

Symposium Will Provide Latest Information on Autism Spectrum Disorders

AUTISM CENTER OFFERS COMMUNITY OUTREACH, CUTTING-EDGE TREATMENT, SUPPORT FOR RESEARCH

Leading experts will gather at Stanford University on May 12 to provide up-to-date information on autism spectrum disorders for parents, caregivers and educators.

The 5th Annual Autism Spectrum Disorders Update, a one-day conference, will cover the latest scientific advances and practical tips for parents. Speakers will discuss treatments, diagnostic tests, legal issues, the transition to adulthood, and common problems faced by patients and families.

The symposium, organized by the Stanford Autism Center at Packard Children's Hospital, is a key part of one of the center's missions: providing community service and outreach for families and care providers. Parents are often bombarded with information, and sifting the good from the bad can be a challenge.

"There are all kinds of information and misinformation," said Carl Feinstein, MD, director of the center. "Parents have a million questions."

Plenary speakers will address two key issues. Anna Penn, MD, PhD, a neonatologist at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital, will discuss how a child's environment before birth may play a role in these disorders—a hot topic since Stanford researchers reported last year that environmental factors are more important than previously thought. The center is also bringing in Peter Gerhardt, EdD, an educator at the McCarton School in New York City, who specializes in helping autistic teenagers adapt their behavior to different social situations.

Breakout sessions with experts will cover a wide range of topics, including the value of genetic testing, whether brain imaging can aid diagnosis, and the status of oxytocin as a treatment. Common problems such as sleep, feeding and digestion, difficult behaviors, and motor coordination will also be addressed. Stanford Law

School attorneys will discuss legal rights and how parents can work effectively with schools to get proper services for their child.

The symposium is just one of many outreach services that the Autism Center provides. The center offers three educational series for parents per year, a parent support group, and classes for Spanish speakers. Waiting lists are coordinated with the Children's Health Council, a nonprofit children's health and educational organization, so that patients can be evaluated as soon as possible.

The center offers diagnosis and treatment for autism spectrum disorders, including autism, Asperger's disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS). One treatment being piloted is pivotal response therapy, which targets a major developmental issue and actively involves the parents in behavioral treatment. Another clinical trial is testing strategies to improve reciprocal social communication, such as looking other people in the eye.

The center supports cutting-edge research by Stanford scientists, who are investigating everything from the brain structure of autistic children to the contributions of genetics and the environment. Stanford neurobiologist Ricardo Dolmetsch, PhD, and his colleagues are taking skin cells from people with Timothy syndrome—a disorder often associated with autism—and growing stem cells that can be turned into neurons. The work could help scientists determine how the neurons of autistic people are different and test treatments on those cells.

Finally, the center is increasing outreach to the pediatric community. Pediatricians who want to perform early screening for autism are welcome to contact the center for help. "I can't tell you how important early diagnosis is," Feinstein said.

For more information about the Stanford Autism Center at Packard Children's Hospital, visit <http://autism.lpch.org> or call (650) 721-6327. To register for the symposium, visit <http://childpsychiatry.stanford.edu>.



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