

## **Screening/Early Detection**

Many times families and/or educational professionals will observe certain characteristics of a child and be unaware that these behaviors are early signs or Red Flags of autism. In other cases, these behaviors may go along with the developmental or neurological disorder the child suffers from but have nothing to do with autism. For children who exhibit possible at-risk behaviors, a screening for autism is necessary. Several tools exist for this purpose. In order to effectively complete a screening, parents and professionals must be familiar with the Red Flags that can indicate an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

These include:

### **Impairment in Social Interaction:**

- Lack of appropriate eye gaze
- Lack of warm, joyful expressions
- Lack of sharing interest or enjoyment
- Lack of response to name

### **Impairment in Communication:**

- Lack of showing gestures
- Lack of coordination of nonverbal communication
- Unusual prosody (little variation in pitch, odd intonation, irregular rhythm, unusual voice quality)

### **Repetitive Behaviors & Restricted Interests:**

- Repetitive movements with objects
- Repetitive movements or posturing of body, arms, hands, or fingers

Wetherby, A., Woods, J., Allen, L., Cleary, J., Dickinson, H., & Lord, C. (2004). Early indicators of autism spectrum disorders in the second year of life. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 34, 473-493. Based on research at the [Florida State University FIRST WORDS® Project](#).

ASDs begin before the age of 3 and last throughout a person's life, although symptoms may improve over time. Some children with an ASD show hints of future problems within the first few months of life. In others, symptoms might not show up until 24 months or later. Some children with an ASD seem to develop normally until around 18 to 24 months of age and then they stop gaining new skills, or they lose the skills they once had.

A person with an ASD might:

- Not respond to their name by 12 months
- Not point at objects to show interest (point at an airplane flying over) by 14 months
- Not play "pretend" games (pretend to "feed" a doll) by 18 months
- Avoid eye contact and want to be alone
- Have trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings
- Have delayed speech and language skills
- Repeat words or phrases over and over (echolalia)
- Give unrelated answers to questions

- Get upset by minor changes
- Have obsessive interests
- Flap their hands, rock their body, or spin in circles
- Have unusual reactions to the way things sound, smell, taste, look, or feel

(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/facts.html>)

Once an understanding of the Red Flags exists, then a screening should take place. Many tools exist for this purpose but one of the easiest and most effective is the MCHAT. Depending on the screening score of the MCHAT, the family/team can make a determination for the need for an evaluation.