

Getting the Point:

Investigating Key Behavioural Markers for Autism

EARLY DIAGNOSIS CAN REDUCE STRESS AND UNCERTAINTY AND GIVES FAMILIES THAT ALL-IMPORTANT EARLY ACCESS TO EFFECTIVE SERVICES AND SUPPORTS.

by Helen Penn



Learning that a child has autism is a difficult process for most families.

EVEN THOUGH AUTISM can be reliably diagnosed by the age of 2, most children are not diagnosed until they are 3 or 4 or older. Children at risk for autism may be seen by many professionals – doctors and preschool teachers – before receiving a diagnosis. It is important for these professionals to learn about key behavioural markers associated with autism so that children can be referred for diagnostic assessments as early as possible. As a doctoral student funded by Autism Ontario, I was part of a research team investigating key behavioural markers for autism in preschool children with cognitive delays.

We assessed children with autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) using a short screening measure called the Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (CHAT) – 14 yes/no questions taking about 15 minutes to complete. Nine questions are scored by interviewing parents and five are scored by observing the child. Children are placed in either high risk or medium risk categories based on their scores on three key items: pretend play, protodeclarative pointing and gaze monitoring (see box).

Babies usually begin to show signs of pretend play, protodeclarative pointing and gaze monitoring between the ages of 9 and 14 months. However, children with

autism have difficulty with these behaviours. In addition, the CHAT measures other behaviours that might be impaired in children with autism, such as taking an interest in other children, making eye contact, showing objects to others, and

It is important that professionals do not rule out a possible ASD diagnosis when children do make eye contact or show interest in social games, as these behaviours appear to be present to some degree in many children on the spectrum.

taking part in social games such as peek-a-boo and hide and seek.

The CHAT was designed for use at 18 months, and researchers have already examined its utility for that age group. However, no previous research has looked at the suitability of the CHAT for older preschoolers. We were interested in learning whether preschool children with autism and cognitive delays would meet high risk and medium risk criteria on the CHAT. In addition, we wanted to find out whether there were specific items on the CHAT that were frequently failed by children with autism or PDD-NOS. This would help us to know more about key behavioural markers for Au-



