



The earlier you can detect autism...

Red flags are not always fire-engine red. They also can be subtle.

Watch an 18-month-old toddler for hints of autism. It's not easy with one so young, but it's possible.

You need to know what to look for. With two new grants from the National Institutes of Health, Amy Wetherby is continuing the work she has done for 27 years: trying to make those red flags more visible to more people – including parents – earlier in the child's life.

"Sometimes the parents don't know, when they see certain behavior at home, that it's anything to be worried about," Wetherby said. "Or the child might show it at home and not when they come in to the doctor.

"If we could figure out which activities are really going to highlight the red flags, then the parents could eventually record it on their iPhone, and their doctor or other professional could look at the clip and say, 'You need to have a diagnostic evaluation.'"

Wetherby, a professor in the College of Medicine and director of the Autism Institute at Florida State University, keeps chipping away at ASD (autism spectrum disorder) because catching it early makes a difference.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends all children be screened for signs of autism at age 18-24 months. But most often in the U.S. autism is not detected until 3-5 years. With minorities, it's 4-6 years.

A \$1.9 million, two-year grant from the NIH's Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development is funding Wetherby research aiming to develop a well-validated, ASD-specific screener for children 18-24 months old in pediatric settings. Her two-year, \$465,000 grant from the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders is funding research that may lead to culturally sensitive screening and evaluation methods. It will involve children as far away as South Africa.

"The complication with autism," Wetherby said, "is that it can actually lead to intellectual disabilities – what used to be called mental retardation.

"Let's say an infant is not looking at faces enough, not drawn to people, not listening to the parents modeling the language. If they keep doing that, they're going to miss out on learning at a time when the brain's potential to absorb information and learn is at its maximum. If they make it to kindergarten that way, they're going to have a severe disability."

That's why Wetherby and her team won't give up.



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