

# New Autism Screening Techniques Urge Early Diagnosis

By Susan Glairon  
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When her daughter was 2 years old, Theresa Wrangham told her pediatrician she was worried. She's not interacting with her peers, the mother told him; she's naming things but not talking in sentences.

Her pediatrician told her, everything was fine, Wrangham said.

When her daughter started echoing what other said instead of talking to them, Wrangham took her to a child psychologist.

Wrangham's daughter was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. By then, she was almost 6.

"I had no support (from my pediatrician)," said Wrangham, president of the Autism Society of Boulder County.

In the United States, one in 166 children are diagnosed with ASD, according to the society.

The average age at which Colorado children are diagnosed with autism is 33 months, according to JFK Partners at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, though the Centers for Disease Control says it can be recognized as early as 12 months.

With that in mind, Wrangham helped organize "Early Screening for Autism," a forum to help physicians recognize red flags for autism. Presenters include John Kirk, a Boulder pediatric neurophysiologist, and Wrangham.

Sponsored by Boulder Community Hospital and the Autism Society of Boulder County, the forum will cover the prevalence of autism, characteristics that doctors should recognize, a screening checklist for children as young as 12 months and information about early intervention support.

The CDC says the average age for an autism diagnosis in the United States is 5 years.

According to the CDC's "Learn the Signs Act Early" program, ASD often can be recognized at 18 months, but only 2 percent of children younger than 3 receive the benefit of federally mandated early intervention.

"It is a huge concern," Kirk said.

Research suggests that children who receive early intervention therapies will have a more positive outcome, meaning some of their autistic symptoms lessen, Kirk said. Those not identified early don't fare as well, and the costs are staggering for parents, schools and communities, he said.

"If your child is being diagnosed at 33 months, by the time they go through their paperwork for getting state-assisted funding for treatment, they are aging out of services," Wrangham said.

Kirk said the class targets physicians who see children frequently for well-child visits. The idea is to help them recognize the red flags so they can refer children who exhibit symptoms to a specialist for diagnosis, he said.

One of the biggest red flags at 12 months is a child not responding to his or her name, but that symptom is often overlooked, he said.

Some important features of the screening tool, called an M-CHAT, are that it takes physicians less than five minutes to assess a child and it yields good results, Kirk said.

Parents of children with ASD often say they told their pediatricians their concerns but were met with responses such as “boys talk later than girls” or “children develop at different rates,” and like Wrangham’s daughter, those children weren’t diagnosed until much later, Wrangham said.

“Parents have that intuitive feeling that something is not right,” she said. “Doctors need to listen to that. We know our children. We are not just panicky parents.

“I was lost for three years trying to find out what was going on with my child. I often wonder, how much better would she have done if we had been told three years before?”

Physicians interested in the “Early Screening for Autism” forum should contact Mari Gambotto at 720-854-7978.

For more information about Dr. John Kirk, visit [www.drjohnkirk.com](http://www.drjohnkirk.com)

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