

US group tries again at studying environment, child health

December 7 2015, byLauran Neergaard

The U.S. National Institutes of Health is launching a new project to help unravel how early-in-life environmental exposures may affect autism, obesity and certain other childhood disorders. It's a second shot at tackling those important questions, after a more ambitious research attempt failed.

The goal is "really to understand that interplay between the environment and genetics and behavior that play out to determine whether a child ends up healthy or not," said Dr. Francis Collins, the NIH's director.

Called ECHO, for Environmental influences on Child Health Outcomes, the seven-year [project](#) will examine such interactions in pregnancy and early childhood, focusing on four areas of special public health concern: asthma and other airway disorders; obesity; neurodevelopmental disorders, including autism and learning disability; and birth defects and other infant health outcomes.

The project announced Monday is a next step after the failure of a massive earlier attempt to study how the environment and genetics interact in child health. The National Children's Study was supposed to eventually track 100,000 children from womb to adulthood. A year ago, Collins canceled that research, after years of planning and pilot-testing only to have scientific advisers conclude it was too unwieldy to work.

The ECHO project takes a different, and more streamlined, approach. Rather than starting from scratch to recruit participants, researchers with

[child health](#) studies already under way can apply to expand them, using new technologies to measure even small environmental exposures that would be analyzed at NIH-designated labs. For example, an asthma study might use wearable monitors to uncover what triggers a child's asthma attacks, or compare air pollution sensors with inhaler use.

NIH said it plans to spend \$160 million on ECHO research this year.

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Citation: US group tries again at studying environment, child health (2015, December 7) retrieved 14 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-12-group-environment-child-health.html>

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