

Coping with Developmental Disorders

Worried that your child isn't reaching all her milestones on time? Addressing developmental delays early can help her get back on track.

WRITTEN BY KATHERINE SCHREIBER

Jennifer S. had a feeling something wasn't quite right with her infant son, Timothy. When she brought her face to his, his eyes rarely focused on hers. When she smiled at him, he seemed in a daze, never mirroring the upward curve of her lips or the joy in her eyes. Timothy was Jennifer's first child, and she was unsure whether her gut-level concerns—why does something just feel off?—were warranted.

With the help of her pediatrician, Jennifer had Timothy evaluated by a team of early-childhood experts, who found he was exhibiting a cognitive and social-emotional delay. At two and a half, he was reevaluated and diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. These were hard truths to swallow. But identifying her son's disability early meant he received treatment during a crucial stage of his development, improving his success at school and among peers.

Approximately one out of every six children in the U.S. is diagnosed with a developmental delay (the term used for cognitive, social, emotional or physical challenges prior to age 3) or developmental disability (the term used for such challenges from age 3 onward), according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And not all delays warrant a diagnosis. But left unaddressed, these delays may set a child up for increased challenges as they grow older.

Identifying a Problem

Discerning whether your child has a delay or is just taking a bit longer to reach a milestone can be tricky. But several red flags during your child's first years of life can be telling.

You probably have grounds to be concerned "if your infant isn't able to track objects with his eyes; hold her head up consistently when placed on her tummy; and isn't babbling, cooing

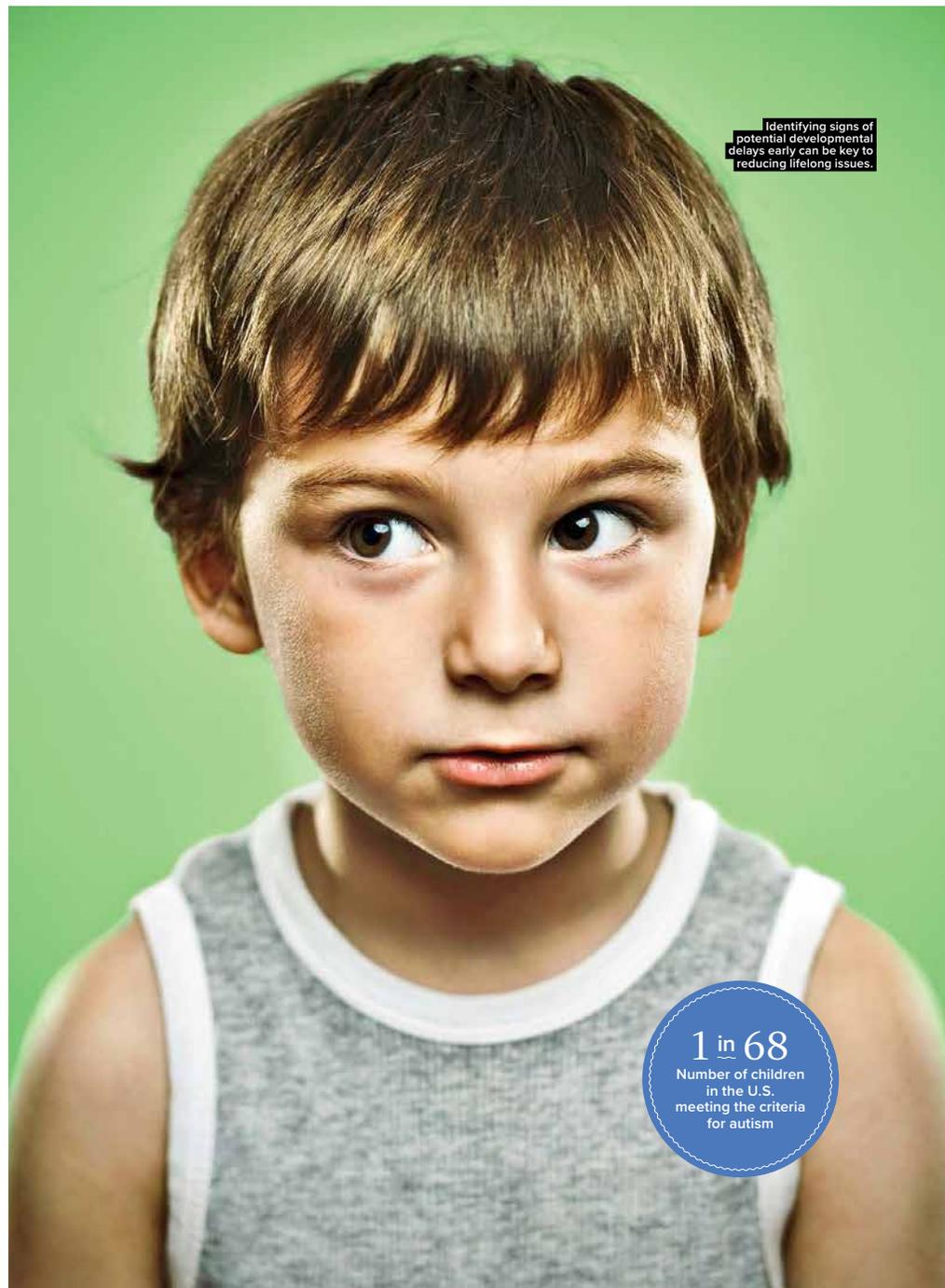
or beginning to say words by age 1," explains Laurie Zelinger, Ph.D., a board-certified school psychologist and author of *Please Explain "Terrorism" to Me!* Not smiling by 6 months of age, resisting or reacting strongly to being soothed and not showing interest in others or her surroundings are other signs that an infant may have a developmental delay or be at risk for a disability later in life.

