



## Thirteen Month Delay Between Evaluation and Autism Diagnosis in Children

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### **Autism Diagnosis**

Children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) may experience a 13-month delay before they are diagnosed.

A study in the April autism supplement of the Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics released today, found that children diagnosed in metropolitan Atlanta were initially evaluated at an average of 4 years of age but were not diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder until an average of 5 years 1 month. The study also found much variability in both, with an age range of 1 year 4 months to 8 years 6 months old for initial evaluation, and an age range of 1 year 5 months to 8 years 8 months old for actual diagnosis.

The study data, collected from the Metropolitan Atlanta Developmental Disabilities Surveillance Program 2000 (MADDSP), did not explore reasons for the 13-month delay. However, the study found that most children were first diagnosed with other conditions, such as language delay or general developmental delay.

"Although this study draws upon data from the metro Atlanta area, it serves as an important indicator of the nationwide challenges of diagnosing autism, particularly more mild cases," said Dr. José Cordero, director of CDC's National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities. "The real public health challenge is to educate doctors on the signs of autism and to encourage use of standardized diagnostic instruments that better identify *symptoms relevant to autism spectrum disorder* and help distinguish ASD from other developmental delays or disorders."

According to the study, a 13-month delay in autism spectrum disorders diagnosis existed for both boys and girls and across racial/ethnic classification. While children with more severe symptoms of autism were evaluated and diagnosed almost two years earlier than children with milder symptoms, they were not evaluated until an average of 3½ years old and were not diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorders until an average of 4½ years old. Previous research indicates that parents of children with an ASD report began to have concerns about their child's development between 1 and 2 years of age.

Seventy-six percent of the children diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorders were identified at medical facilities such as hospitals and clinics, and 24 percent were identified at schools. The study's researchers found that 70 percent of healthcare professionals did not use a standardized diagnostic instrument when assigning the first ASD diagnosis. Autism spectrum disorders are lifelong neuro-developmental disorders characterized by early onset of social, communication, and behavioral problems, which are present before

3 years of age. Early identification of ASDs leads to earlier entry into intervention programs that can help improve developmental outcomes. It is important for parents and healthcare professionals to recognize early symptoms of autism spectrum disorders. It is also important that children with identified delays be administered routine developmental and autismspecific screenings. CDC designed the "Learn the Signs, Act Early" campaign to educate parents and professionals on the early signs of autism and other developmental disorders. For more information, visit [www.cdc.gov/actearly](http://www.cdc.gov/actearly)