

Spotlight On Autism

New funding has fueled expanded research, detection and treatment. Even how we define the disorder has changed.

by Susan Stopper

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Brett's story is becoming more common as the autism rate continues to rise. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), autism disorders now affect one child in every 150.

Autism occurs more frequently in certain families and among males, but we still don't know what causes it, and no one is sure why the numbers are increasing. With a recent large influx of research funding, experts are studying potential causes, both genetic and environmental.

Autism's Broader Definition

"In the 1980s and earlier, the statistics only included kids with classic autism," says Suzanne Buchanan, PsyD, director of clinical services at the New Jersey Center for Outreach and Services for the Autism Community (COSAC).

Today's definition of autism is more inclusive. It embraces not



Red Flags For Autism Disorders

If your child exhibits any of these signs, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention urges you to consult your child's doctor for an evaluation.

- No smiles or other joyous expressions by 6 months
- No back-and-forth sharing of sounds, smiles or other facial expressions by 9 months
- No babbling, pointing, waving or gesturing by 12 months
- No words by 16 months
- No two-word meaningful phrases (without imitating or repeating) by 24 months
- Any loss of speech or babbling or social skills at any age

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only so-called classic autism, a neurological disorder that can profoundly affect development in social interaction and communication skills, but also other “autism spectrum disorders.”

These conditions include Asperger syndrome, a “high-functioning,” milder form of autism typified by deficiencies in social skills and difficulty reading nonverbal cues and processing sensory information. Individuals with Asperger syndrome have average or above intelligence and usually no significant delay in language development.

Pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), also on the autism spectrum, is a condition in which individuals exhibit some traits of classic autism or an unusual pattern of developmental deficits.

Greater awareness and parent advocacy have also led to improvements in identifying children with autism disorders. Educators, clinicians and parents are more aware of the warning signs, and research has produced better assessment tools.

Importance of Early Detection

Identifying children with autism as early as possible has become a main goal of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). Although an autism disorder can’t be cured, early, intensive therapy can make a difference in a child’s behavioral and learning development.

Jean Rutenberg, executive director of The Center for Autism in Philadelphia, explains that years ago autistic individuals weren’t treated. Because their brains weren’t stimulated early, most were viewed as mentally challenged, although their intelligence levels actually range from low to very high.

Children with autism, like all children, do much better if their brains are stimulated early. They often suffer “meltdowns,” throwing tantrums or becoming severely agitated when over-stimulated, their routines are interrupted or they can’t communicate their needs.

Once these children learn strategies to calm themselves and to communicate, they are better able to learn other skills. The earlier children begin learning, the farther they often progress. Within two months of intervention, Brett Boothman could communicate his needs and wants.

The CDC, in partnership with other national organizations, has launched a campaign called “Learn the Signs. Act Early” to help parents measure their child’s development from age 3 months to 5 years. It lists milestones for children such as responding to their own name at 7 months or babbling at 12 months. Delays in reaching these milestones could signify a developmental problem. (**See sidebar.**) However, only testing can determine if a child is a late bloomer or has a disorder.

“An experienced clinician can make the diagnosis of autism as early as 18 months in some children,” says Dr. Buchanan. Children with Asperger syndrome can be trickier to diagnose early on because they usually have no language impairment. Deirdre Wright, president and founder of ASCEND Group, The Asperger Syndrome Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, explains that kids with this disorder are usually diagnosed when they reach school age and their issues make them stand out from typical peers.

If You Have Concerns

What should you do if you think your child is displaying warning signs for an autism disorder?

“If you have any concerns about a child’s social interaction or language development, don’t hesitate to have him evaluated,” says Susan Levy, MD, director of the Regional Autism Center at The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia.

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Looking Ahead

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As health professionals learn to identify autism at earlier ages, researchers are exploring interventions appropriate for the very young.

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Causes

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