

Learning the Signs of Autism and the Importance of Acting Early

Jacob is 24-months-old and is developing as expected. He progressed from simple language skills like saying “Oh-oh” to putting two words together such as “Eat cookie.” He enjoys make-believe play like pretending to talk to



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Grandma on the telephone.

Tyler, who is also 24-months-old, is still not using his words to express what he needs or wants. He only plays with one toy (his favorite toy) and sings one song over and over again. He also doesn't make eye contact and doesn't seem to have any interest in playing with the other children.

Jacob and Tyler are twins. Their mom is worried that Tyler is not meeting his developmental milestones. She decides to talk with her child's doctor at his well-child check-up. Her doctor has her fill out a general developmental screening questionnaire, followed by an autism-specific screening questionnaire.

Doctors and nurses use developmental screening tools to tell if children are learning basic skills when they should or if they are late in learning. A doctor may ask parents questions or talk and play with the child during an exam to see how he or she plays, learns, speaks, and acts. The general development of all children should be screened at 9, 12, 18, 24 and/or 30 months. In addition, all children should be screened for Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) at 18 and 24 months.

After the appropriate screenings, Tyler was immediately referred to his local early intervention program for further assessment and intervention. Tyler saw specialists who diagnosed him with ASD.

Tyler's parents played a critical role—they paid attention to the development of both children. It is important that Tyler's parents noticed Tyler wasn't meeting all his developmental milestones because early intervention is a key component in making sure a child reaches his full potential. But, it is just as important that his parents noticed that Jacob was meeting all of his developmental milestones, so they can track his development properly and make sure no delays occur later.

Just like we have height and weight milestones for children, we also have developmental milestones that parents should watch for. Watching for these milestones can help determine if a child has a developmental delay such as an ASD.

To raise awareness about developmental milestones and the importance of identifying them and getting help early, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offers free information and tools for parents, health care professionals, and early educators through its “Learn the Signs. Act Early.” campaign (www.cdc.gov/actearly). Research has shown that early intervention is key to helping a child reach his or her full potential. That's why CDC wants all parents to “learn the signs” and “act early,” even if a problem is only suspected.

It is important to remember that missing any individual milestone by itself—for example, how a child manages transitions, engages in meaningful interactions with adults, or uses her imagination—can be typical. However, a pattern of unusual behaviors and constant use of certain behaviors over time or problems with communication or social skills are cause for concern.

A recent study showed that parents noticed delays in children with an ASD prior to age 3, but the average age of diagnosis is not until 5 years. Parents know their children best. Parents should talk to their child's doctor or nurse if they have concerns about how their child is developing.

If a parent or the doctor has a concern, the child may be referred to a developmental specialist, such as a developmental pediatrician or other specialist, and to the local early intervention agency (for children under 3) or public school (for children 3 and older) for a developmental assessment.

To find out who to speak to in your area, contact the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (www.nichcy.org/states.htm). In addition, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has links to information for families at www.cdc.gov/actearly. Remember, if there is a problem, it is very important to get a child help as soon as possible.

To learn more about CDC's “Learn the Signs. Act Early.” campaign, including how to order a free resource kit to help you track your child's development and what to do if you have concerns, visit the campaign website at www.cdc.gov/actearly.