



Media Release

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Early signs of autism identified

Researchers have discovered that toddlers who later go on to be diagnosed with autism use fewer gestures, in findings that may revolutionise the way in which autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is screened.

Early identification and intervention is crucial in managing ASD but until now it has been difficult to diagnose children with the disorder until the age of three or older.

As part of the Early Language in Victoria Study (ELVS) conducted at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, the early developmental skills and behaviour of 1900 children at key ages were measured including those of 45 children diagnosed with ASD between the ages of three and seven years, with the results to be presented at Speech Pathology Australia's 'Diversity & Development NT' National Conference in Darwin this week.

Lead researcher and speech pathologist Carly Veness said that the decreased use of gestures, like pointing, showing, giving, and waving, was the main characteristic that differentiated children with ASD from all other groups of children.

"By analysing the amount of communicative gestures used by children studied, we were able to differentiate children later diagnosed with ASD from children with other forms of language impairment or developmental delay, as well as typically developing children.

"Our study showed a pattern of low gesture use for children with ASD between the ages of eight until 24 months. As early as eight months of age, early communication gestures differentiated children with ASD from some of the other children," Ms Veness said.

The results of the study could revolutionise the way ASD is screened for and provide better outcomes for children with ASD through early intervention programs.

Funding for this research has run out, however if the project were to continue it would investigate the reliability of low gesture use to predict a diagnosis of ASD, as well as the unique patterns of individual ASD diagnoses, for example autism versus Asperger syndrome.

"We hope further research into low gesture use and the types of gestures used will lead to earlier detection and diagnosis of the condition to ensure the children receive the specialist early intervention services they need to get the best start in life," Ms Veness said.

For more information on Speech Pathology Australia's national conference, visit www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au.

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About Speech Pathology Australia

Speech Pathology Australia is the national peak body for more than 4,500 members. The Association supports and regulates the ethical, clinical and professional standards of its members. The Association also lobbies and advocates for people with communication and swallowing difficulties.

Speech Pathology Australia's 2011 Conference

Local and international industry experts will examine topical issues at this year's conference.

The Conference theme is *Diversity & Development NT* and will showcase the innovative contributions of speech pathologists in advancing choices, knowledge and access. Held at the Darwin Convention Centre, the conference will run from 26-29 June 2011.

