

# Health Care Providers— On the Frontline of Recognizing Signs of Risk for Autism



Parents rely on you, their health care professional, to monitor not only the physical health but also the developmental progress of their children. One in about 31 children will be diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Although there is no cure for autism, early detection, assessment, and intervention are keys to promoting positive outcomes for children with ASD. **See Tennessee Autism-Specific Resources on page 3.** You can help in the following ways.

- Health care professionals are the vital first step in identifying children at increased risk for ASDs. By recognizing the early signs of autism, you can refer children who show these symptoms to specialists for further evaluation. By increasing your knowledge of the common symptoms of autism and sharing information with colleagues, staff, and families in your care, you can ensure needed help.
- Request and use the CDC “Learn the Signs. Act Early.” free Health Care Professional Resource Kit. [cdc.gov/act-early/index.html](http://cdc.gov/act-early/index.html); **1-800-CDC-INFO**  
Materials, in both English and Spanish, include:
  - Informational cards to display in waiting area or share at well-child visits with parents, which provide milestones by age and questions about childhood development that parents can discuss with you.
  - Fact sheets on developmental screening\* and specific developmental disorders that can be given to parents when there is a concern.
  - Growth Chart [developmental milestones] posters for waiting or exam rooms are also free on request.



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- Parents are generally the people who spend the most time with their children. Listen to their concerns. Parents who suspect that their child has autism may present it at a well-child visit as either a suspected speech/language delay or a problem with social development.
- Be specific when asking questions about a child's development; e.g., Does your child smile in response to smiles from others? Engage in reciprocal, back-and-forth play? Have unusual speech patterns? Avoid or have limited pretend play?
- Be prepared to refer parents for a developmental assessment. Pursue screening promptly. According to the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, a child should be evaluated for autism immediately if a child has:
  - no babbling by 12 months
  - no gesturing (pointing, waving bye-bye, etc.) by 12 months
  - no single words by 16 months
  - no 2-word phrases (not just echolalic) by 24 months
  - any loss of any language or social skills at any age

- If a child is found to be at risk for or diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, or other developmental disorder, continue to provide support for the entire family:
  - Help the family obtain early intervention services as rapidly as possible.
  - Help the family connect with local autism family organizations. Parent-to-parent support is powerful.
  - Children with an autism spectrum disorder should be evaluated by an autism expert who has experience completing the assessment for the common genetic conditions or neurologic comorbidities that can be found in individuals with autism.
  - For example, genetic conditions can be identified in approximately 15% of individuals with autism. The tests with the highest yield include chromosomal microarray analysis, karyotype, and Fragile X testing.
  - Children with an autism spectrum disorder are at risk for medical issues such as gastrointestinal problems and sleep disorders; refer for specialized assistance as needed.
  - Refer families for specialized intervention in areas such as language and communication, social skills, behavior management. Encourage parents to attend a workshop to understand their educational rights and to help them be effective advocates for their children.
  - Pay attention to the well-being of the entire family. Parent, sibling, and grandparent support groups are available.
- Help build Tennessee's capacity for developmental screening by becoming trained to administer autism screening assessments.

\*The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends routine developmental surveillance at every well-child visit; use of standardized broadband screening tools at 9, 18, 24, and 30 months; use of ASD-specific tool at 18 and 24 months.

## Tennessee Autism Resources for Health Care Professionals

The following list is selective, due to space constraints. For a comprehensive list, see TN Disability Pathfinder ([TNPathfinder.org](http://TNPathfinder.org))

### Tennessee Autism-Specific Resources

#### *For children under age 3*

Tennessee Early Intervention System (TEIS) TEIS provides funding for child (0-2) developmental assessments, and physical, occupational, and speech therapy based on Individualized Family Plan; does not directly provide ABA therapy but can refer.

The **TN Department of Education** has an Autism and Behavior Consultant and Office of Transition Services. TEIS Central Office [tn.gov/disability-and-aging/disability-aging-programs/teis.html](http://tn.gov/disability-and-aging/disability-aging-programs/teis.html)

#### *For children of all ages*

##### **Signal Centers, Inc. (Chattanooga)**

Provides developmental evaluations; ABA, occupational, physical, speech therapy; and early intervention.

