

**Words are not enough:
Social Communication and Early Signs of Autism Spectrum Disorders**

Pam Rollins
Associate Professor
Callier Center for Communication Disorders
The University of Texas at Dallas

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are a group of heterogeneous neurodevelopment disorders which include Autism (AD), Asperger's Disorder (AS) and Pervasive Developmental Disorders not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS)

- Is known as a spectrum because it is difficult to reliably differentiate among the various disorders
- Core features include deficits in social communication and restricted repertoire of interests and activity
- Current prevalence estimates from the center for disease control (CDC) are 1 in 100 children

Reasons for increase in prevalence

- Change in diagnostic criteria; diagnostic substitution; unidentified environmental, genetic and epigenetic factors; and increased awareness

Learn the signs act early

- Early identification is important because it leads to early diagnosis and opens up the appropriate amount and type of services
- Early intervention leads to better outcomes

Reliable diagnosis can be made by 18-24 months

- Social communication impairment is prominent
- Restrictive repertoire of activities may not yet be evident

Early Social Development: Three important transitions

2 months transition: Sharing emotions

- Face-to-Face (dyadic) interaction
- Reciprocal exchanges of emotions
- Rhythmic, balanced, turn-taking sequences
- Mutual gazing
- Responds to vocalization & facial expressions

6-9 month transition: Pursuing goals

- Involve child, adult and an object/event towards which they both direct their actions
- Child is goal directed
 - Selective attention to goal
 - Persist until goal is met
 - Happy when goal is met
- Child understand other's have goals

- Helps to predict what comes next

12 month transition: Sharing attention and intention

- Shares attention with another person
- Child understands they are doing something together
- Can coordinate their plans and help each other

(9-12 months) Infant begin to communicate

- Social Routines → Wave bye-bye, peek-a-boo
- Share Attention → Nonverbal: shows object; verbal: makes comments
- Direct Attention → Nonverbal: point, verbal: says “look”
- Behavior Regulation → Nonverbal: requests with an outstretched hand, protest with crying; verbal: requests by labeling item, protest says “no”

Cognitive underpinnings of Behavior Regulations (i.e., request & protests) is “*pursuing goals*”

- Requests and protests are not true social communication, they do not require the child to share information with another
- Child can develop words
- BUT WORDS ARE NOT ENOUGH

Cognitive underpinnings of sharing & directing attention (i.e., showing & pointing) is “*shared intention*”

- Constitutes true social communication
- Leads to rule governed language

Early Indicators of ASD: Be Concerned if-

- No warm, joyful engagement by 5 months
- No two-way, back-&-forth gesturing, smiles or social-emotional reciprocity by 9 months
- By 12 months
 - Limited use of communicative gestures (words)
 - Showing
 - Waving
 - Pointing
 - Sharing Attention
- Limited use of back and forth interactions (peek-a-boo)
- Does not follow adults gaze or point
- Does not respond to name
- ANY loss of ANY language or babbling or social skills

If you are concerned contact:

- Your doctor or nurse and ask for a referral to a developmental pediatrician or other specialist
- Your local early intervention agency (for children under 3)
 - In Texas <http://www.dars.state.tx.us/ecis/publications/Referral.pdf>
- Your local public school (if 3 and older)
- The *Center for Children and Family’s Infant Development Program* <http://infantdp.utdallas.edu/>
 - Offers developmental screenings for infants and toddlers up to 30 months.
 - Make sure you mention that you are concerned about ASD.
 - Contact Emily Touchstone at 972-883-4827 etouchstone@utdallas.edu
- *The Chrystal Charity Ball Autism Project’s Coordinated Referral Services*
 - A centralized phone number for direct access coordinated autism related services, provides educational information, referral information, and access to on-line and community resources.
 - Call 214-456-7700
- The Callier Center for Communicative Disorders <http://www.utdallas.edu/calliercenter/clinic/autism/>
 - Provides individual, group and classroom-based social communication therapy and parent training by certified speech/language pathologists.
 - Call the Dallas location at 214-905-3000
 - Call the Richardson location at 972-883-3630
- The ACT Early website <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/index.html>