



"Autism Awareness- What Parents in Berks County Really Need to Know"

By Jennifer Lukach Bradley, Esquire

Every April we celebrate "Autism Awareness Month." Most of us by now know the staggering statistic: Approximately 1 in 150 children are diagnosed with Autism every year. Most of us also probably have heard that early diagnosis and early intervention services are the keys to managing the disorder and can have a significant impact on the development of children with Autism. However, do parents know the signs and symptoms of the disorder? And do they know where to go for services? Parents need to be educated on both these important issues – not just on the statistics.

Autism is classified as a complex neurobiological disorder. Most people diagnosed with autism will experience symptoms throughout their entire life. While it occurs in all ethnic and social groups, Autism is more likely to impact the life of a boy than a girl. Autism itself is classified as part of a group called Autism Spectrum Disorders and can present itself with a myriad of symptoms, from mild to severe. It can be diagnosed prior to age 3. Parents should look for these common signs:

- Minimal eye contact
- Delayed speech
- Failure to respond when their name is called (between 10 and 12 months)
- Failure to use gestures to communicate (between 12 and 15 months)
- Failure to play with a variety of toys or failure to play with a toy in a variety of ways (between 12 to 18 months)
- Failure to seek out others (signaling problems with social skills) (between 12 to 15 months).

Parents should keep in mind that all children develop differently. However, if a parent is concerned, a simple evaluation should be explored. Pediatricians generally will track a child's progress and may evaluate a child for Autism. However, parents may not be aware that federal legislation exists to ensure their right to a free evaluation and free Early Intervention services. The federal legislation guaranteeing these services, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), provides services from birth to age 21.

If you live in Berks County, have a child under the age of 3 years old, and suspect that your child may have Autism (or another disability), you should contact Service Access and Management (www.sam-inc.org) and request an Early Intervention Intake for children under the age of three at 610-236-0530. If your child is eligible for Early Intervention services, those services are provided through the Berks County Office of Mental Health and Mental Retardation

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(MHMR). Services are delivered via a written document entitled an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). Services may include information on how children develop, early childhood education and interventions which can help a child with hearing, seeing, talking, moving or learning; ideas for how a family can help their child at home or in the community; and design plans to help a family enhance their child's growing and learning. The IFSP describes the services received by the child. It will describe the medical and support services as well as document the frequency of the service and the provider of the service. The IFSP is based on the child's strengths and the family's concerns and priorities, and are typically provided in the child's home or occasionally in daycare settings.

If your child is between the ages of 3 to school age you should contact the Berks County Intermediate Unit (IU) at 610-987-8542. Services for children are then provided through the IU via an Early Intervention Individualized Education Program. Services are typically provided at the child's preschool and occasionally in the child's home.

Once your child enters school, your school district becomes responsible for providing services via an Individualized Education Plan. Services are most often provided at the child's school and are available until the child turns 21 or until he or she graduates.

Indeed the statistics are staggering. However, a parent of an autistic child needs to know where to turn for help, not just the statistics.

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