

The New Normal: 1/90?

Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders –What Does This Mean for Families

By Judith Aronson-Ramos, MD

Director of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics of South Florida

www.draronsonramos.com

The American Academy of Pediatrics recently published a study about the prevalence of ASD based on a comprehensive interview of over 78,000 families in 2007*. The results of this study found the prevalence of autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) is about 1 percent of U.S. children..

For this study thousands of parents of children between the ages of 3 and 17 were questioned in a telephone interview. They were asked whether they had ever been told by a health care provider that their child had autism, Aspergers Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD), or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). If parents said yes, they were then asked if their child still had the diagnostic label and if so, how severe were the symptoms.

Based on these parent interviews, the prevalence of ASD was 110 per 10,000 children (or 1 in 91), representing an estimated 637,000 children ages 3 to 17 with a current diagnosis of ASD in 2007. This is higher than the previous estimate from the CDC of 1 in 150 in 2002.

Researchers have suggested the increased prevalence might be partly explained by differences between in the ways the two surveys were conducted. This new survey includes Aspergers Syndrome, PDD-NOS, and Autism Spectrum Disorder. In addition previous studies have shown the average age of diagnosis is decreasing, which leads to an increase in total prevalence at any one point in time.

Odds for having autism were four times higher for boys than for girls, and white children were more likely than black children or multiracial children to have autism. Children diagnosed with ASD were also significantly less likely than other children to receive care in a medical home, and they had more problems obtaining referrals and coordinating their care. Parents of half the children with ASD described the condition as “mild.” Another third of parents described their child’s condition as moderate, and the remaining parents described it as severe.

About 38 percent of the children who were ever diagnosed with ASD were reported by their parents to no longer have that diagnosis. Researchers proposed several possible explanations, including the imprecision and difficulty of diagnosing very young children, who may no longer meet the criteria for ASD as they age. Children who had “lost” their autism diagnosis were more likely to be diagnosed with other developmental or mental health conditions, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, anxiety problems, or behavioral problems.

No study is perfect, this one included and there may be an “over labeling” bias in these numbers as more professionals and parents become aware of ASD’s. On another note, the positive outcomes for nearly 2/3 of the children in this study whose symptoms were either mild or lost their label this points to the very positive outcomes we can see in our children on the spectrum.

*The study, “The Prevalence of Parent-Reported Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children in the United States, 2007,” published in the Oct. 5 issue of *Pediatrics*, draws on data from the 2007 National Survey of Children’s Health, a telephone survey of parents conducted jointly by the Health Resources and Services Administration and by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Center for Health Statistics. The study can be found online through www.aap.org