

Facilitating Earlier Identification of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

Did you know that:

- ✓ parents often voice concerns about signs of ASD before their child reaches 24 months of age?
- ✓ it is possible to identify children early, by at least 18 months of age, when early indicators of ASD may be observed?
- ✓ prevalence of ASD has increased to 1/110?
- ✓ early diagnosis is important, because children who are identified early with ASD and receive appropriate intervention early, demonstrate development that is greatly improved including better progress in school, especially when **intervention begins before 3 years of age?**

If you would like more information about this, go to the CDC website -- <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/index.html> and <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/index.html> -- where you can find the most current description of early signs of autism, free downloadable materials to share with families, as well as information about other developmental disorders and resources.

Additional Information on ASD (CDC-AUCD Collaborative Research Award 2009-2010)

It has been well documented that delays in diagnosis and treatment for ASD presently exist. Because of increasing needs related to ASD affecting young children, families, and communities, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) determined that there was an urgent need to facilitate earlier identification and treatment for ASD.

Information for all families and other team members to know

Some Background Facts

Why focus on ASD?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong condition that responds to intervention. Average age of diagnosis is much later than it should be, at 4.5 years of age (Rice et. al. 2009; ASHA, 2006). This delay in diagnosis, and related treatment, occurs despite parental concerns registered before 24 months of age. Additionally, it is possible to identify children even earlier, by 18 months of age, when indicators of ASD may be observed (Wetherby, 2009; Wiggins, Rice, & Bain, 2006; Wimpory et al., 2000).

Why is early diagnosis of ASD important?

Early diagnosis is important, because children who are identified early with ASD and receive appropriate intervention early, demonstrate improved life-long outcomes, especially when intervention begins before 3 years of age (Harris and Handleman, 2000; National Research Council, 2001; Landa, 2007). The need to identify children with ASD is more urgent than ever with recent increases in estimates of children with ASD in the U.S. (Rice et al., 2009).

What might improve age of diagnosis of ASD? What is the role of Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) and other team members?

Communication and language are the most frequent areas of delay/disorder in young children 0-3 years of age with developmental disabilities (Hebbeler, 2007). Deficits in social aspects of verbal and nonverbal communication are potential first markers of more serious emerging developmental problems such as ASD (Wetherby, 2009; ASHA 2006; Joseph et al., 2002). SLPs, because of their specialization in communication and language, may be one of the first professionals to receive these concerns from parents and are therefore positioned to help guide them toward earlier diagnosis (ASHA, 2006).

Studies have shown that listening to and educating families promotes earlier identification of ASD (ASHA, 2006). SLPs and other team members must therefore be prepared with current readily-useable evidence-based information and resources related to ASD to support their role in helping families reach sooner diagnoses. On the next page, see some helpful resources.

How do SLPs presently help families reach earlier diagnosis of ASD (based on a study co-sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control, National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, and Association of University Centers on Developmental Disabilities, as part of the CDC's "Learn the Signs. Act Early." campaign

to increase awareness of parents about child development, early warning signs of developmental delay, and how to act early to help a child with delays reach his/her full potential).

Some preliminary findings and corresponding resources for all team members:

- 1.** Although many SLPs (48%) do not use published screeners to detect potential signs of ASD, they do observe for indicators of ASD during speech/language evaluations. Such screening activities are important because we know that screening leads to earlier diagnosis and appropriate interventions. It is also important to note that in young children, early signs of ASD can be subtle, with research continuing to uncover and describe these. **Find helpful information about screening and evaluation for ASD – <http://www.firstsigns.org/index.html> & <http://search.asha.org/?q=@syssource=asha-practice-policy%20@Keywords=Early+intervention>**
- 2.** When ASD is suspected, SLPs primarily refer children to pediatricians or Part C systems. It may be helpful to know that states vary in their eligibility requirements, and that states' early intervention systems do not serve all children with developmental disabilities including ASD. It is important to refer to the early intervention system and may also be helpful to refer to a second evaluation source. **Find helpful information on local resources – <http://www.medlineplus.gov> where all team members can search for information on ASD to share with families, in different languages, & to find your local evaluation/referral sources.**
- 3.** SLPs feel least prepared to: select and use screening tools for ASD, explain information about ASD to families of differing cultures, help families reach a diagnosis of ASD (in general), discuss current evidence about ASD with families, and access easy to read and appropriate resources about ASD to share with families. SLPs also report that they wanted to have information, mostly on these topics, through professional meetings/conferences, colleagues/specialists, CDC's "Learn the Signs. Act Early." Campaign, hard copy products, and internet/web. **To find helpful information on ASD – <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/index.html> , <http://firstwords.fsu.edu/>, & <http://search.asha.org/?q=@syssource=asha-practice-policy%20@Keywords=Early+intervention>**

**** More resources and references available upon request**