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

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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 my 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: Pursing 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)
- Your local public school (if 3 and older)
- The Center for Children and Family’s Infant Development Program [http://infantdp.utdallas.edu/](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
  - 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