How Early Can Autism Spectrum Disorder Be Diagnosed and Where To Focus Treatment for My Toddler

Tessa VanKirk, MS, BCBA
Stormi Pulver White, PsyD

CENTER FOR AUTISM & DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES
What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

- Focus on 2 areas:
  - Social Communication
  - Restricted, Repetitive Behaviors
How has our understanding of Autism changed?

- Autistic Disorder
- Asperger's Disorder
- PDD-NOS

→ Autism Spectrum Disorder

American Psychiatric Association (2013)
What are the early signs of ASD?

**Social Communication**
- Delays in language development
- Limited gesture use or unconventional gesture use
- Limited pointing
- Repetitive or nonfunctional language/sounds
- Echolalia
- Frequent non-directed vocalizations
- Lack of integration of language with eye, gesture use
- Limited or inconsistent eye contact
- Limited showing or directing others attentions to objects of interest
- Limited joint attention skills
- Limited shared enjoyment with others
- Limited range of facial expressions
- Limited interest in same age peers
- Limited or inconsistent response to name being called (despite normal hearing)

**Restricted, Repetitive Behavior**
- Repetitive, nonfunctional use of toys/objects (e.g., opening and closing doors on a toy car, spinning the wheels on a toy car, flicking light switches on and off)
- Unusual Interests (e.g., lights, metal objects, street signs, toilets)
- Atypical motor mannerisms (hand flapping, body tensing, toe walking, finger posturing)
- Sensory Interests (e.g., mouth objects, holding objects close to explore them visually, feeling the texture of objects)
- Sensory Aversions (e.g., covering ears in response to common noises, tags in clothing, haircuts)
- Adherence to nonfunctional routines (compulsions/rituals, verbal rituals)
- Difficulties with transition from one activity to another
- Hyperfocus on certain objects or activities
What are some good questions to ask myself about my child?

Social Communication

• Does your child babble?
• Wave bye-bye? Raise arms to be lifted?
• Hear your voice as well as other things in the environment?
• Does your child respond to sounds differently from someone calling his/her name?
• Does your child try to get you to look at things at a distance (e.g. stars, signs) even when he or she is not asking for them?*

Restricted, Repetitive Behaviors

• Does your child have echolalia, “pop-up” words, exceptional labeling?
• What is your child’s favorite toy/type of play?
• How does your child respond to changes in routine?
• Does your child use his/her body to let you know when excited, upset?
When should I ask for a referral?

- Refer upon first suspicion due to wait times!
Why Identify Early? Why Not Wait?

Early Identification

Reliable diagnosis 18-24 months

Early Diagnosis

Early Services

Better Outcomes

Webb & Jones, 2008; Itzchak & Zachor, 2010
How is ASD diagnosed in young children?

- There are no medical tests (e.g., Blood Tests) for ASD
- Largely through gathering a thorough developmental history from parents and behavioral observation. Two important areas of focus:
  - Joint attention
  - Nonverbal communication
What is joint attention?

• Shared focus of two individuals on an object
What is nonverbal communication?

- Eye contact
- Facial expressions
- Gestures
What are some good beginning goals for my toddler?

• Play partner
• Joint attention
• Nonverbal communication
How can I capture my child’s attention?

• **What is your child is interested in?**
  – Observe him, what does he seek me out for, what makes him smile or laugh

• **Position yourself for interaction**
  – Face to face; sitting across from each other

• **Manage distractions**
  – Put toys away, TV off if no one is watching it, less busy room

• **Figure out the comfort zone**
  – Some children prefer to be up close and personal where others prefer 5 feet of distance when engaged

• **Join in by following child’s lead**
  – No instructions or demands here; follow child’s lead and later you will elaborate the play
Where do I start in nonverbal communication skills?

• Can include: gestures (reaching, pointing), eye contact, physical, giving item to you for help, combination of two

• Observe activities to determine how your child communicates

• Decrease your assistance; pause

• Create opportunities and capitalize on opportunities

• Provide verbal feedback as you are giving access – keep it basic
Where do I start in Joint Attention?

• Triangle of attention: interaction involving two people and an object
• Shifting gaze back and forth between object and person
• Show objects, give objects, point to share experiences
• Don’t take item when child shows you, acknowledge the item and comment enthusiastically with name of item
How do I make Learning Fun?

• Teachable moments occur often
• Capitalize on activities your child already prefers
• Determine your child’s preference for loud and crazy activities versus quiet and serious activities; can include both depending on the activity
What are some examples of activities to try?

- Blowing bubbles
- Peek-a-boo
- Pushing on a swing
- Bouncing, rolling, throwing balls
- Singing nursery songs
- Ring around the Rosie
- Airplane spoonfuls at snack
- Wagon rides
- Jack in the box
Additional resources

- Autism Speaks-Learn the Signs https://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism/learn-signs
- IDEA Part C-Early Intervention (services for children aged 0-2:11) http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/ei.index.htm
- Early Start Denver Model
  - An Early Start for Your Child with Autism, Sally Rogers, PhD; Geraldine Dawson, PhD; Laurie Vismara, PhD
- Early Start Lab at UC Mind Institute http://www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/mindinstitute/research/esdm/