

# Looking into Autism

Information for  
pediatricians, family  
physicians, and other  
medical professionals  
from the Maryland  
Chapters of the Autism  
Society of America



A Special Edition

April 2004

## SCREENING FOR AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS An Update for Physicians

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Autism Spectrum Disorders are characterized by significant impairments in *social interactions* and *communication* and by the presence of *repetitive routines*. It is also common that individuals with autism have unusual sensory reactions, especially to tactile and auditory stimuli. Autistic individuals have cognitive abilities ranging from profoundly mentally impaired to genius IQs.

The recent increase in autism diagnoses indicates a prevalence of 3-6:1,000, two-thirds of whom are in the categories of Pervasive Developmental Disorders-Not Otherwise Specified or Asperger syndrome. At highest risk are the siblings of children already diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. Although autism is a lifelong disorder for which there is presently no cure, significant progress is possible for children with autism through appropriate educational interventions which emphasize structured, systematic, and visually-based teaching methods.

Based on parents' concerns about their child's *failures of early development of language and social interactions* between 18-24 months of age, the following "red flags" which should prompt immediate full evaluation include:

- No babbling or pointing or other gesture by 12 months
- No single words by 16 months; less than 50 words by 24 months
- No 2-word spontaneous (not echolalic) phrases by 24 months
- ANY loss of ANY language or social skills at ANY age

Several screening tests for early identification of possible autism have been developed, including the Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (M-CHAT), available free to pediatricians through the First Signs website ([www.firstsigns.org](http://www.firstsigns.org)). In order to catch those children whose autism appears after a regression between 18-24 months, administering the M-CHAT at the 24-month check-up is recommended for all children.

Complete diagnostic evaluation of autism spectrum disorders may be obtained locally at:

- Center for Autism & Related Disorders/KKI: 443-923-7680
- Mt. Washington Pediatric Hospital: 410-578-8600
- Children's National Hospital, Washington DC: 202-745-3421
- Private psychologists:  
Dr. Barbara Allgood-Hill--410-580-0750  
Dr. Eve Band--410-902-0434  
Dr. Karen Cruise--410-992-0262  
Dr. Taruna Ahluvalia--301-565-0534

### **Suggested References:**

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- Robins, D., et al., (2001). The Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers: an initial study investigating the early detection of autism and pervasive developmental disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 31, 131-144.

### **Websites:**

- <http://www.bcc-asa.org>  
<http://www.maryland-autism.org>  
<http://www.autism-society.org>

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# JOHNS HOPKINS RESEARCH GROUP MOVING FORWARD

A number of new research projects are taking shape at Johns Hopkins University's Center for Autism and Developmental Disabilities Epidemiology (CADDE) in Baltimore.

CADDE is a byproduct of the Children's Health Act of 2000. This act directed the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention to establish regional epidemiology centers of excellence for autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and other developmental disabilities. CADDE is one of five CDC-funded Centers – the others are located in California, Colorado, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. Each center is charged with monitoring ASD prevalence, collaborating on a large research study of ASD risk factors, and developing its own special research projects. CADDE studies, primarily, the populations of Maryland and Delaware.

CADDE has been working in cooperation with local health and education departments to collect data needed to begin monitoring ASD prevalence. The project has proven very labor intensive but CADDE hopes prevalence estimates for the first study year will be available by the end of this year. Estimates from

four other states also engaged in ASD monitoring should be available about the same time. The National CADDRE Study of Child Development and Autism, the official name of the collaborative study of ASD risk factors mentioned above, will soon get underway. This will be the largest study of ASD risk factors ever undertaken. CADDE hopes that the autism community in Maryland will participate in and support the study. Look for more information about this very important study over the coming months. Because CADDE scientists are especially interested in the way genes and environmental factors might interact to cause autism, CADDE has begun some special studies on genes and ASD risk. These investigations are following up on leads about specific genes that might be involved in a genetic predisposition to autism. The DNA samples for this study come from the Autism Genetics Research Exchange – an innovative biobank started by Cure Autism Now and now supported by the National Institutes of Health. Results from the first of these analyses are to be presented at scientific meetings later this spring.

CADDE is also doing research to help improve the way ASDs are diagnosed. Among its other aims, the Investigating Developmental Delays Study (IDDES) is comparing the performance of two parent questionnaires both intended to provide early indications of ASD. This Spring CADDE will also be attempting to survey all pediatricians in Maryland and Delaware to get better data on developmental screening and autism early detection practices in our community. Also note that on June 7<sup>th</sup> CADDE will be cosponsoring, along with the Center for Autism and Related Disorders at Kennedy Krieger Institute, a daylong workshop on the early detection of ASD. This workshop, to be held in Baltimore, is open to the public and will feature nationally recognized speakers. Look for more announcements about this soon.

