



Autism: How Parents and Caregivers Can Put the Pieces Together

One in every 150 children is diagnosed with autism, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That means 1.5 million Americans have some form of autism, and that number is on the rise.

Right now, there is no cure for autism, but early intervention can help. Children who are diagnosed at a young age and visit a doctor regularly for treatment show improvements in learning and communication skills. While some parents may be concerned about the safety of vaccines and whether there is a link to autism, the American Association of Pediatrics continues to recommend that children receive their immunizations to protect them against childhood diseases.

In recognition of Autism Awareness Month, First 5 Contra Costa offers the following information to help parents understand autism and connect them to the resources they need.

Early Warning Signs

Autism is complex and can be difficult to diagnose because it affects each child differently, but there are signs that parents should look out for – like the ones below. As soon as you notice symptoms you should take your child to a doctor or health care provider.

- **Eye Contact.** Autistic children make little or no eye contact.
- **Speech.** Look for late speaking or no speaking at all. Some children with autism have trouble expressing needs or do not respond to verbal communication.
- **Relationships.** Sometimes children with autism have difficulty relating to other people, prefer to be alone or don't like to cuddle.
- **Play.** Children are active and creative, so take note if your child doesn't play. Also keep in mind that autistic behavior sometimes includes unusual play patterns like spinning objects over and over again.
- **Extreme Behaviors:** Watch for extreme behavior like too much laughing or crying for no reason, tantrums and sensitivity to pain (or lack of it). Sometimes children with autism don't have a natural fear of danger, and are fixated on certain objects for a long time. Repetitive movements like hand-flapping also can be an early sign of autism.

The Sooner, The Better

Since there are no specific medical tests for autism, it's important that parents, caretakers, teachers and health care providers pay close attention to a child's communication, behavior and development. Screenings for autism can take time, so get started as soon as symptoms are noticed.

- **Early Intervention.** Research shows that early intervention reduces the effects of autism. By starting treatment at an early age (0 to 3) when the brain is developing, children can make great progress by the time they start kindergarten.
- **Treatment.** Autistic children benefit from programs that help develop their communication, social and mental skills. According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, some of the most common treatment options include speech therapy, diet and treatments that focus on improving relationships.

Resources Available to Help

If you have concerns about your child's development, don't wait – talk to your doctor or health care provider about getting an autism screening. The following services can also help:

- **California Department of Developmental Services.** For children under age 3, call 1-800-515-BABY (2229) and select the “Early Start” extension number. For children between ages 3 and 5, call First 5 California at 1-800-KIDS-025 for screening services and information on whether your child can receive free special needs assessments.
- **The Autism Society of America (ASA).** The Autism Society of America has chapters throughout California and provides information on symptoms and treatments. For more information, visit www.autism-society.org.
- **Kit for New Parents.** This free resource, a \$75 value, includes educational DVDs, guide books and brochures with parenting information, advice and useful tips including developmental milestones from ages 0 to 5, and warning signs that your child might need to be tested. To order a *Kit*, call 1-800-KIDS-025 or contact (925) 755-4200 locally.
- **Local Programs.** The CARE Parent Network provides one-on-one and group support for parents who have children with autism, and helps parents find the services they need to support their child. Call (800) 281-3023 for more information.

For more information on parenting resources or other First 5 Contra Costa programs, please call (925) 771-7300 or visit www.firstfivecc.org.