



EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH CONNECTION

MOVING LIVES FORWARD

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder, it is characterized by severe impairments in social interaction and communication and by the presence of restrictive and repetitive behaviors. Accurate and early identification of ASD is critical as is early intervention.

Early warning signs for ASD in young children:

Challenges for young children with ASD usually present early in life and the diagnosis can usually be made before a child turns three. Research has shown that families often have worries about their child's development prior to age 12 months, including concerns with vision and hearing. While some of these early red flags are specific to ASD, these red flags can also be areas of difficulty experienced by children with general developmental delays and warrant need for further evaluation.

Research in US has shown that based upon parent report, at 12 months of age the earliest signs of risk for ASD. These include:

- Child does not make good eye contact.
- Child does not direct their smiles toward the adults
- Child does not direct their vocalizations toward the adult.

The clearest signs of risk for ASD at 24 months include:

- Increases in repetitive behaviors and difficulties with imitation
- Child not attending to the adult's voice, not spontaneously directing other's attention, or not understanding words out of context).
- Preference for geometric patterns
- A great resource for identifying developmental differences between children with ASD and their typically developing peers, Go to this link to the Autism Navigator located on the Autism Speaks website at <http://autismnavigator.com/>

As a parent, you've probably spent a lot of time thinking about your child's future. Even more so if they have an ASD diagnosis. Apart from the medical care and therapies that you may line up to help your son or daughter, there are simple, everyday things that make a difference.

1. Focus on the positive. Just like anyone else, children with autism spectrum disorder often respond well to positive reinforcement. That means when you praise them for the behaviors they're doing well, it will make them (and you) feel good.

Be specific, so that they know exactly what you liked about their behavior. Find ways to reward them, either with extra playtime or a small prize like a sticker.

Also, as you would with anyone -- on the spectrum or not -- prize your child for who they are. As a parent, loving your child for who they are is key.

2. Stay consistent and on schedule. People on the spectrum like routines. Make sure they get consistent guidance and interaction, so they can practice what they learn from therapy.

This can make learning new skills and behaviors easier, and help them apply their knowledge in different situations. Talk to their teachers and therapists and try to align on a consistent set of techniques and methods of interaction so you can bring what they're learning home.

3. Put play on the schedule. Finding activities that seem like pure fun, and not more education or therapy, may help your child open up and connect with you.

Cheryl's Corner of Caring

"Definitions have evolved over time, but fundamentally resilience is understood as referring to positive adaptation, or the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity."

(Helen Herman, 2011)

4. Give it time. You'll likely try a lot of different techniques, treatments, and approaches as you figure out what's best for your child. Stay positive and try not to get discouraged if they don't respond well to a particular method.

5. Take your child along for everyday activities. If your child's behavior is unpredictable, you may feel like it's easier not to expose them to certain situations. But when you take them on everyday errand like grocery shopping or a post office run, it may help them get them used to the world around them.

6. Get support. Whether online or face-to-face, support from other families, professionals, and friends can be a big help. Create a village of friends and family who understand your child's diagnosis. Friendships may be difficult, and your child will need support in maintaining those friendships. Support groups can be a good way to share advice and information and to meet other parents dealing with similar challenges. Individual, marital, or family counseling can be helpful, too. Think about what might make your life a little easier, and ask for help.

7. Look into respite care. This is when another caregiver looks after your child for a period of time to give you a short break. You'll need it, especially if your child has intense needs due to ASD. This can give you a chance to do things that restore your own health and that you enjoy, so that you come back home ready to help.

Early intervention is key. If you think your child may have some characteristics of ASD please contact your early childhood specialist in your area. We would be more than happy to help connect you to the appropriate resources needed to figure out what could be going on. It is recommended to bring your concerns to your pediatrician as soon as possible and if they are in school chat with their teacher to see if they have noticed the same characteristics as you. Children with ASD are beautifully unique, and have so much to offer this world. Although it may be hard to come to terms that your child has or may have ASD there are so many supports out there to help you and your child. Your pediatrician and local early childhood specialist is a great place to start!

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For additional support during
the COVID-19 Pandemic you
can call Centennial's
**COMMUNITY
SUPPORT LINE**

You can do this by calling your
nearest Centennial office:

Akron - 970.345.2254
Burlington - 719.346.8183
Cheyenne Wells - 719.346.8183
Elizabeth - 303.646.4519
Fort Morgan - 970.867.4924
Holyoke - 970.854.2114
Julesburg - 970.474.3769
Limon - 719.775.2313
Sterling - 970.522.4392
Wray - 970.332.3133
Yuma - 970.848.5412

Contact your local Centennial Mental Health Center for assistance with any Early Childhood need.

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