



# Research Brief

A SUMMARY OF A PUBLISHED RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## Toddlers with Autism: Developmental Perspectives

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A review of recent research on the early symptoms of autism in children (younger than three years of age) examines the symptoms, relationships among symptoms, and screening tools available to help in early diagnosis.

### Affective Development

Typically developing babies start using their faces to express themselves by the time that they are 2-3 months old. Babies usually display a wide variety of facial expressions and by 6 months can respond to a smile by smiling back (e.g., a social smile). However, babies with autism tend to show fewer facial expressions and parents often describe their babies as "having an expressionless face." Babies later diagnosed with autism lack responsive smiling, are less likely to direct expressions toward others, and may fail to show concern for others in distress.

### Sensory Processing

Babies and children with autism may react to stimulation in two different ways: being hypersensitive (oversensitive) or hyposensitive (undersensitive) to sensory stimuli. When a child is hypersensitive to stimuli the senses become overloaded (e.g., noises are too loud, tastes are too strong, textures are too rough). When a child is hyposensitive to stimuli you may see the child have difficulty orienting to stimuli (e.g., no reaction to noises or to visual stimulation near the child, but seeks lots of physical stimulation like squeezes or rough and tumble play.)

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This research brief is based on the article *Toddlers with autism: Developmental perspectives*, by Watson, L. R., Baranek, G. T., & DiLavore, P. C. (2003) published in the journal *Infants and Young Children*, 16(3), 201-214.

## Imitation, Communication, & Play

Babies and young children with autism have a much harder time learning to imitate what they see. They are less likely to spontaneously imitate object play and verbal/nonverbal language. This may mean the child won't repeat words or sounds that you say, or imitate you combing a doll's hair or building a tower with blocks. Children with autism are likely to have delayed language development. They can have difficulty comprehending language and as babies they are less likely to respond reliably to their name when it is called. Young children are less likely to communicate verbally; they are more likely to request an action by manipulation of a parent's hand (e.g., may put the parent's hand on a refrigerator door when the child is hungry and wants food). Along with this, children with autism demonstrate fewer instances of social communicative intent (e.g., vocal turn-taking, showing off). They are less likely to engage in vocal imitation and don't generally use gestures (e.g., pointing, nodding head, shaking head, clapping, shrugging shoulders) to communicate. Young children with autism tend to use communication to request an object or action, rather than as a means of social communication (e.g., they tend not to engage in "small talk" or conversation unless it is about a topic of interest to them).

Children with autism are less likely to display the skills necessary to engage in play with peers (e.g., building a block tower with a friend, looking at a book with a peer, or asking a peer to play with him/her). They tend not to share attention with other chil-

dren (e.g., they do not coordinate eye gaze and initiate play with others). If they do engage in play, it tends to be further away from peers. Object play tends to consist of object mouthing, more instances of repeating the same action on an object, and less functional (not using toys for their intended function) play with toys (e.g., feeding a doll with a spoon). Instead of using the spoon to feed the doll, the child with autism may use the spoon to tap the table.

## Motor Features and Stereotyped/Repetitive Behaviors

Most children with autism achieve motor milestones, but as many as 28% lag in gross motor development. They may demonstrate stereotypical behaviors such as hand flapping, toe walking, and lining up objects.

## Early Diagnosis

While 25% of children going to the pediatrician display behavior that should alert the doctor to developmental concerns, only 30% of pediatricians screen for autism. Your doctor should screen for autism if any of the following red flags are present: 1) no babbling, pointing, or gestures (nodding head, shrugging shoulders, shaking head, finger to mouth for sssshhhh) by 12 months; 2) no single words by 16 months; 3) no 2-word spontaneous phrases by 24 months; or 4) loss of language or social skills at any age.