TODAY

BABIES

Early signs of autism for infants and toddlers

This free resource could change the game when it comes to ASD diagnosis.

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By Joe Dziemianowicz

Does my baby have autism? As a parent, you don't even want to imagine your child facing that challenge. But when it comes to autism spectrum disorder (ASD), which impairs how children communicate and relate to others, catching it ASAP makes a huge difference.

"Like other health conditions, early detection of autism is critical to get started earlier in intervention," said Amy Wetherby, Ph.D., director of Florida State University College of Medicine's Autism Institute, which just launched Baby Navigator. This free week-old online resource is designed to be a game-changer for early ASD identification and treatment. It arrives right on time for World Autism Awareness Day on April 2.

What age do signs of autism appear?

"There are no medical or blood tests to diagnose autism," Wetherby told TODAY Parents, "so early detection is based on noticing behavioral symptoms." CDC figures show that 1 of 59 children are diagnosed with ASD. And although the median age for diagnosis is 4-5 years, "a trained diagnostician can detect autism by 18-24 months in most children."

Baby Navigator helps moms and dads read the signs with science-based, easy-to-use information. Parents can access photo illustrations, video clips, developmental milestones, and a screening tool for children 9-18 months. That's a significant window because ASD signs can appear that soon but often fly under the radar. Undetected, ASD has a cascading effect on brain development.

Baseball organization gives kids with special needs a league of their own

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"The early signs of autism are easy to miss as they unfold from 9 to 18 months, which is when the learning environment has the greatest impact because brain plasticity is greater at younger ages," said Wetherby.

What are the symptoms and early signs of autism?

There are actually many. If it's hard to get your baby to look at you or to respond to their name, those could be red flags. Baby Navigator lists 16 Signs of Autism by 16 Months to help parents take the guesswork out of what they're seeing and experiencing.

One or two signs isn't cause for worry, experts reassure. If a baby shows four, Wetherby suggests that moms and dads have their child screened. If a child shows eight or more of these early signs, FSU experts recommend that families ask for a referral for a diagnostic evaluation. "If families have questions, they can reach us at support@babynavigator.com. We are here to help," said Wetherby.

Laura Iyampillai, a freelance photographer and mother of four ages 1 to 17 in West Palm Beach, knows that first-hand. Her daughter Elsa, now 4 1/2, “wasn’t like her other kids from the beginning. She was off on her own little planet,” she told TODAY. “She didn’t communicate. She was very prone to meltdowns. I felt like I was racing against time to get her help.”

This 26-year-old baseball player with autism is an inspiration on the field

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When Elsa was 1 1/2, mom reached out to Wetherby, whom she learned of through a speech-pathologist friend. Elsa was screened at 18 months and became part of FSU research and long-distance video coaching. “They started the intervention right away,” said Iyampillai. “By her second birthday she was a completely new child.”

Wetherby regards “Rain Man” and “The Good Doctor” as “extreme examples” of autism served up by pop culture. She acknowledged there’s fear and stigma around the ASD label, but that’s slowly fading. “Sesame Street” has a character with ASD, while Amy Schumer wove her husband’s ASD into her new comedy routine.

Amy Schumer explains why she opened up about husband's autism diagnosis

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Waiting to see if things improve on their own isn’t optimal. “The wait-and-see approach is a bad choice,” Renee Holland, assistant director of early intervention services research at the Autism Institute, told TODAY. “We prefer ‘let’s get started.’”

“Our message,” said Wetherby, “is that the earlier parents catch this, the better the outcome will be.”