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Could My Child Have Autism?

The signs and what to do
if you see them

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Could My Child Have Autism? What Are the Signs and What Do You Do If You See Them?

By *Rosini Robinson*

Most of us have heard of autism and more than likely know at least one family that has been affected by it. But what exactly are the characteristics of a child with autism and what should you do if you suspect your child has this disorder?

What is Autism?

Let's start with a definition. Autism is a disorder that begins in early childhood and persists throughout adulthood. It affects three crucial areas of development: communication, social interaction, and creative or imaginative play. It affects boys more than girls at a ratio of 4-to-1. It is classified as a broad spectrum disorder, where children can fall into a range of low functioning through high functioning. A high-functioning child can have good vocabulary skills and grammar, but doesn't know how to interact with peers. A low-functioning child would show more severe symptoms such as not speaking by the age of 4 or 5, hand flapping, and repeating words or phrases over and over.

Jean Rutenberg, executive director of the Center for Autism for the past 30 years, says that autism can be seen as early as infancy. "When you gaze at and interact with your baby, it is usually a pleasant and joyful interaction. Babies who are born autistic may not look at you or respond," she says. "The baby may not be able to be easily soothed or regulate its emotional or behavioral states."

As Your Child Ages

In toddlers and preschool-age children, one discriminator between autism and other disorders is that the child has a poor response to calling their attention to something.

Another recognizable sign of autism in toddlers is a language delay or a regression in language. While some language delays are due to a hearing problem or a true speech delay, an autistic child's hearing is fine.

Rutenberg notes that another sign would be if the child does not respond to things parents are showing them. The child may also appear not to express much joy in discovery games or interaction with family members.

By age 3 to 4, an autistic child can get involved in a particular aspect of play and you can't tear them away. If playing with a car, for instance, the child will spin the wheels over and over again. If the child gets interrupted, he will become very upset.

Sensory sensitivity can be another symptom. Certain sounds, odors, movements and touch can interfere with an autistic child's focusing and learning.

Rutenberg points out that while we all have spatial issues (how physically close we are comfortable being with people), for the autistic child, the sensitivity is exaggerated and can become painful and obtrusive.

Rutenberg says that "like snowflakes, every single autistic child is different. Their evaluation and treatment needs to be approached with the individual child in mind."

First Steps to Take

If you suspect your child may fall somewhere in the autism spectrum, you may opt to take him to the pediatrician for a simple screening test. If your pediatrician's office does not have this screening test, they may tell the parent to "just wait and see." As any autism professional would tell you, this would be a monumental error.

According to Dr. Rob Rosenthal, the director of autism services at the Growth Opportunity Center in Huntingdon Valley, Pa., and a school psychologist in the Abington School District, "Waiting would be a mistake as early intervention is the best possible thing you can do for your child."

Rosenthal recommends taking your child to either a developmental pediatrician or a child psychologist, as those two specialists have the most training in diagnosing an autism spectrum disorder. Your child can also be diagnosed at a facility that specializes in autism, such as the

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Growth Opportunity Center or at the Center for Autism in Philadelphia, among others.

When you begin the process of taking your child for diagnosis, Rutenberg firmly recommends that you should trust your feelings. "Go with it until someone proves you wrong," she says.

Personal Experiences

Here are some families who trusted their gut instincts on the sometimes difficult road to getting a proper diagnosis.

When Eric and Linda Newman of Voorhees, N.J., first suspected there was something not quite right with their then 20-month-old son Max, "The first thing we did was to go to the pediatrician," says Eric. "They tried to ease our concerns by placating us with comments like, 'He's a boy, they start talking later than girls' and 'Einstein didn't speak until he was 4 years old.' They didn't hear the other things that we were telling them. The next thing we did was to have his hearing checked in hopes that was the problem. It wasn't; his hearing was fine. At 22 months, we had him evaluated by a developmental pediatrician at C.H.O.P. and he was diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum," he says.

Another example of how a family trusted their intuition when dealing with their child's well-being is Mike

and Kris Foglia of Marlon, N.J., who were concerned about their then 14-month-old daughter, Samantha. "The red flags for me were that she stopped responding to her name and her lack of communication," Kris says. "I took her to C.H.O.P. for a complete hearing evaluation. They said she could hear. I went to the pediatrician's office to talk about my concerns and he dismissed them," she says.

"I had already called C.H.O.P.'s Developmental Pediatrician's department and had been put on a 6-month waiting list for an appointment. In the meantime, we sought out a local neurologist. He was confused as to why we were at his office. At this point, Samantha was 22 months old and was not talking. I told him that we were concerned that Samantha could have autism and he said, 'Who told you that?' I asked him then why she was not responding to her name and why she was not talking. He says that she was a little behind in communication. I walked out of there with no more answered questions than when I came in. At 25 months, Samantha was officially diagnosed with moderate autism by a doctor at C.H.O.P.," says Kris.

Thoughts

"There is so much information in the media about autism," Rosenthal says. "For most parents, it's a frustrating, overwhelming and confusing journey to get your child diagnosed and then to subsequently find the best type of service for your child."

Early intervention is the key to helping children with autism. Until very recently, Pennsylvania was only one of two states in the country that did not have a department of developmental disabilities. But thanks to a newly created autism task force, Pennsylvania is catching up. The state is now working to get more professionals trained in how to diagnose autism, as well as to help treat it.

Rosenthal recommends that parents find a case manager, speech therapist, developmental pediatrician or child psychologist to help guide them through the system, instead of trying to go it alone.

Rutenberg says that families are the best advocates for their kids. "It is a huge burden, but it's the greatest gift they can give. I have the highest regard for families who have an autistic child," she says. "They are some of the most courageous people out there."

Rosini Robinson is a freelance writer from Huntingdon Valley, Pa.

Questions or comments? E-mail the editor at dkaye@montgomerynews.com.

Books Worth a Look

► "A Cup of Comfort for Parents of Children with Autism - Stories of Hope and Everyday Success"

by Colleen Sell (Adams Media, 2007, \$9.95). Parents and healthcare providers share triumphs and challenges with stories that show unconditional love and hope in this inspirational book. Read about these devoted, courageous people who show strength and acceptance on a daily basis.

► "Strange Son - Two Mothers, Two Sons and the Quest to Unlock the Hidden World of Autism"

by Portia Iversen (Riverhead Books, 2007, \$24.95). A view of autism seldom seen, this book follows a trail of hope as the author, mother to a son withdrawn into a world of isolation, learns of a special boy from India and his equally remarkable mother, who have found ways to penetrate the walls of autism and reveal the child trapped within.