



The Earliest Sign of Autism

New Evidence from Emory University



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This past November, Warren Jones, PhD, director of research at the Marcus Autism Center and Emory University published evidence of what is likely the earliest sign of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) described in the scientific literature.¹ While the diagnosis of ASD usually occurs after two-years of age, retrospective studies of family movies have demonstrated that children later diagnosed with ASD demonstrate significant deviations in development (such as **eye contact, responding to name, pointing, and showing**) by 12 months of age.^{2,3} The current study found that an outward sign of ASD may become evident as early as two to six months of age.

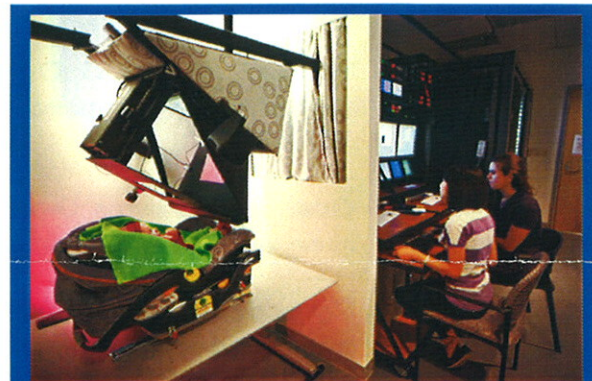


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Jones and Ami followed 110 children from birth to three years of age. Roughly half of the children had an older sibling diagnosed with ASD, and the other half had no first, second, or third degree relatives with ASD.

Between two and 24 months of age, at ten intervals, researchers tracked the eye movements of children while showing them videos of their caregivers. Researchers measured the amount of time children spent focusing on eyes, mouths, and bodies versus non-human spaces in the videos. Interestingly, all children started life with relatively normal attention to the eyes of others. However, **among children later diagnosed with ASD, attention to eyes began waning between ages two and six months, and it continued to decline throughout the 24-month observation period of the study.** The current study gives further credence to the idea that parents and childcare professionals can be observant of delayed development in social skills while children are very young.

Early identification of and intervention for ASD results in improved outcomes in cognition, language, and educational achievement.⁴⁻⁶ Early intervention also produces significant cost savings for families and society.^{7,8} The American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended that screening for developmental disorders be conducted at least three times before the age of 3, even in the absence of parental or practitioner concern.⁹ When a child demonstrates behaviors or characteristics suggestive of autism, they will usually benefit from both a referral to a psychologist to determine whether or not the child meets criteria for autism and simultaneous referrals for speech and occupational therapy evaluations. Occupational and speech therapy are essential components of an effective intervention program for most children with ASD. **When developmental delay is suspected, children can benefit from pediatric OT and ST even prior to an official ASD diagnosis.**

Integrating Occupational and Speech Therapy

ASD is one of the many pediatric challenges that benefits from the combined expertise of occupational and speech therapy. For many types of challenges, Emerge provides a more comprehensive pediatric therapy approach by integrating services from both occupational therapists and speech therapists.

**Please tell parents about Emerge – A Child's Place
Believing in a Child's Potential to Flourish**



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