

## **MARCH: WHAT CAUSES AUTISM?**

There is no known single cause for autism, but it is generally accepted that it is caused by abnormalities in brain structure or function. Brain scans show differences in the shape and structure of the brain in autistic versus non-autistic children. Researchers are investigating a number of theories, including the link between heredity, genetics and medical problems. In many families, there appears to be a pattern of autism or related disabilities, further supporting a genetic basis to the disorder. While no one gene has been identified as causing autism, researchers are searching for irregular segments of genetic code that autistic children may have inherited. It also appears that some children are born with a susceptibility to autism, but researchers have not yet identified a single “trigger” that causes autism to develop.

Whatever the cause, it is clear that children with autism and PDD are born with the disorder or born with the potential to develop it. It is not caused by bad parenting. Autism is not a mental illness. Children with autism are not unruly kids who choose not to behave. Furthermore, no known psychological factors in the development of the child have been shown to cause autism.

### **Early Diagnosis**

Research indicates that early diagnosis is associated with dramatically better outcomes for individuals with autism. The earlier a child is diagnosed, the earlier the child can begin benefiting from one of the many specialized intervention approaches treatment and education.

The characteristic behaviors of autism spectrum disorders may or may not be apparent in infancy (18 to 24 months), but usually become obvious during early childhood (24 months to 6 years).

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) lists five behaviors that signal further evaluation is warranted:

- Does not babble or coo by 12 months
- Does not gesture (point, wave, grasp) by 12 months
- Does not say single words by 16 months
- Does not say two-word phrases on his or her own by 24 months
- Has any loss of any language or social skill at any age.

Having any of these five “red flags” does not mean your child has autism. But because the characteristics of the disorder vary so much, a child showing these behaviors should have further evaluations by a multidisciplinary team. This team may include a neurologist, psychologist, developmental pediatrician, speech/language therapist, learning consultant, or other professionals knowledgeable about autism.