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## 1-year-olds can show traits of autism, UW study finds

**By Carina Stanton**

*Seattle Times staff reporter*

Confirming what parents of autistic children have told doctors for years, Seattle researchers concluded in a new study that children as young as 1 year old can show signs of autism.

The University of Washington study released yesterday says 1-year-olds later diagnosed with early-onset autism were less likely than other children to babble or point at objects and people.

The study also says that children with a different kind of autism, autistic regression, used complex baby talk twice as much as typical infants by age 1 and then regressed significantly by their second birthday.

### Signs of autism

These behaviors, seen in many children from time to time, are persistent and debilitating in those with autism

- No pointing by age 1
- No baby talk by age 1; no single words by 16 months; no two-word phrases by age 2
- Any loss of language skills at any time
- No pretend playing
- Little interest in making friends
- Obsessive focus on a narrow interest
- Repetitive body movements, such as hand flapping or rocking
- Little or no eye contact

Autism is a neurological disorder that affects a person's ability to talk and engage emotionally. Experts estimate that it affects as many as one in 167 people.

While the causes are still unknown, researchers continue to investigate environmental, biological and genetic links to the disorder. Some parents suggest that exposure to mercury in vaccines may be the cause, but several studies have disputed that claim.

Led by Geraldine Dawson, director of the University of Washington Autism Center, the study is based on the behavioral analysis of 56 children videotaped on their first and second birthdays.

The videos included children with no developmental disabilities and kids with early-onset autism or autistic regression.

The research provides the first hard evidence for autistic regression, which accounts for an estimated 25 percent of all diagnosed cases in the U.S., according to the study published yesterday in the *Archives of General Psychiatry*.

"The study lends further support to the need for parents to be aware of possible autism symptoms by at least 12 months of age,"

- Fixations on a single object
- Unusually strong resistance to changes in routines
- Oversensitivity to certain sounds, textures or smells
- Difficulty reading nonverbal social cues, such as facial expressions

*Source: University of Washington  
Autism Center*

Dawson said. "By intervening earlier, we might be able to have more effect because the brain is still developing and more plastic, and thus more responsive to treatment."

The research also suggests that in addition to early screening for autism, screening should be done at ages 2 and 3 to find those who develop normally at first and then regress into autism, she said.

While the study did not investigate the causes of autistic regression, findings suggest there might be various types of autism that have different early symptoms and might be different biologically or genetically, Dawson said. "Our next goal is to examine biological differences between children with early-onset autism versus those

with regression," she said.

*Carina Stanton: [cstanton@seattletimes.com](mailto:cstanton@seattletimes.com)*

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