

NEWS

Movie-based test helps parents recognize autism in infants

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A video-based screening tool can flag infants who are later diagnosed with autism as early as 6 months of age. Researchers presented the unpublished results yesterday at the **2017 International Meeting for Autism Research** in San Francisco, California.

The tool, called the VIRSA, presents parents with a series of 20-second video clips that show a child the same age as their own interacting with a parent. Parents watch pairs of videos and in each case select the video with the child who seems more like their own. (VIRSA stands for Video-Referenced Infant Rating System for Autism.)

Typical screening tools ask parents a series of questions about behaviors in their children that may signal autism. VIRSA provides a visual that may make it easier for parents to recognize these behaviors, says **Sally Ozonoff**, vice chair for research in psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the MIND Institute of the University of California, Davis, who presented the work.

“Parents may recognize something when they see it, in a way they might not if they were just reading a statement about a particular behavior,” Ozonoff says.

Ozonoff and her colleagues originally collected the videos for a long-term study of infant siblings of children with autism. These so-called ‘**baby sibs**’ are about 20 times more likely than a typical child to be diagnosed with autism.

The videos cover a range of ages and degrees of ability. Some of the children have no developmental issues; others are later diagnosed with autism or have some autism-like features but don’t qualify for a diagnosis.

Comparing clips:

The children in the first two videos are quite different from each other. In the next pair of videos, the children are more similar. After about eight video pairs, parents arrive at a child who is a lot like theirs.

Parents repeat the entire video series once — a process that takes just 10 to 15 minutes. Then they receive a score from 1 to 10, with lower scores indicating possible autism.

The researchers tested the tool in 100 baby sibs and 50 children with no family history of autism. Parents completed the VIRSA online at home when their children were 6, 9, 12 and 18 months old. They also completed two standard autism screening tests: the Infant Toddler Checklist and the Vineland Motor Scale.

Baby sibs who were later diagnosed with autism scored significantly lower on the VIRSA than those who were not. This difference was evident as early as 6 months.

“This, of course, is months to years before they’re diagnosed,” Ozonoff says. “There’s something about the VIRSA and the videos it presents that helps parents tell us there’s something different about their child.”

The researchers are still analyzing data from the study. So far, they have data from only about one-third of the children at the 36-month visit.

“We won’t know that the VIRSA is easier for parents to use than a questionnaire until we have all the data,” Ozonoff says. “Then we will be able to compare how the VIRSA and traditional paper-and-pencil screening measures perform in identification of [autism], how long each one takes, and how easy parents find each format to complete.”

The researchers plan to test the tool in more children who have no family history of autism.

For more reports from the 2017 International Meeting for Autism Research, please [click here](#).