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## Early diagnosis may help with autism

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Just because they look OK doesn't mean they are.

That's what Cindy King wants others to know about her autistic son. Although the bright-eyed 4-year-old looks like other children his age, he doesn't always behave like them. When King and her husband Richard are out in a restaurant and their son throws a tantrum, sometimes people stare. King knows people get frustrated when Tyler makes a scene.

But there isn't any easy way to discipline or reason with a child whose mind is moving faster than a train. Because so many thoughts are racing through his mind, Tyler has difficulty concentrating and remaining calm.

The 4-year-old has most of the typical challenges associated with autism. With more than 60 new cases of autism being diagnosed per day, the condition is the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States, according to the Autism Society of America.

Because of the staggering numbers of autistic children, the Autism Society of America is working to obtain more funding to conduct research into the effects of high mercury levels in vaccines and other environmental toxins on children.

King, a South Beloit police dispatcher, and her husband, Richard, a retired South Beloit police sergeant and current Van Galder coach driver, and 6-year-old daughter, Angela, aren't alone in dealing with an autistic family member.

New studies suggest as many as one out of 166 people are autistic. Autism impairs a person's ability to interact with others and may result in repetitive behaviors. Often autistic people are withdrawn, but may have highly developed talents in certain areas.

After more than three years of intensive therapy, Tyler is what is considered to be a high functioning autistic. He interacts with his family and attends early childhood classes at Burdge Elementary School. Tyler will attend kindergarten next year and has hope of growing up relatively normal.

His mother attributes his success to an early diagnosis. If Tyler wouldn't have been treated for autistic behaviors, he may not be talking today or have hope of functioning as an adult.

King knew something was wrong with her son right away. He was different than his older sister Angela. At five months Tyler would wake up screaming and thrashing around. When he was 15 months old, he bumped his head on the counter.

"He just kept going. I knew something was wrong," King said.

Then King noticed her son dangling an Ernie doll back and forth in front of his face. When King and her husband left for the evening, Tyler just stared ahead, not showing any emotion if his parents were leaving the home.

Although Tyler was enrolled in Birth to Three, a service to help kids with cognitive skills, no one would make a diagnosis.

It would have been easy for King to give up and stop worrying. But she didn't and she hopes other parents who wonder about their children won't either.

"It's hard for parents to admit something is wrong with their children. Everyone wants their children to be normal," King said.

But getting that diagnosis may have changed Tyler's hope for a happy future. After the Weisman Center in Madison, Wis. diagnosed Tyler with autism, King was able to enroll him in the early autism project. Now experts perform 25 to 30 hours a week of in home play therapy.

Tyler has gone from living in an eggshell to talking, running over to his parents and playing with other children. King has learned new ways of coping. She sets an alarm clock for every hour to help toilet train Tyler. She presses her hand on his back to help calm him. Every night the parents must rock their son to sleep. Tyler is still learning how his body and mind works.

"He still doesn't play with other children, but will play next to them," King said.

Despite the progress, there are many hurdles. With two full-time jobs and another daughter, the couple has little time to themselves. Even a family activity like going to the park can be a challenge. Because there are no enclosed parks, the Kings have to spend their time chasing their son around instead of relaxing or focusing on Angela.

But King won't give up on her son. If she can help it, he will grow up one day, get an apartment and pay his bills. No matter what happens, however, the Kings will know they did everything they could for their son.

"Any parent would do the same," King said.