

FSU researcher wins \$2.4M in grants to pursue early detection of autism

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A Florida State University College of Medicine researcher has been awarded two separate grants from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) totaling \$2.4 million to continue her work in detecting autism in children as young as 18 months.

Amy Wetherby is director of the Autism Institute in the College of Medicine. For a decade her FIRST WORDS® Project has screened children to identify early red flags of various autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Among those red flags are a child's reluctance to look at the face or eyes of others; a delay in the use of gestures, sounds and words; a tendency not to share excitement or interests; and a fixation on certain objects.

The younger the child, the more subtle the red flags but the greater the chances of working with the family to lessen the negative effects. People with autism can have many strengths, Wetherby said, citing Albert Einstein as a prime example. For some people, however, autism is a severe disability.

"The symptoms themselves can actually impair learning," Wetherby said. "Just like cancer, the earlier we can catch it, the far better the outcomes."

In the United States, she said, most children who have autism are usually not identified until somewhere between ages 3 and 5. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends screening children between ages 18 and 24 months. The problem, Wetherby said, is that there is no well-validated, ASD-specific screener for that age group for use in pediatric settings.

A \$1.9 million, two-year grant from the NIH's Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development will fund research that aims to develop such a screener. Wetherby's collaborators are Eva Petkova at the New York University Child Study Center and Catherine Lord at the University of Michigan Autism and Communication Disorders Center.

A total of 600 children will participate. The researchers will study several different screening and evaluation measures that they developed. Some are designed to help parents detect red flags of ASD. Other are designed to help pediatricians and other professionals.

"By improving and streamlining early screening and diagnosis of ASD in 18- to 24-month-old children, the findings of this study will have important implications for earlier access to intervention," the grant proposal stated.

Sometimes a screening tool that works well in one culture does not work as well in another. Wetherby's two-year grant from the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, which totals more than \$465,000, will fund research that may lead to culturally sensitive screening and evaluation methods.

Children of African-American and Latino families in the United States, she said, are usually not diagnosed with autism until they're 4 to 6 years old, a full year later than other children.

"We're trying to address that disparity by studying cultural differences in the early signs of autism," Wetherby said.

Researchers will compare children of Latino immigrants in Immokalee, Fla., with children from the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa and children from Leon County, Fla. The College of Medicine has a health education site in Immokalee, and a former doctoral student of Wetherby's, Nola Chambers, lives in South Africa. Richard Grinker, an anthropologist from George Washington University, is also a collaborator.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided the funding for the NIH grants. None of this stimulus money will be spent in Africa, Wetherby said, but in the United States it will pay for researchers and will pay families \$50 for participating in assessments. Wetherby thinks it's a good investment.

"Now we have this big chunk of money that is going to help us accelerate our findings," she said, "which is really the idea of the stimulus money -- to use it to accelerate science."

Source: Florida State University