

EDUCATING MEDICAL PROVIDERS ON DIAGNOSING AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER



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At The Center for Autism & Neurodevelopmental Disorders education and training are a key part of our mission. We strive to provide innovative educational and training opportunities to benefit individuals, parents, caregivers, and professionals impacted by neurodevelopmental disorders, including autism spectrum disorder.

Last year, with support from the UniHealth Foundation, The Center developed the UniHealth Autism Community Toolkit (ACT). This toolkit is a combination of three training programs - Improving Primary Care for Children with

Autism, Empowering Families, and Enhancing School-Parent Communication. Improving Primary Care for Children with Autism is a unique training specifically aimed at primary care providers, including general pediatricians, family practitioners, and nurse practitioners in Orange County. After meeting with multiple groups of primary care providers, a clear need for more training, practice, comfort and support was identified.

To address this need, Drs. Joe Donnelly and Robin Steinberg-Epstein developed a curriculum to better educate medical providers about patients with Autism Spectrum Disorders. The 12-hour program includes information about early warning signs, screening, and surveillance, diagnostic evaluations, communicating the diagnosis, etiology, outcomes, treatment planning, managing comorbidities, and sharing resources.

The course has been offered twice, training a combined total of 75 primary care providers. Within hours of the initial flier being sent, more than 120 physicians reached out to express interest in the training showing us the tremendous need for these educational opportunities.

This training is incredibly important for a number of reasons. There are thousands of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders living in Orange County and there are not nearly enough providers to address the diagnostic and ongoing medical needs of these children within our community.



Many of these children wait to be seen by physicians. Additionally, many go unidentified because of limited access to screening tools. Our hope is that we can increase capacity in Orange County to provide additional options and services to these children and their families.

Encouraging primary care providers to use autism-specific screening tools is the first step. We need to identify children as early as possible to promote better outcomes. Additionally, primary care providers can and should make diagnostic decisions when appropriate. This enables children and their families to better access much-needed services. We also want primary care providers to feel more comfortable managing healthcare for children with autism, regardless of whether or not they made the initial diagnosis. The Center provides many of these services, but we cannot operate in isolation. We need help from other community resources to provide ongoing support for individuals with autism and their families. Through training and education, we can enhance community collaboration and provide high-quality care for our families in Orange County.

**This blog post is part of a series highlighting The Center's UniHealth Autism Community Toolkit. Check back for features on the other two prongs of the program.*

