

Early Signs of Autism in Infants



The CDC estimates about 1 in 88 children are diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and a growing number of children, 18%, are being diagnosed by age 3. Still, the CDC notes the majority of children are diagnosed as late as 4–6 years of age, well beyond the optimal time to begin early intervention services.

More recently, however, studies have indicated that parents of children with ASD notice problems before their child turns one. Some even noticed deficits in social, communication, and fine motor skills from 6 months of age, the CDC suggests.

RED FLAGS

So how can you as a parent be prepared to notice these deficits as early as possible? Here are 8 “red flags” to help you identify the possibility of ASD in infants:

- Smiles late or very minimally. Smiling occurs in the first few months of life.
- Seldom makes eye contact with people. Typically, eye contact emerges between two and four months.
- Does not respond to calling of their name with head turns. This reaction begins between eight and ten months.
- Does not turn or look when you point or say “look at this.” This usually occurs between ten and 12 months.
- Does not point at objects or people. Pointing typically emerges between 12 to 14 months.

“Even if a child is under-stimulated, these characteristics are developmental and should be evident. Although they may not be overt in an under-stimulated child, these characteristics should be acquired by certain ages.” — *Darlida Ospina-Arenas, MS, CCC-SLP, TSSLD*

- Does not babble back and forth. Babbling should start at six months of age and becomes more complex with more syllables between 8 to ten months.
- Demonstrates unusual movements, such as hand flapping, spinning, tapping or playing with the same toy in a way that seems odd or repetitive.
- Doesn’t explore surroundings with curiosity or interest.

EARLY INTERVENTION

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children be screened for autism at 18 and 24 months, or whenever a parent or provider has a concern. Knowing these signs can help you seek screening early and pave the way for early diagnosis and intervention. Early intervention, even for infants, affords many benefits, including:

- Neural connections, which create the foundation for learning, behavior and health, are the most flexible during the first three years of life. Therefore, the earlier the service the better it is for your child (www.nectac.org).
- A therapist will serve as a coach to help your child learn how to communicate in a functional manner.
- You as a parent will learn strategies embedded within natural routines to enhance communication.
- You can help your child develop socialization skills and form positive relationships with others, which impacts cognitive and language development (www.nectac.org).

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

If your child receives a diagnosis of ASD, here are further considerations to keep in mind:

- Consult a developmental pediatrician who specializes in working with children with autism.
- If you are unsatisfied with the mandate (amount of therapy) and think your child might benefit from increased services, speak to your therapists, as they can submit a justification letter at least three months after services have begun to request additional weekly sessions.
- If you are unsatisfied with the psychological evaluation, you are entitled to a second opinion.
- Upon diagnosis, your child should automatically qualify for Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) — behavioral services 10-20 hours a week, depending on your child’s needs.
- ABA services are initiated in the home but can later be increased to services in a school setting if your child qualifies.
- Sensory processing disorders (SPDs) often coexist with ASD and your occupational therapist can work with you to make your child as comfortable as possible.
- If your child has an SPD, he may also be a very “picky” eater; your occupational and speech therapists can both address this issue.

Information for this handout was provided by Darlida Ospina-Arenas, MS, CCC-SLP, TSSLD, a bilingual SLP and evaluator in Queens, N.Y.

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