

MY CHILD SEEMS NORMAL. WHY ARE YOU SCREENING?

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EARLY IDENTIFICATION AND TREATMENT OF HEALTH ISSUES IN CHILDHOOD LEAD TO LONG-LASTING POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR BOTH THE CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES.

Developmental and behavior problems are especially difficult to identify early, because each child's personality and temperament is unique. Detecting problems before they become apparent or disruptive can be challenging, even for physicians, which is why we rely on screening tests to aid in early identification.

Screening tests are given to all children, even if everything seems normal, to allow for early detection of problems. The most common ones are for vision and hearing. These tests can help identify risks or conditions well before they show definite symptoms or cause problems.

It's important to understand that screening is not the same as diagnosis. Screening is a brief assessment used for all children with the purpose of early identification to determine who should receive a more detailed evaluation. The American Academy of Pediatrics has set a schedule for all the screening tests that children should have.

With autism, for example, the earliest symptoms are often present as soon as 18 months of age but may be subtle and go undetected during routine pediatric visits. And since early intensive intervention can prevent some longer-term autism-related disabilities, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends **ALL** children be screened for autism twice: at 18 months, and again at 24 months of age.

DON'T BE AFRAID OF A RECOMMENDATION FOR SCREENING; SCREENING TESTS ARE AN IMPORTANT TOOL TO EITHER:

- Reassure you that your child is on a good path in terms of their health and development,

OR

- Get your child the care they might need as soon as possible.

DEPENDING ON THE RESULTS OF SCREENING, YOUR PEDIATRICIAN MAY

- Advise you that no further action is necessary (but may want to screen again in a few months)
- Conduct additional tests themselves; or
- Refer your child to a specialist for more intensive assessment.

For the vision screening commonly required for entry to school and childcare, anywhere from 1-6 out of 100 children require further evaluation. For autism screening, in one study of 16,000 children, only 2 out of 100 had a positive screening; and only half of those children actually had the diagnosis.

For those few children who were diagnosed, they had the opportunity for life-changing early treatment. Early intervention — especially a combination of professional and parental interactions — has been shown to reduce the need for services when children reach school age.

If you have concerns about your child's health or behavior, don't wait for screenings to talk to your pediatrician. If you think your child may have problems with their hearing, vision, speech, or movement, or if you or others have worries about their behavior, please let your pediatrician know as soon as possible.

It's always a good idea to have things checked. If it's nothing, you'll gain peace of mind. If it's something, getting help early will make a big difference in your child's success in school and in life later on.

**This handout was developed for parents by Steven Merahn, MD FAAP, Chief Medical Officer at UNIFI Autism Care*