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## Autism cases on the rise

When Gerri Taylor's son was just 2 years old, he would stand in a corner with his hands over his ears and close his eyes.

Taylor would watch as her child literally spiraled into his own head.

At 27 months old, he was diagnosed with autism. The diagnosis came just a few months after he stopped speaking and interacting with people. His mother said he withdrew from everything.

"If you can't communicate in some way, your life is going to be frustrating," said Taylor, who is the facilitator of the Regional Autism Network Group in Prattville. "The good thing about (autism) awareness, is that it has made some people become more willing to see that there is some problem. A problem that can truly affect your life. And the life of your family."

Autism is a diagnosis being given to more U.S. children than ever before, largely because of more awareness and better diagnosis.

According to new government statistics released in April as part of Autism Awareness Month, the rate is about one in 88, which means autism is nearly twice as common as it appeared in data the government gathered 10 years ago. The largest increases are in Hispanic children.

"Awareness has changed because more people are being diagnosed due to better identification," said Melanie Jones, executive director of the Autism Society of Alabama. "There is greater need overall, more families and communities are affected and are speaking out."

### Early detection is key

Unlike Taylor's son, a report recently issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 40 percent of children weren't diagnosed until after age 4. Evidence shows that children who are identified early and get help have the best chance for reaching their potential.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends autism screening for all children at age 18 months and 2 years.

Tracey Doran's daughter, who turns 14 in May, was diagnosed in 2002 when she was almost 4 years old.

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“When she was 18 months old, we thought she had autism, but thought there was nothing wrong until I had no choice to say there is something wrong,” she said. “The awareness of autism has improved a lot since she was diagnosed. It seems more people know about it and the signs of what people have when they have autism.”

The causes of autism are not easy to pinpoint, though a study released this week links a mother’s obesity to autism.

Researchers found that the risk of autism increased by nearly 70 percent when moms were obese during their pregnancies, while the risk of having a baby with some other neurodevelopmental disorder doubled, according to the study published online in *Pediatrics*.

Typically, a woman is considered obese when she’s about 35 pounds overweight or more, or has a body-mass index of 25, the study states.

Regardless of the varying opinions behind the causes, Alabama needs to screen children for autism earlier, Jones said.

The median age for a diagnosis in the state is 61 months, according to the CDC. Autism can be reliably diagnosed at 18 months, so “we still have catching up to do,” Jones added.

The waiting list to be diagnosed in Alabama is six months. Doran said her 7-year-old son is on that list.

“In the meantime, you just deal with it everyday,” she said, adding her daughter’s issues are more social, where she believes her son’s are more behavioral.

“For my daughter, it is more about her personal space,” she said. “And my son ... he counts everything.”

Jones noted that the Autism Society of Alabama is participating in the CDC’s “Learn the Signs. Act Early” campaign in order to bring more awareness and resources to the state.

## Understanding and patience

Doran, who said her daughter sometimes rocks if she becomes too overwhelmed, said people tend to automatically assume autistic children also have an intellectual disability.

She said she has noticed an increase in autism awareness in just over the past three years.

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But it's not the autism organizations that have educated her — it's her children.

"When you have a child who has been diagnosed, it takes a lot of acceptance, understanding and patience, where I had none before," she said.

Taylor wants people to know autism is not a death sentence, or a disease.

"The way I look at autism, is that everybody, every person that is living, is different," she said. "Everyone is on the spectrum of humanity. Autism happens to be a disorder that is more recognizable now. I don't think there is necessarily any number of an increase, but I think professionals have learned how to diagnose it and recognize it."

Taylor becomes offended when she hears that there is a need for "a cure" for autism.

"For that person, it turns them into an object," she said. "If I only had one thing to say about autism, the only thing that I could share with the world, it is that autism is not the end of your life. It's just a different thing."

*The Associated Press contributed to this report.*

## WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism spectrum disorders are a group of developmental disabilities that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges.

Signs of autism, according to Autism Speaks, include:

- No big smiles or other warm, joyful expressions by six months or thereafter
- No back-and-forth sharing of sounds, smiles or other facial expressions by nine months or thereafter
- No babbling by 12 months
- Loss of speech or babbling or social skills at any age
- No words by 16 months
- No two-word meaningful phrases (without imitating or repeating) by 24 months
- No back-and-forth gestures by 12 months

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BY THE NUMBERS• About 1 in every 88 children has been identified with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

- ASDs are almost five times more common among boys (1 in 54) than among girls (1 in 252)
- About 1 in 6 children in the U.S. had a developmental disability in 2006-2008, ranging from mild disabilities such as speech and language impairments to serious developmental disabilities, such as intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy and autism

— *Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*

LEARN MORE: • **Online:** [autism-alabama.org](http://autism-alabama.org), [cdc.gov](http://cdc.gov), [autismspeaks.org](http://autismspeaks.org)

• **Locally:** For more information on the Regional Autism Network Group, which provides autism networking opportunities and support groups for those in the River Region, call 868-1589.

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