By age 2, if your child is not pointing to things she wants, cannot stack blocks or is struggling to form basic sentences (like, "want more juice") and follow simple instructions (think: "Bring Mommy the ball") she could be experiencing a cognitive delay. Zelinger adds. Equally indicative is if a child cannot engage in joint attention—looking to where a caregiver is looking or looking to and from a caregiver and a toy while playing. Once age 3 rolls around, difficulties in walking, running and feeding become reasons to worry, says Robert Goldman, Psy.D., J.D., supervising psychologist at The CIIT Medical Center in Plainview, New York. So does avoiding eye contact, being disinterested in peers or performing "stereotyped" behaviors (such as hand flapping, swaying, spinning or rocking) at any age.

Hypersensitivity to touch or sound and difficulties sucking, swallowing or breathing and extreme pickiness once solid foods become introduced can also be warning signs of a delay or disability, says Ari Yares, Ph.D., a nationally certified school psychologist in Washington, D.C.

If you notice any of the above signs, don't wait too long to contact your

Identifying signs of potential developmental delays early can be key to reducing lifelong issues.



1 in 68
Number of children
in the U.S.
meeting the criteria
for autism

pediatrician, Goldman advises, "Your doctor can screen your child for delays or disabilities and refer you to an early-intervention or special-education program that, per the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), must offer free evaluations and services for qualifying families. Each state also has Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs), which provide parents with support and education related to disabilities as well as guidance on obtaining services. Do an Internet search for your local PTI, to get started."

Getting Help

Research shows that many evidence-based treatments can help address developmental disorders and delays. Speech therapy helps children produce, articulate and better comprehend language—and can help with feeding issues, like chewing and swallowing. Physical and occupational therapy address gross and fine motor skills. And behavior therapists help reinforce desired behaviors (sharing, sitting still and making eye contact) and reduce troubling ones (biting or hitting).

While most developmental disorders cannot be entirely resolved through treatment, addressing them early can reduce just how much

of an impairment individuals may experience throughout their lives and improve their ability to function and be more independent at home, in school, at work and in social settings. Ideally, children should start treatment before beginning school. "Early intervention is especially important during children's first five years of life, when their brains are rapidly developing new connections and are at their most malleable," says Yares. "The data shows that getting kids support by preschool age or sooner has an impact on their learning and outcomes later in life."

Children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can especially benefit from early intervention. Applied behavior analysis (ABA) is the most common treatment for ASD. It entails planning and assessment of goals, ranging from basic communication skills (e.g., asking for a desired item) to emotion regulation (counting to 10 when angry instead of throwing or breaking objects). ABA therapists reward desired behaviors and ignore undesired ones. "Social-skills training and providing opportunities for children to engage with peers who don't have a diagnosis of autism have also been shown to help children with autism learn to model appropriate social behavior," adds Goldman.

1 in 6
Number of kids in
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with a developmental
delay or disability

Where to Get Help

The following websites and organizations provide a wealth of knowledge and guidance for parents concerned about potential delays or disabilities.

- ★ **Autism Speaks**
Offers comprehensive information about autism spectrum disorders in addition to advocacy and other support services. (autismspeaks.org)
- ★ **The Department of Education** boasts a comprehensive list of resources for families looking to learn more (www2.ed.gov)
- ★ **Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund (IDEED)** advocates on behalf of individuals with disabilities living in the U.S. (www.ideo.org)
- ★ **The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**
The Developmental

Common Autism Myths

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) refers to a range of impairments in cognitive, behavioral, communication and social-interaction abilities. Approximately one in every 68 children in the U.S. meets the criteria for autism. Though awareness about autism has increased in recent years, there are still many common misconceptions about the disorder. Here are a few of the biggest that advocates and professionals are working hard to dispel.

MYTH #1 Vaccines can cause autism.

Numerous studies have disproved the false link between vaccines and autism popularized by a now discredited doctor in the late 1990s. Put simply: There is no connection between getting your child vaccinated and an increased risk of autism.

And not vaccinating your child puts her at a much greater risk of getting seriously ill—one reason there has been a resurgence of infectious diseases, such as mumps and whooping cough, throughout much of the U.S.

MYTH #2 Autism looks the same in every case.

"Autism spectrum disorder is a complex collection of symptoms, and not every child exhibits every one," explains Yares.

"Children may receive a diagnosis ranging from high-functioning to low-functioning." Some may be incredibly gifted in a specific area—approximately one in every 10 cases of autism exhibits "savantism"—yet struggle to express empathy and connect with peers. Others may experience severe delays in learning, communication, emotion-regulation and self-help skills.

MYTH #3 People with autism don't feel empathy.

Autism itself is not a barrier to empathy. Rather, a condition called alexithymia—which is more common among individuals with autistic spectrum disorder—can make understanding and identifying emotions difficult. About half of all individuals with autism meet the criteria for alexithymia.

