

NEWS [/NEWS]

Two reasons why many of NJ's autistic kids never get early intervention services

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➡ In four New Jersey counties over 10 years, fewer than half of autistic children under the age of 3 received early intervention services, a Rutgers study found.
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There are two key reasons too few New Jersey children with autism get early intervention services, Rutgers University adjunct professor Josephine Shenouda said.

"There's a problem in the detection and the connection," she said.

Shenouda was the lead researcher [on a new study \(https://www.rutgers.edu/news/only-half-children-autism-receive-early-intervention-services\)](https://www.rutgers.edu/news/only-half-children-autism-receive-early-intervention-services) examining disparities in early intervention program participation. Researchers looked at medical and special education records from Essex, Hudson, Ocean, and Union counties from 2006 through 2016, and found fewer than half of autistic children received services before 36 months of age.

Children in affluent areas were 80% more likely to receive care than children in poorer areas. Black and Hispanic children were less likely to receive services than non-Hispanic white children.

The data was specific to the four New Jersey counties, but Shenouda said it's likely that similar patterns play out elsewhere.

Early intervention services can make a tremendous difference in a child's development, health researchers say. According to the National Institutes of Health

(<https://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/autism/conditioninfo/treatments/early-intervention#:~:text=Research%20shows%20that%20early%20diagnosis,on%20symptoms%20and%20later%20sl>

some autistic children who get interventions before the ages of 2 or 3 make so much progress that they're no longer considered to have autism spectrum disorder when they get older.

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"There was a randomized control study that was about 10 years ago that showed that when we intervene early, a child can gain in their adaptive function and their IQ score," Shenouda said.

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates access to early intervention services for children with disabilities, but Shenouda said many children simply aren't screened at a young age. Even when they are, parents sometimes don't act on that information, or don't know options are available to them.

"Information by itself is not sufficient," she said. "We have to find effective strategies to improve that follow-through to connect the parents to the services."

Most parents don't know they don't need formal referrals or diagnosis to pursue early intervention services, Shenouda said.

"They could just call in and say, 'I'm concerned about my child, and I would like an evaluation,'" she said.

New Jersey makes information about seeking services available through the state Department of Health website (<https://www.nj.gov/health/fhs/eis/>). Costs vary, depending on a family's income, but families who make less than three times the federal poverty level can get services at no cost.

The first step, Shenouda said, is helping families recognize when their children need help.

"Early universal autism screening is key," she said. "That is the first step we need to have better autism screeners, more efficient, more valid autism screeners."

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