

Mizzou program significantly reduces delay in autism diagnosis

15 August 2018



Kristin Sohl, associate professor of child health, says that technology can be used to train physicians to provide critical initial autism diagnoses to shorten wait times. Credit: MU

When Katie New first suspected her son had autism, she had to wait 18 months for a diagnosis. She also had to travel nearly 100 miles from her hometown of Poplar Bluff, Missouri, to see an autism specialist in Cape Girardeau. When she had similar concerns regarding her younger child, she was able to get the diagnosis in less than one month thanks to ECHO Autism, a University of Missouri program. A new study on the effectiveness of ECHO Autism shows that the program significantly reduces diagnostic wait times for young children at highest risk for autism and saved families an average of 172.7 miles in travel for diagnosis.

"Stories like Katie's are why the MU Thompson Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders is committed to improving access to care in underserved communities around the world," said Kristin Sohl, associate professor of child health and director of ECHO Autism. "To shorten wait times, we are using technology to train physicians to provide the critical initial diagnoses."

The ECHO Autism team, made up of researchers from the University of Missouri, the University of Virginia and University of New Mexico, developed and tested a new training program that expanded upon the original ECHO Autism model. In the new model, they added hands-on training and diagnostic tools to assist physicians with screenings. Additionally, ECHO Autism offers ongoing video-based coaching and mentorship.

The researchers worked with 18 primary care providers in underserved areas across Missouri to study the program's effectiveness. After attending a one and a half day in-person training, they then participated in ongoing video-based coaching every two weeks for one year. The video-based coaching connected local physicians to an interdisciplinary team of [autism](#) experts, including a pediatrician specializing in autism, a clinical psychologist, a parent of a child with autism, a social worker, a dietitian and a psychiatrist. The expert team provided brief lectures focused on best-practice guidelines for autism diagnosis and treatment.

"In the first study of the program we found notable improvements in autism screening and [diagnosis](#)," Sohl said. "All participants reported that they had changed their practice as a result of participation in the program, and they felt confident in their abilities to screen and diagnose autism early on, which is incredibly beneficial to families."

One pediatrician who participated in the new training program believes it is critically important for families and primary care physicians.

"ECHO Autism is an amazing learning opportunity for physicians," said Claudia Preuschoff, a pediatrician in Poplar Bluff. "Through the combination of hands-on learning and access to experts, it provides the necessary information to provide quick diagnoses, meaning families have earlier access to services for their children."

"I'm such a fan of this program," New said. "Thanks to ECHO Autism, my youngest is now receiving speech therapy at 21 months, as opposed to three and a half years. No parent should ever have to wait more than a year to know if their child might have autism."

"ECHO Autism STAT: accelerating early access to [autism diagnosis](#)," was published in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.

More information: Micah O. Mazurek et al, ECHO Autism STAT: Accelerating Early Access to Autism Diagnosis, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s10803-018-3696-5](#)

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

APA citation: Mizzou program significantly reduces delay in autism diagnosis (2018, August 15) retrieved 4 May 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-08-mizzou-significantly-autism-diagnosis.html>

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