



LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Autism: opportunities for pediatric leadership, partnership

Autism is a concerning condition that appears to be increasing and that has a major impact on families. Pediatricians are positioned to lead efforts to help families dealing with autism. However, significant barriers challenge optimal care and impair effective partnerships. The current state of affairs is that:

- Scientific understanding of the cause of autism is far from complete. While pediatric researchers are learning about the complex nature of the autism spectrum and the multiple genetic correlates and phenotypic expressions, there has not been a major breakthrough on what autism is and why it is increasing. Understandably, parents and caregivers of children with autism are distressed by the lack of scientific understanding of autism.
- There still are no effective autism cures. Some evidence-based treatments do attack symptoms, but may involve side effects and rarely are fully effective.
- Care of children with autism has been fragmented among diverse professionals, agencies, programs and schools. Excellent programs exist for children with autism, but they are costly and not available in every community.
- There are shortages of developmental-behavioral pediatricians and child psychiatrists, and long waiting lists at developmental evaluation centers.

Given these problems, what is the AAP doing in partnership with parents and other professionals?

- The AAP continues to support the call for basic research on autism spectrum disorders and other serious pediatric conditions. The AAP is a strong supporter of the National Children's Study, which is looking at potential environmental causes of autism and other developmental disorders.
- The AAP, through the Autism Subcommittee of the Council on Children with Disabilities, has produced an autism toolkit to help practitioners provide the best possible care to children with autism. (Visit www.aap.org/publiced/autismtoolkit.cfm.)
- The AAP has helped its members at the state level advocate for screening and treatment for children with autism and other developmental disabilities.
- The AAP is committed to providing families, practitioners and policy-makers with the most authoritative information on autism, its causes and treatments. The AAP also will continue to work hard on correcting misinformation that unduly worries the public and encourages unhealthy practices. The AAP concurs with scientists and parents who find no linkage between vaccines and autism,



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and continues to encourage all parents to bring their children for their life-saving immunizations.

We must be constructive leaders on this issue, addressing the needs of children with autism in our practices, communities, within state governments and at the national level. And to succeed in these efforts, we need to partner with parents and others as appropriate to achieve the optimal health of children. In addition to supporting the above AAP efforts, I suggest all pediatricians take the following steps:

1. Read the November 2007 clinical reports in *Pediatrics* concerning the identification, evaluation and management of children with autism.
2. Order *Caring for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Resource Toolkit for Clinicians* and related booklets for parents (e.g., *Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorders*) from the AAP Bookstore, www.aap.org/bookstore, and use these materials to improve our efforts to meet the needs of children with autism and their families.
3. Screen all children at 18 and 24 months for signs and symptoms of autism and provide ongoing surveillance for symptoms of autism and other developmental disabilities. Help parents document "joint attention" in their infants who are between 6 and 12 months of age.
4. Develop a real medical home for children with autism, assist parents in making the best decisions for their children and link them with supportive resources.
5. Meet with groups of families who have children with autism and assist them in convincing government leaders and payers to adequately fund safe, effective therapies. Such efforts may be bolstered by the fact that passage of mental health parity at the federal level gives AAP chapters the opportunity to advocate for the needs of children with autism and other developmental disabilities with state government leaders and payers.
6. Encourage your states to sufficiently fund developmental evaluation centers so families do not have long waits to obtain answers about children with developmental disabilities.

In my community practice, I have found it challenging but rewarding to work with the families of children with autism — families who are unbelievably dedicated to doing what is best for their children. These families need us, and we are more valuable to them than many of us imagine.

Thank you for helping the Academy support and assist families of children with autism spectrum disorders. Working together, we can ensure optimal outcomes for all children.

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