

Early diagnosis of autism can lead to better treatment

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(Medical Xpress) -- Autism awareness month has come and gone for 2012, but the need for awareness has not. The struggles for families affected by the disorder remain, and the number of those affected continues to rise.

One in 88 children is diagnosed with an [autism spectrum disorder \(ASD\)](#) by the age of eight, according to a report recently released by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#). That's a 78 percent increase in the communities studied since 2002. Although the report does not identify a specific cause for the increase in prevalence, it alludes to the importance of early detection and early intervention.

“What we do know is that we are getting better at diagnosing it, and better diagnosis leads to better treatment,” said Anibal Gutierrez, assistant professor in FIU’s Department of Psychology.

A board-certified behavior analyst, Gutierrez’s research includes treatment effectiveness for individuals with autism. Although the [CDC](#) report shows an increase in prevalence, he said, other research shows the number of adults with low-functioning (severe) autism has decreased.

“This can be attributed to early diagnosis and treatment – some parents reject the diagnosis, others embrace it. It’s the best way to get help and treatment for the child,” Gutierrez said.

Typically, autism appears during the first three years of life. It is a

complex developmental disability that affects a person’s ability to communicate and interact with others. Because it is a spectrum disorder, autism affects individuals in varying degrees, Gutierrez said. It’s characterized by difficulties in social interaction, deficits in verbal and nonverbal communication, and repetitive behaviors.

“The most common way to help improve language and social behavior in children with autism is using applied behavior analysis,” Gutierrez said.

This treatment uses techniques that develop and enforce positive behavior while reducing the negative behavior that can impair learning. Specific methods for treatment are largely determined by the learning styles and functionality level of each individual child, according to Gutierrez. His research focuses on identifying and establishing effective early intervention techniques across the [autism](#) spectrum.

Provided by Florida International University

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