

PRESS RELEASE

Florida State University, University of Michigan to Share \$7 Million Grant to Study Autism Early Intervention

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By Doug Carlson

June 2008 TALLAHASSEE, Fla. -- Researchers know that early intervention is the key to better outcomes for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), but the effectiveness of intervention with very young toddlers is not yet known. With a \$7 million grant from the National Institutes of Mental Health, Florida State University and University of Michigan researchers aim to find out how effective early intervention is for children diagnosed with ASD by the time they are 18 months old. The study is one of the largest of its kind and one of the first to explore intervention in children that young. Amy Wetherby, professor of clinical sciences and director of the FSU Autism Institute in the College of Medicine, is principal investigator on the NIMH grant along with UM Professor Catherine Lord. "A preliminary study at FSU demonstrated the feasibility and promising results of this early intervention," Wetherby said. "With the new funding from NIMH, we will be able to train researchers at the University of Michigan on early intervention and conduct a large-scale study to examine the impact on toddlers with ASD and their families. The findings will underscore the importance of early detection of ASD leading to early intervention." Wetherby and Lord, the director of UM's Autism and Communications Disorders Center, will recruit 100 toddlers younger than 18 months old who have been diagnosed with ASD. Previous research has shown that children 3 to 5 years old with ASD have the best outcomes if they are actively engaged in intervention at least 25 hours a week. Because children with ASD typically are not diagnosed prior to age 3, research is not available on the effectiveness of earlier intervention. "The future for children with ASD is changing every day as we create more services to support their strengths and address or prevent difficulties," Lord said. "As we develop ways of identifying ASD in younger and younger children, we must develop treatment methods and family supports that are appropriate for toddlers. This is the purpose of this study." The researchers expect that the study will provide important evidence of parent-implemented intervention for toddlers and will substantiate that autism screening for toddlers is crucial for families to access early intervention. Symptoms of ASD at 18 months old include a lack of appropriate gaze; lack of using eye gaze with sounds, gestures and facial expression; lack of sharing interest or enjoyment; lack of response to name; lack of warm, joyful expressions; lack of showing or pointing gestures to get others to notice objects or things of interest; unusual melody of speech or babbling; and repetitive movements with objects or with the body. No single red flag indicates that a child has ASD, and a child with ASD may not show all of these characteristics, according to Wetherby and Lord. However, children who show several should be screened for possible ASD. Parents of 16- to 20-month-old children suspected of having ASD who are interested in participating in the study

should call the FSU FIRST WORDS Project at (850) 488-5780 or the UM Autism and Communication Disorders Center at (743) 936-8600.