

Autism: earlier detection offers more options, parents say

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TAMPA - A new study by California researchers indicates that signs of autism may be present in children as young as one year old.

The researchers at UC San Diego developed a brief questionnaire to detect early signs of autism and other developmental delays.

Parents in the waiting rooms at pediatricians' offices answered the questions about the child's use of eye contact, sounds, words, and gestures, as well as object recognition and other ways of communicating.

More than 10,000 children were tested. One hundred eighty four infants failed the initial screening and then underwent further evaluation. Of those babies, 32 were later diagnosed with autism.

Ninety others were diagnosed with language or other developmental delays. Overall, the screening had a "positive predictive value" of 75 percent.

"I think it's very exciting that we're kind of at the forefront of some information that could be very useful," said Dr. Karen Berkman.

Berkman is executive director of USF's Center for Autism and Related Disabilities.

"What we want to be able to do is intervene early, to get that language development on track, to work on play skills, to get them interacting with others more effectively and in a meaningful way," said Berkman.

Autism forever changes families. Its mystery is always being studied and debated.

In Tampa, Carmen Inclan and her partner Christina Lorences have an autistic son, Michael.

"A friend noticed that Michael was different," explained Inclan.

At the time, Michael was 18 months. Once he was diagnosed, the family was living in an entirely new world.

"We immediately, when we were diagnosed, started a very long process that we're still in today," Inclan said.

She thinks a reliable screening test for children at age one would be a major advantage. Then, she says, why not screen every few months?

"I think people can get better clues, if their child is reacting to some type of toxic injection into their blood stream, into their bodies," Inclan said.

Michael's other mom Christina is also encouraged by the study, but at the same time, saddened.

"It's almost a little too late," said Lorences. "I wish we could find out what the cause is."

The California researchers caution the study is only a first step. They want to see how effective the questionnaire is on a larger group of subjects. The study is in the Journal of Pediatrics.