

Centerpiece: Early detection of autism can make a difference

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Early diagnosis of children with autism is essential to their lifetime success, experts say.

"There is clear evidence that the earlier we intervene in changing behaviors of children with autism, the better outcome they will have," said Dr. Roberto Tuchman, a pediatric neurologist at Miami Children's Hospital's Dan Marino Center.

With that in mind, the Naples-based John Maxwell Biasco Foundation for Children with Autism of Southwest Florida launched an educational campaign for pediatricians and family practice physicians in April — National Autism Awareness Month — said spokeswoman Anne Allen.

"We put together a packet that emphasized the importance of autism screening during well-baby exams," Allen said. "Parents also need to be aware of the warning signs so they can be proactive in getting the care their children need." A child should be evaluated for autism or other possible developmental disorders if he or she fails to meet these milestones:

- No babbling by 12 months.
- No gesturing (pointing, waving bye-bye, etc.) by 12 months.
- No single words by 16 months.
- No two-word phrases by 24 months.
- Any loss of language or social skills at any age.

Other red flags that may indicate autism that usually occur between 15 months of age and 3 years old include:

- No eye contact or joint attention — Child won't look at you or look at an object in response to your saying, "Hey, look, there is a (name his or her favorite toy.)"
- Lack of pointing — Child will not use his or her index finger to point or to direct another person's attention.
- Language regression — Any regression or loss of words.

- Inappropriate body motions and actions — Spinning in circles, toe walking, closing or squinting eyes, hand flapping, rocking, strange facial expressions, laughing for no obvious reason.
- Aloofness — Child withdraws, is less social, interactive or friendly than he or she once was. Child appears to tune people out.
- Lack of imitation — Child will not copy movements of others, such as waving good-bye.
- Hearing problems — Child does not appear to hear some sounds and/or exhibits an over-sensitivity to other sounds. Child may cover ears or cry in response to certain sounds.
- Sustained odd play — Child fails to engage in back-and-forth play, or child displays obsessive-compulsive behavior.