

Embracing Differences: Raising Awareness About Autism Spectrum Disorder and Down Syndrome

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Dear Esteemed Members of the *Indian Academy of Pediatrics* (IAP),

As we step into April and celebrate the 'Autism Awareness Month', I wish to draw your attention to this enigma called 'Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)' which demands our collective understanding and action. Studies have shown a staggering increase in the prevalence of ASD from 1 in every 2000 individuals to a concerning 1% more recently [1-3]. The rise in the incidence of ASD has been attributed to a multitude of factors including genetic and non-genetic elements like advancing age of parents, maternal obesity, alcohol consumption during pregnancy, use of antiepileptic drugs by the mother, perinatal insult to the fetus [4], in addition to an increased recognition of the condition due to improved awareness within the medical fraternity as well as society [5].

Early diagnosis and intervention are of paramount importance in addressing the challenges posed by ASD. Research strongly demonstrates that timely identification and appropriate interventions significantly improve long-term outcomes, mitigating symptoms and fostering the development of crucial skills [6]. In fact, ASD can often be identified in children before they reach the age of 2, and some children, whose development appeared typical, may experience regression around this critical period.

A plethora of screening tools, such as the Childhood Autism Rating Scale, Second Edition (CARS-2), Autism Spectrum Screening Questionnaire (ASSQ), Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (M-CHAT), and Pervasive Developmental Disorder Screening Test-2 (PDDST-2), are now readily available for clinicians. These tools enable early detection and intervention, providing a beacon of hope for a brighter future for affected children. With minimal additional time required in routine clinical practice, we can strive for better outcomes for our children.

Educational strategies, such as the renowned

Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH), offer structured teaching methodologies, utilize visual supports, and tailor environments to meet the unique needs of individuals with ASD. These interventions have shown remarkable efficacy in enhancing cognitive and adaptive skills, empowering individuals to navigate the world more confidently.

Amidst our efforts to diagnose and treat ASD, we must confront and dispel the myths that shroud this condition. Misinformation regarding vaccinations, contagiousness, or even parental abuse only serves to perpetuate the stigma and hinder progress. It is incumbent upon us to disseminate accurate information, debunk myths, and foster a culture of understanding and acceptance within our communities. On this World Autism Day on 2nd April, let us pledge to spread the right knowledge and increase awareness about ASD.

As we close on March, a month when we celebrated the Down Syndrome Day on 21 March, let us remember to fulfil our duty as responsible health professionals to help make public attitudes more accepting of *Down Syndrome*. The prevalence of Down Syndrome underscores the importance of community awareness and support. Through this campaign, we aim to eliminate the unfounded social stigmas that surround this condition.

As pediatricians, we shoulder the dual responsibility of both early diagnosis and prevention of Down syndrome, a genetic condition affecting approximately 1 in 650 to 1000 live births [7]. Our first task lies in the meticulous screening for various abnormalities associated with Down Syndrome, ensuring timely detection and intervention. This involves a comprehensive approach encompassing regular follow-up and screening for hypothyroidism, Hirschsprung's disease, leukemia, hearing impairments, ophthalmological issues, and developmental delay at the time of diagnosis and throughout the child's development.

Beyond diagnosis, our role extends to empowering the parents with knowledge and support. We must engage in open and empathetic communication, educating families about the condition and provide information about the available resources for the effective management. It is crucial to dispel misconceptions, alleviate fears, and reassure parents that while Down Syndrome presents unique challenges, it is a manageable condition. By emphasizing the potential for a fulfilling life with proper care and access to resources such as occupational therapy, we can instill hope and confidence in families facing this diagnosis.

As advocates for preventive healthcare, we advocate for prenatal screening and equipping prospective parents with the information they need to make informed decisions about pregnancy. By facilitating discussions about prenatal testing options and the implications of a positive diagnosis, we empower individuals to take proactive steps in their reproductive health journey.

In our commitment to comprehensive care, we recognize the importance of ongoing support for families navigating the complexities of raising a child with ASD or Down Syndrome. This entails fostering a network of support services, connecting families with community resources, and advocating for inclusive education and

social opportunities. Through collaboration with multidisciplinary teams and community organizations, we strive to create a supportive environment where every child, regardless of ability, can thrive and reach their full potential.

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