Autism is much more common than originally thought. And the numbers are increasing. The CDC recently found that one in 150 8-year-old children in several areas of the United States have some form of autism.

Several decades ago, if a child was diagnosed with autism, there was little hope for leading anything close to a "normal" life. Only the most severe and obvious cases, usually with intellectual disability, were diagnosed, and the prognosis was very poor.

In fact, many parents were encouraged by professionals at the time to place their child with autism into institutional care to spare the family the stress and heartache of attempting to raise the child.

Due to a shift in the "spectrum" view of autism spectrum disorders, we now are better able to identify and assist those who have less severe forms of the disorder. These people were most...
Autism spectrum disorders can often be detected as early as 18 months. While all children should be watched to make sure they are reaching developmental milestones on time, children in high-risk groups -- such as children who have a parent or brother or sister with an ASD -- should be watched extra closely. A child with any of the warning signs of ASDs should be checked by a health care professional.

**Warning signs**

Children and adults with an autism spectrum disorder might:

- Not play "pretend" games (pretend to "feed" a doll).
- Not point at objects to show interest (point at an airplane flying over).
- Not look at objects when another person points at them.
- Have trouble relating to others or not have an interest in other people at all.
- Avoid eye contact and want to be alone.
- Have trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings.
- Prefer not to be held or cuddled or might cuddle only when they want to.
- Appear to be unaware when other people talk to them but respond to other sounds.
- Be very interested in people, but not know how to talk to, play with, or relate to them.
- Repeat or echo words or phrases said to them, or repeat words or phrases in place of normal language (echolalia).
- Have trouble expressing their needs using typical words or motions.
- Repeat actions over and over again.
- Have trouble adapting to changes in routine.
- Have unusual reactions to the way things smell, taste, look, feel, or sound.
- Lose skills they once had (for instance, stop saying words they were once using).
Talk to your child's doctor or nurse if your child loses skills at any age.

**Benefits of early intervention**

Research shows that early intervention can greatly improve a child's development. By providing the child with autism-appropriate services and supports at appropriate developmental levels, there can be significant gains in most life skills. Acting early can make a real difference.

**Don't give up**

Treatment does seem to help the child with autism reach his or her full potential, so parents and other caregivers should keep plugging away although at times it seems discouraging. The most symptomatic time is usually about age 4 or 5, and symptoms often improve after that, especially with treatment. Although not all such children will become completely normal, there is enough hope that it is important to take the long view and work toward goals.

If you think your child may have an ASD, ask your child's doctor for a referral to see a developmental pediatrician or other specialist. You can also call your local early intervention agency (for children under 3) or public school (for children 3 and older). To find out who to speak to in your area, check with the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities.

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