

# PARENT CONNECTIONS

A Newsletter for First Steps Families ♦ Spring 2010

## April is Autism Awareness Month

### What are autism spectrum disorders?

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a group of developmental disabilities caused by a problem with the brain. ASDs can impact a person's functioning at different levels ranging from mild to severe. There is nothing about how people with ASDs look that sets them apart from others, yet they may communicate, interact, behave and learn in ways that are different from most people. The thinking and learning abilities of people with ASDs can vary from gifted to challenged. Autistic disorder is the most commonly known type of ASD, but there are others, including Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) and Asperger's syndrome. Scientists do not yet know exactly what causes ASDs.

### What are the signs of ASDs?

People with ASDs may have problems with social, emotional and communication skills. They might repeat certain behaviors and might not want change in their daily activities. Many people with ASDs also have different ways of learning, paying attention or reacting to things. ASDs begin during early childhood and last throughout a person's life.

Children with ASDs might:

- not play "pretend" games (for instance, pretend to feed a doll).
- not look at objects when another person points at them.
- avoid eye contact and want to be alone.
- repeat actions over and over.

- prefer to not be held or cuddled, or might cuddle only when they want to.
- be very interested in people but not know how to talk, play or relate to them.
- repeat or echo words or phrases in place of normal language (echolalia).
- have trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings.
- have trouble adapting when a routine changes.
- have trouble expressing needs using typical words or motions.
- have unusual reactions to the way things smell, taste, look, feel or sound.
- lose skills they once had (for instance, stop saying words that they had been using).

### What can I do as a parent?

Talk with your child's doctor or nurse. If you or your doctor think there could be a problem, ask for a referral to see a developmental pediatrician or other specialist. You can also contact First Steps at 866-583-2392 or the Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) office at your local school district. In addition, you can visit <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/index.html> to find ASD information and resources from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

*(The preceding information comes from the CDC's fact sheet on autism spectrum disorders. To download a PDF of the full document, go to [http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/pdf/parents\\_pdfs/AutismFactSheet.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/pdf/parents_pdfs/AutismFactSheet.pdf).)*

### WHAT OTHER RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE?

A free, online training module called Understanding Autism in Young Children is now available. This module is an overview of the characteristics of ASDs and the criteria used to diagnose children. The training is hosted on the University of Missouri Extension Web site; anyone who wants to view the training will need to register for an Extension Passport and select the Understanding Autism course to view. Go to <http://thompsoncenter.missouri.edu/training/index.php> and click on the link under *Featured Trainings: Understanding Autism*. There is no charge for the passport or to view the training.



# A Missouri Family's Story

By Natalie of O'Fallon, Mo.

We are thankful for First Steps and the early intervention that was provided for our twin boys, Alex and Nick. When they were 16 months old, Nick was diagnosed with autism. First Steps set up evaluations, and services began soon after. There is so much information available on treatments and therapies for autism, and we were overwhelmed as to what else to do. Our therapists suggested looking into ABA therapy for Nick, which we did. We attended a parent training and then started our home program. Our service coordinator was great in getting everything lined up, which took some of the pressure off of us. The early intervention tremendously helped prepare both boys for preschool.

The therapists also gave us suggestions for things to work on at home. They helped to incorporate therapies into the daily routines of our family. When Nick was beginning with First Steps, he did not know how to play with toys. He had repetitive movements all of the time, and we did not know what to do to engage with him. He could not tolerate being in public places without shutting down. With the help of First Steps, the toys that were "work" are now things he enjoys. He plays with toys instead of staring at a fan or spinning in circles. We can go to public places at times, and he tolerates being around others much better. He is able to get his sensory needs met now that we understand better and know how to help him.

Because of First Steps and the exceptional therapists there, Nick and Alex have made great progress. It is true that early intervention is so important, and we are forever grateful to all of the therapists who helped our family!

## ENCOURAGING WORDS

Encouragement can help children feel good about themselves. Helpful words show appreciation without sounding like empty praise or "things parents are supposed to say."

Here are some tips on sharing encouragement with your child:

- Tell your child how much you love her and how wonderful she is with encouragement about specific actions, such as, "You put your book back on the shelf." She will see her own actions as helpful.
- Pay attention to the things that your child gets correct. For example, if he remembers to wait in line, you might say, "I'm glad you remembered to wait to go down the slide when you saw Jason get to the ladder first," along with a smile or a hug.
- Use words to help your child become aware of her own approach to problems. "I noticed Maria wanted to play a different game than you did, so you suggested playing her choice and then playing yours. You looked like you were having fun together."
- Children and adults feel good when they hear these words: "I love you." "I'm proud of you." "I'm so glad you're my child."

*Reprinted with permission from the Illinois Early Learning Project, University of Illinois. The full document is available at <http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tipsheets/encouragingwords.htm>.*



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