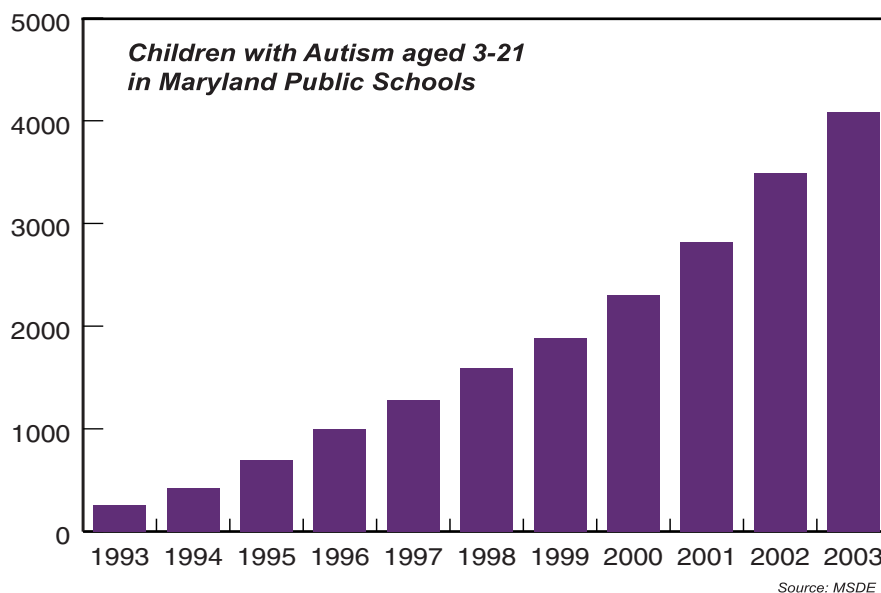
As their projects begin to produce findings, CADDE will make efforts to share what is learned not only by publishing in scientific journals but also by summarizing findings in newsletter articles like this one and posting updates on the Center's web site –

<http://www.jhsph.edu/cadde>

## Increasing Numbers of Children on the Autism Spectrum

Since 1993, the number of children coded by local school systems with an autism spectrum disorder in Maryland has jumped 1242%. While the addition of autism as a category under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and better diagnosis explain some of this increase, they do not provide a full explanation for these increasing numbers.

Research has shown the benefits of early intervention for young children with autism. Late identification may result in a failure to obtain early intervention services at a time that might have the greatest impact on brain development.



# AUTISM A.L.A.R.M.

## **A**utism is prevalent

- 1 out of 6 children are diagnosed with a developmental disorder and/or behavioral problem
- 1 in 166 children are diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder
- Developmental disorders have subtle signs and may be easily missed

## **L**isten to parents

- Early signs of autism are often present before 18 months
- Parents usually DO have concerns that something is wrong
- Parents generally DO give accurate and quality information
- When parents do not spontaneously raise concerns, ask if they have any

## **A**ct early

- Make screening and surveillance an important part of your practice (as endorsed by the AAP)
- Know the subtle differences between typical and atypical development
- Learn to recognize red flags
- Use validated screening tools and identify problems early
- Improve the quality of life for children and their families through early and appropriate intervention

## **R**efer

- To Early Intervention or a local school program (do not wait for a diagnosis)
- To an autism specialist, or team of specialists, immediately for a definitive diagnosis
- To audiology and rule out a hearing impairment
- To local community resources for help and family support

## **M**onitor

- Schedule a follow-up appointment to discuss concerns more thoroughly
- Look for other features known to be associated with autism
- Educate parents and provide them with up-to-date information
- Advocate for families with local early intervention programs, schools, respite care agencies, and insurance companies
- Continue surveillance and watch for additional or late signs of autism and/or other developmental disorders

For More Information: [www.medicalhomeinfo.org](http://www.medicalhomeinfo.org)



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The recommendations in this document do not indicate an exclusive course of treatment or serve as a standard of medical care. Variations, taking into account individual circumstances, may be appropriate.

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# The Autism Society of America

The Autism Society of America was founded in 1965 by a small group of parents working on a volunteer basis out of their homes. Over the last 39 years, the Society has developed into the leading source of information and referral on autism. Today, over 20,000 members are connected through a working network of over 200 chapters in nearly every state.

## **Autism Society of America**

(800) 3AUTISM  
www.autism-society.org

## **Anne Arundel ASA**

(410) 923-8800  
annearundel-asa@maryland-autism.org

## **Baltimore-Chesapeake ASA**

(410) 655-7933  
baltimorechesapeake-asa@maryland-autism.org

The Maryland Chapters of ASA are all-volunteer, nonprofit organizations dedicated to acting as a voice for individuals and families affected by autism spectrum disorders. Most members are parents of individuals with autism, but membership also includes persons with autism, siblings, grandparents, and other relatives, as well as professionals in the education and medical fields. The

## **Frederick County ASA**

(301) 746-8080  
frederick-asa@maryland-autism.org

## **Harford County ASA**

(410) 836-7177, ext 617  
harford-asa@maryland-autism.org

## **Howard County ASA**

(410) 760-5595  
howard-asa@maryland-autism.org

Maryland Chapters exist as a resource for everyone who needs help and support with the challenging – and rewarding – job of raising, working with, and advocating for individuals with an autism spectrum disorder. Individual chapters can provide you with information about education, treatments, and adult services in your area. We encourage you to contact and join your local chapter.

## **Montgomery County ASA**

(301) 652-3912  
montgomery-asa@maryland-autism.org

## **Prince George's County ASA**

(301) 627-5150  
princegeorges-asa@maryland-autism.org

## **Washington County ASA**

(240) 420-3692  
washington-asa@maryland-autism.org

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**www.maryland-autism.org**

