

Autism screening tool goes global

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Researchers at Flinders University are excited about the world-wide uptake of their early screening tool for children suspected of having Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The early screening tool, known as Autism Detection in Early Childhood

(ADEC), is already available in Australia and is now available free of charge to low-resource countries such as Indonesia, Mexico, China and Guayaquil (Ecuador).

A [study](#) published recently in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* investigated the effects of translating and culturally adapting the screening tool for a Spanish-speaking population in Ecuador.

"ADEC is an easy-to-use tool, requiring limited additional training, providing a cost-effective way to identify children who may have a high likelihood of developing autism," says Professor Robyn Young from the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work.

"While many tools have been developed in English-speaking countries, screening in countries with other languages requires specific cultural and linguistic adaptation.

"We hope the adaptation of ADEC for low-resource countries will allow for more efficient, reliable and cost-effective diagnoses and support," she says.

Autism Spectrum Disorder, or autism, is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by challenges in [social interaction](#), communication and restricted or repetitive behaviors.

The global prevalence of autism is estimated to be around 1 in 39, making it one of the most common neurodevelopmental disorders.

Early diagnosis—by the age of 18–24 months—is pivotal in improving outcomes for children with autism. It provides opportunities for early support that can positively impact language, cognitive and social-emotional functioning.

Flinders University researchers worked closely with a team led by Professor Clark, based in Ecuador to help improve diagnostic methods for autism in local children.

The [pilot study](#) translated and culturally adapted the original version of ADEC for the population of Guayaquil (Ecuador) for a sample of 613 children aged 18–48 months, of whom 23 were diagnosed with autism (3.75%).

Professor Young says that the findings indicate that ADEC can be adapted for non-English speaking cultures but that more still needs to be done.

"While the study was successful, improving diagnosis doesn't simplify the difficulties that autistic people have accessing support, particularly in a low socio-economic environment," she says.

"Early detection only makes sense if there is the possibility of developing early support, so our next steps will be to investigate the effects of early support programs implemented in non-English speaking [low-resource countries](#) like Ecuador," she adds.

More information: Susana Mata-Iturralde et al, Autism Detection in Early Childhood (ADEC) in a Low-Income Spanish-Speaking Population in Guayaquil (Ecuador), *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s10803-024-06413-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-024-06413-3)

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