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Early intervention and autism

OUR VIEW

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By reaching out to parents years before their children start kindergarten, the Volusia County school system is giving children with autism a better shot at overcoming the disorder.

The school system is the first in the country to partner with the Florida State University/College of Medicine's Autism Institute in offering access to Autism Navigator, a program that helps educators and parents identify hallmarks of autism spectrum disorders in very young children.

Autism spectrum disorders remain frustrating and mysterious to experts and parents alike. Is the disease over-diagnosed, or are many cases still being missed? Is there some missing link to environmental factors? Are too many conditions collected under the general heading of "autism?" Researchers believe they've begun to answer many of these questions, finding links to genetics and environmental factors such as infections, pregnancy complications and pollution. Other suspected links, such as vaccines or parenting styles, have been fairly thoroughly debunked.

But there is little doubt that autism presents a significant challenge to families and educators, with one in every 68 children diagnosed with some form of autism-spectrum disorder. The hallmarks of autism — social impairments, cognitive problems and communication difficulties — are frustrating and often heartbreaking. And the effects are widespread, crossing all economic, social and racial boundaries. Gender is the only imbalance: Boys are 4-5 times as likely to manifest symptoms.

Society also bears a burden: The United States spends more than \$260 billion a year meeting the needs of children and adults with autism, including treatment and disability costs.

There's also little dispute that identifying potential problems early can be the key to successful lives for children diagnosed with autism disorders. Early intervention often leads to significant improvements in a child's ability to communicate, interact socially and lead happy, productive lives. The cost of lifetime care can be cut by two-thirds with early intervention, according to the Autism Society of the United States.

That's what makes the Autism Navigator program so potentially valuable.

Volusia County's program includes several components, including modules for parents, health care providers and school district employees. Parents can access support through a website (whyautismnavigator.com) that includes videos of children interacting normally, shown side-by-side with videos of children with autism spectrum disorders — an invaluable tool that health care providers can also use in counseling parents, says Nancy Redmond, the district's director of exceptional student education and student services.

Once a child is diagnosed, school staff can provide support for parents, who often find that something as simple as a trip to the grocery store becomes impossible for a child suffering from sensory overload. Working with FSU, Volusia schools also have

access to no-cost training and technical assistance, and as part of a long-term research project, FSU has even been able to cover a portion of the salaries of some employees engaged in helping students with autism disorders.

“We help families learn strategies to support their children themselves, since they are ultimately the lifelong teacher for their child,” Redmond says. “This is one of the most phenomenal things I’ve ever experienced.”

The program could be a lifeline for parents who still report having to struggle to find the resources their children need — and provide hope for families and children. That’s something to be proud of.

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