

Two Questions Yet to Be Answered By the Oklahoma Autism Network

Two of the most commonly asked questions by parents, professionals, and legislators is “Why the increase in the number of children affected by autism?” and “How many children in Oklahoma have autism?” Unfortunately these questions have yet to be clearly and definitively answered.

Multiple theories exist as to the increase in the number of children being diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. One theory is that with more research and increased awareness children are being identified and diagnosed at a younger age than in the past. Another theory is that with the addition of Asperger Syndrome to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition in 1994, children with milder characteristics of autism are being diagnosed, contributing to larger numbers of children who qualify for an ASD diagnosis. Some individuals contribute the increase to the higher amount of pollutants in our environment. These theories are described in more detail in the American Academy of Pediatrics Identification and Evaluation of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (2007).

A study from the UC Davis M.I.N.D. Institute earlier this year (Hertz-Picciotto & Delwiche, 2009) studied the increased numbers of children affected by autism in California. The study found that the increase could not be fully accounted for by controlling for factors such as earlier diagnosis, including children with milder forms of autism in the ASD category, or children moving into the California school system for services. The authors, Hertz-Picciotto and Delwiche recommend that research dollars be equally spent between investigating the genetics of autism and the potential environmental causes of autism (2009). They also recommend that science continue to improve on the interventions that are available for treating autism.

The other unanswered question is “How many children in Oklahoma have autism?” Currently the Centers for Disease Control funds the Autism Developmental Disabilities and Monitoring (ADDM) Network. This Network is gathering information to determine baseline data about the prevalence of autism, determine how that prevalence changes over time, and to describe the population affected by autism. “Prevalence is the number of existing disease cases in a defined group of people during a specific time period. Public health professionals use prevalence measures to track a condition over time and to plan responses at local, regional, and national levels.” (CDC, January 2008). The CDC reported in 2008 that the current prevalence of autism is 1 in 150 8 year olds in certain parts of the country where this information was obtained. For additional information on how these numbers are obtained by the CDC visit their website at the link provided below.

We do not currently have a formal mechanism for tracking the number of Oklahomans of all ages with a diagnosis of ASD. The only current system we have is child count for students age 3-21 through the Oklahoma State Department of Education, Special Education Services (OSDE-SES). School districts are required to report the number to

OSDE-SES by the United States Department of Education (USDE), Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) as part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Child count includes all children receiving special education and related services in the public schools in Oklahoma at a certain point in time. According to the 2007- 2008 OSDE-SES child count, 2,297 children age 3 – 21 (OSDE, 2008) were receiving special education services under the category of autism. This number does not include children who may have a diagnosis of autism but are receiving special education services under another IDEA category, such as developmental delay or multiple disabilities.

The OSDE-SES system only tracks those children age 3 - 21 receiving services through the public school system. Unfortunately we do not currently have a system for tracking children who are not in the public education system or for tracking those who are younger than 3 years of age or are older than 21 years of age. For now, we can only estimate the number of individuals affected by autism in our state. Several groups are discussing this issue to develop a plan for tracking the number of individuals in Oklahoma affected by autism.

References

Centers for Disease Control: Autism Frequently Asked Questions: Prevalence of Autism. (cited January 2008). Available at:

http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/faq_prevalence.htm

Hertz-Picciotto, I. & Delwiche, L. (2009). The rise of autism and the role of age at diagnosis. *Epidemiology*, 20(1): 84-90.

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Resources

Summary of the UC Davis MIND Institute Study

http://www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/welcome/features/20090218_autism_environment/index.html