

Signs of Autism in Toddlers and Infants

http://www.myomancy.com/2006/07/signs_of_autism

With autism, early detection and treatment is critical but what should parents be on the look out for?

The average age for an autism diagnosis is between three and four years old. Yet many parents first become concerned around 18 months old. This age coincides with some vaccinations and has caused many parents to blame the vaccinations for autism. However research over the last few years has indicated that many autistic children show signs of autism in their first year.

So what symptoms of autism should you look for in infants and toddlers?

Firstly, is the child hitting all the normal milestones of development? There is an excellent guide from the Centre of Disease Control (see Great Links) that gives all these milestones from birth to five years. Your doctor or health professional will be able to give you more information. The difficulty in detecting autism is that some children do develop slower than other so being a few weeks late reaching one particular milestone is nothing to worry about. When a child is late over a range of these milestones then seek advice.

Research in the last few years has highlighted other symptoms of autism to watch for in early development. Much of this work has been done by using home videos taken sometime before the child is diagnosed. Often these are from the baby's first birthday because it's an occasion many parents video. The movement and behavior of the child is analyzed and compared to similar videos of children who are not autistic.

What these videos reveal is that even at one year old, autistic children have different patterns of behavior. They lack or rarely use the 'social gaze', the process of looking at someone when giving them attention. 'Joint Attention', when parent and child are both giving their attention to the same object or person, is also rarer. These early signs forewarn of the two of most notable symptoms of autism, a lack of empathy for others and a tendency to withdraw into a world of their own.

One of the distinctive symptoms of full blown autism is the child's patterns of movement. Clumsiness, violent outbursts and repetitive movements are all common in autism. So researchers looked at how the infant moved to see if any signs of later problems can be detected.

One study noted that the autistic child still showed signs of retained primitive reflexes. These reflexes are present at birth and help the infant brain learn to move their body. For example, the grasp reflex is what triggers the curling of a baby's fingers around an object placed in its palm. Other reflexes help the baby to roll over and learn to crawl. During normal development these reflexes drop away as the infant grows but in some children

they are retained. This makes it harder for the infant or child to control their body because moving one limb may reflexively make another move. This makes the child appear uncoordinated or clumsy.

There is growing evidence that it is possible to spot autism in infants. It may not be possible to formally diagnose autism at this stage but if the signs are there at infancy it best to assume the worse and begin treatment. Early intervention can make a significant difference to a later development.