



Early Years

Developmental surveillance for autism



Background

The importance of early recognition and diagnosis of autism is well established as this facilitates access to targeted early learning and functional supports for very young children. Despite increased knowledge on early presentations of autism in infancy and toddlerhood, children in Australia are rarely diagnosed with autism prior to 4-years of age.



Aim

Our foremost objective was to promote the early identification of children on the autism spectrum by training community service providers so that the majority of children are diagnosed prior to 3-years of age.



Who took part

276

Early child health nurses in Victoria and Tasmania.

500

Children who were identified as showing early signs of autism and referred for a further assessment, and their parents/caregivers.



How we did the research



The nurses were trained on the early signs of autism and how to monitor these signs using Social Attention and Communication Surveillance (SACS-Revised).



Across the Victorian sites and Tasmania, 19,512 children were monitored at routine check-ups between 12- to 24-months of age. In Victoria, all children continued to be monitored until 42-months of age.

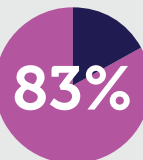


Children showing early signs were referred for a developmental and diagnostic assessment.



What we found

The SACS-R training and implementation was highly evaluated by nurses across sites.



In Victoria, 83% of all children identified by nurses with a high likelihood of autism on the SACS-R were diagnosed with autism.

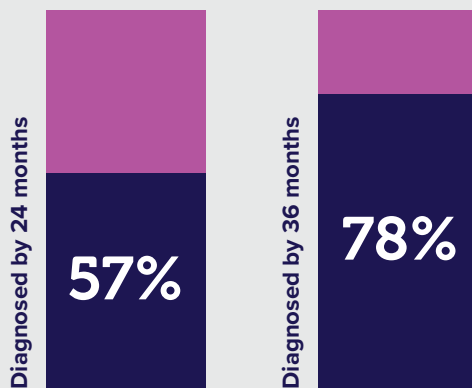


This number was lower in Tasmania (60%), most likely because half of the state did not have an 18-month check-up for children.

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What we found



At the Victorian site, 57% of children on the autism spectrum were identified and diagnosed by 24 months of age, with 78% identified and diagnosed by 36 months of age.



All children not diagnosed with autism at each site either had a developmental or language delay, meaning that all identified children were in need of developmental supports.



Children identified and diagnosed with autism had lower cognitive scores at each age (12-, 18-, 24- and 42-months) than those children who had a language or developmental delay. The difference between chronological age and cognitive age became more marked over time in the autistic group.



This finding highlights the importance of identifying children as early as possible and providing them with ready access to much needed supports to bolster their learning potential.

The psychometric properties of the SACS-R, calculated within the Victorian implementation, were robust, and can thus be strongly recommended.



Who did the research



LA TROBE
UNIVERSITY



Olga Tennison
Autism Research Centre

UNIVERSITY of
TASMANIA 

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Find out more

Download the final report and executive summary on the Autism CRC website: autismcrc.com.au/report/developmental-surveillance

Find out more details about SACS-R: latrobe.edu.au/otarc/research/identification-and-diagnosis

