills and language development. Although the causes remain unknown, there appears to be a biological and genetic basis to ASD.

The disorder occurs much more frequently in boys than in girls and once a child is diagnosed with an ASD, there is a tenfold increase in the possibility that another child in the family will be affected.

Autism is currently diagnosed much greater rates than at any time in the past. Has ASD reached epidemic proportions or are we reacting to developmental disorders differently?

A psychiatrist first used the term autism 65 years ago to describe a group of children who were extremely aloof and indifferent to people the medical community, however, did not officially accept the term until 1980.

Prior to that time, many ASD children and adults were likely labeled as mentally retarded, learning disabled, speech impaired, or emotionally disturbed.

So, while there may be an increase in autism, we may also be seeing the results of increased awareness of the autism spectrum and an improved ability to diagnose ASD more accurately.

Even though autism is a chronic condition and there is no cure, early recognition and intervention can be very effective in improving a child's quality

of life, interpersonal skills, ability to function independently, and in relieving patient and family stress. Parents should speak with their pediatricians any time they have concerns about their infant's or toddler's development.

In addition, parents of autistic children should closely monitor the development of their other children with early and continued evaluation through the preschool years.

Children with autism are most frequently diagnosed when their language delays become an issue at 18 to 24 months of age. While there are no single behaviors or developmental issues that determine a diagnosis, there are a group of subtle signs that, if recognized early, could trigger more effective intervention and treatment.

The inability to connect is one of those subtle signs. The typical child "connects" to his parents in a number of ways. By six months of age, he returns mom's and dad's smiles.

During the first year of life, he will make intense eye contact with family and caretakers, tracking people and objects of interest. He responds when his name is called, and begins to point at things and interact with people within his environment.

There is reason for real concern, however, when a child fails to make these connections. Since these signs could mean many things, including deafness, a full evaluation is necessary.

Communication and language delays have long been the key to diagnosing both developmental delays and autism. The "red flags" in language delay include:

No babbling or pointing by 12 months;

No single words by 16 months;

No two-word phrases by 16 months;

Loss of language or social skills, at any age.

One of the screening tools for autism spectrum disorders recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics includes the following questions for use at 18 months:

Does your child enjoy being swung/bounced on your knee, etc?

Does your child take an interest in other children?

Does your child like climbing on things, such as up stairs?

Does your child enjoy playing peek-a-boo/hide-and-seek?

Does your child ever use his/her index finger to point, either to ask for something or indicate interest in something?

Does your child ever bring objects over to show you something?

The autism spectrum disorders are a group of poorly understood developmental illnesses. They vary in severity from mild to severe and frequently reflect characteristics unique to a particular child.

Initiating the evaluation process can be frightening for parents and accurately answering their questions and making a correct diagnosis may take time.

If you have concerns about your child's development, speak with your pediatrician - now.

Much of this information was compiled from a new report published by the Academy of Pediatrics in the November issue of Pediatrics.

The AAP is promoting early screening for autism. Information is available at www.aap.org, www.firstsigns.org, and at www.autismresearchcentre.com/tests/chat_test.asp

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