[signalcenters.org](http://signalcenters.org)

##### **Tennessee Disability Pathfinder (Nashville)**

Pathfinder offers, in English and Spanish, a telephone helpline, website (with searchable database), and print resources that connect persons with service providers and resources. The Website provides a list of TN Statewide Autism Resources. Pathfinder is a project of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center and the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities.

[TNPathfinder.org](http://TNPathfinder.org)

(615) 322-8529; (800) 640-4636

### **TRIAD at Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC) (Nashville)**

The Treatment and Research Institute for Autism Spectrum Disorders (TRIAD) is dedicated to improving assessment and treatment services for children with autism spectrum disorders and their families while advancing research and providing training. [triad.vumc.org](http://triad.vumc.org)

### **University of Tennessee Boling Center for Developmental Disabilities (Memphis)**

Autism Spectrum Clinic offers occupational, physical, and speech therapy. The Developmental Evaluation Center provides medical, developmental, psychological, behavioral, educational, and nutritional evaluations.

<http://uthsc.edu/bcdd/>

### **Vanderbilt Autism Treatment Network (ATN) (Nashville)**

Vanderbilt Medical Center is 1 of 15 sites in the Autism Treatment Network (funded by Autism Speaks), a consortium of medical centers providing clinical services and generating a research registry that will be used to identify evidence-based standards of medical care for children with autism. Clinical disciplines include gastroenterology, genetics/metabolics, psychiatry, neurology, and sleep. Access through VAC.

### **Vanderbilt Bill Wilkerson Center for Otolaryngology and Communication Sciences (Nashville)**

Its Autism Spectrum Disorders Team emphasizes language/communication in children (18 months-16 years).

[vanderbiltbillwilkersoncenter.com](http://vanderbiltbillwilkersoncenter.com)

### **Vanderbilt Center for Child Development (Nashville)**

Its evaluation center provides medical, developmental, and behavioral assessments, treatment, and therapy services for children (0-18) [childrenshospitalvanderbilt.org/service-line/center-child-development](http://childrenshospitalvanderbilt.org/service-line/center-child-development)

## Tennessee Developmental Disabilities Resources

### **Family Support Program**

This statewide, community-based program, Tennessee Division of Intellectual Disability Services, provides limited financial assistance to meet family-identified needs.

[tn.gov/disability-and-aging/disability-aging-programs/family-support.html](http://tn.gov/disability-and-aging/disability-aging-programs/family-support.html)

### **Support and Training for Exceptional Parents (STEP)**

STEP provides training for parents of children (birth-22) to better understand educational rights.

Statewide [tnstep.info](http://tnstep.info)

Email: [gethelp@tnstep.info](mailto:gethelp@tnstep.info)

## Tennessee Autism Family Organizations

### **Autism Tennessee (Nashville)**

[autismtn.org](http://autismtn.org)

### **Autism Resources of the Mid-South (Memphis)**

[autismresourcesmidsouth.org](http://autismresourcesmidsouth.org)

### **East Tennessee Chapter, Autism Society of America (Knoxville)**

[asaetc.org](http://asaetc.org)

## National Resources

### **American Academy of Pediatrics—Autism**

[healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/Autism/Pages/default.aspx](http://healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/Autism/Pages/default.aspx)

### **Autism Society of America**

[autism-society.org](http://autism-society.org)

### **Autism Speaks**

[autismspeaks.org](http://autismspeaks.org)

### **CDC Autism Information Center**

[cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism](http://cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism)

### **CDC Learn the Signs. Act Early.**

[cdc.gov/act-early/index.html](http://cdc.gov/act-early/index.html)

### **KidsHealth for kids, teens, and parents**

[kidshealth.org](http://kidshealth.org)

### **National Institute of Child Health and Human Development**

[nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/autism](http://nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/autism)



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