



Identifying autism in toddlers

The Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers: M-CHAT

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It is now widely accepted that Autism Spectrum Disorders need to be identified as early as possible; that children and their families need to be referred on to appropriate services as soon as possible; that early intervention in autism is necessary and beneficial and the earlier the better.

Best practice in the identification of Autism Spectrum Disorders

Current discussion of best practice in the early identification of Autism Spectrum Disorders includes the importance of using of screening tools. The UK National Autistic Society report “National Initiative for Autism: Screening and Assessment”, (2003) recommends that there be a general developmental assessment that clearly identifies developmental concerns, developmental history and includes an autism screen when children present with developmental problems. The document specifies the following *absolute indicators* for referral for a general developmental assessment:

- No babble, pointing or other gesture by 12 months
- No single words by 18 months
- No 2-word spontaneous (non-echoed) phrases by 24 months
- ANY loss of any language or social skills at ANY age

We have previously discussed some other useful autism screening tools (the CHaT, the DBC – Autism Screening Algorithm and the DBC- Early Screen (see ACT NOW fact sheets 9 and 10). The Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (M-CHAT; Robins, Fein

& Barton, 1999) is another screening tool for the early detection of autism. It is an American adaptation of the UK Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (CHaT). The M-CHAT differs from the CHaT. It is a 23 item checklist completed by parents and is designed to screen for autism in toddlers between the ages 16 to 30 months. A parent can complete the items independently and the M-CHAT does not require clinician observation.

There are 23 items on the checklist and 6 of these are critical.

2. Does your child take an interest in other children?
7. Does your child ever use his/her index finger to point, to indicate interest in something?
9. Does your child ever bring objects over to you (parent) to show you something?
13. Does your child imitate you? (e.g., you make a face - will your child imitate it?)
14. Does your child respond to his/her name when you call?
15. If you point at a toy across the room, does your child look at it?

These critical items relate to

- *Joint attention* - Protodeclarative pointing, following a point, and bringing objects to show parent
- *Social relatedness* - Interest in other children and imitation
- *Communication* - Responding to name

These items as a group discriminate children with an autism spectrum disorder from other children. A child fails the M-CHAT when 2 or more CRITICAL ITEMS are failed or when any 3 items are failed. Yes/No answers convert to Pass/Fail responses. If a child fails the M-CHAT once, you are advised to re-screen the child approximately one month later. If a child fails a second time, that child should be referred to a specialist team for diagnosis. This screening tool should be used to alert health professionals for the need of a diagnostic assessment performed by professionals trained in autism assessments.

It must be stressed that the M-CHAT does not allow a clinician to make a diagnosis of an Autism Spectrum Disorder, but is a very useful clinical tool that has excellent sensitivity and specificity. Positive results suggest a high risk for an Autism Spectrum Disorder, and indicate referral to a multi-disciplinary assessment team.

What if the child's screening results are positive? What now?

If a child scores at or above the cut off for the screening test they have been identified as at risk of a diagnosis of an ASD. It is important at this stage to stress to parents that this is a screen, NOT a diagnosis but the referral on for further assessment is necessary.

- Present results in an honest, respectful and caring way
- Remember that parents will respond in a range of ways; sadness, anger, denial, relief...
- Avoid using jargon and be mindful of your non-verbal communication
- Discuss results in the context of normal child development
- Encourage parents to ask *you* questions too
- Provide information about referral pathways, services and support
- Work together to develop an action plan
- Offer ongoing support

Parents may want time to think about this and you need to have, literally at your fingertips, information about where they can go, what the local options are and the costs involved.

Websites

A useful, authorised website for professionals to visit for further information about autism and screening tools.

www.firstsigns.org/

The M-CHAT can be downloaded from this site that also lists authors' instructions and permission for use.

www2.gsu.edu/~wwwpsy/faculty/M-CHAT.pdf

or this one:

www.dbpeds.org/media/mchat.pdf