

FSU Autism Institute launches web-based family ecosystem to jump-start early intervention

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Waiting for children to develop on their own is one reason so many toddlers with autism go undiagnosed. A delay in treatment can result in the loss of precious months or years when interventions are able to dramatically affect outcomes.

The Autism Institute at Florida State University has launched a new [early intervention](#) approach called the Family Ecosystem. It's a system of care developed in partnership with Autism Navigator and the FIRST WORDS Project.

By integrating automated screening beginning at 9 months with evidence-based online courses, tools and resources, the Family Ecosystem is designed to improve [early detection](#) of communication delays and autism, help families get a jump-start on early [intervention](#) and facilitate their access to care for a better outcome.

While the signs of autism can be detected by 18 to 24 months, the average age of diagnosis is between 4 and 5 years old, when early intervention is no longer possible. By then, 80 percent of school-age children who qualify for special education miss the opportunity for early intervention. Screening in [primary care](#) is challenging, and the early-intervention system is overburdened. Too often the results are substantial societal costs and lifetime consequences for children with [autism spectrum disorder](#) (ASD) and their families.

Autism Navigator integrates the Family Ecosystem and current research into a highly interactive web platform with extensive video footage to illustrate early learning and development, early signs of autism and early intervention. It provides hundreds of video illustrations of evidence-based intervention techniques that families can incorporate into everyday activities to support their child's learning and development as soon as they suspect autism.

The first course for the public, About Autism in Toddlers, was originally released in April 2015 and has more than 12,000 users in 115 countries. Autism Navigator now offers a collection of web-based courses for professionals who screen toddlers, make referrals and provide early intervention. Those who complete the Autism Navigator for Primary Care course can begin using the Early Screening for Autism and Communication Disorders (ESAC), a new innovative screener for children 12 to 36 months old that is based on parent reports and uses "smart" technology. Families are then invited to the parent portal, where they have unlimited access to online courses, tools and resources in the Seamless Path for Families.

Autism Navigator is helping to bridge the gap between science and community practice, improve [family](#) access to care, train and guide professionals, and transform community-based systems of health care delivery and education for toddlers with ASD and their families.

"By leveraging technology, systemwide changes in early detection and early intervention practices for toddlers with autism are viable and sustainable," said Amy M. Wetherby, Distinguished Research Professor in the Department of Clinical Sciences and director of the Autism Institute at the FSU College of Medicine. "The Autism Navigator web platform is advancing science by providing a practical, achievable mechanism for identifying [autism](#) at very young ages through community-based screening. This is enabling genetic, biomedical and

intervention research to study children younger than was previously possible, given the usual age of diagnosis, and help to accelerate scientific advances."

Autism Navigator is available at <http://www.autismnavigator.com/> and is being deployed globally. Each course and tool is designed to increase the capacity of health care professionals, early intervention providers, educators and families to improve outcomes of young children with ASD.

"Our vision," Wetherby said, "is to make Autism Navigator courses, tools and resources free to families and utilize the fees associated with the professional development courses to fund ongoing research and development."

Provided by Florida State University

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