

## **Autism: early detection and intervention is essential**

Recently, the Centers for Disease Control rocked the nation with a study concluding that the incidence of autism is higher than previously thought, affecting 1 in 150 children.

That news prompted speculation as to what's driving the numbers upward, but an equally important question for parents and policymakers is what are we to do for this large and growing population of children with extraordinarily challenging needs?

As the parent of a 19-year-old, autistic son and assistant director of a residential program for autistic children that produces some miraculous results, I see cause for hope if we make the appropriate care for these children a national imperative.

Twenty years ago, when I learned my son had autism, there was little information and few resources. Today, we know more. Parents have options (if they are lucky enough to access them.) And with intensive early intervention, children with autism, even those with severe cases, have the opportunity to reach their personal potential and achieve semi-independence.

The program I oversee is located in DesPlaines, Ill., on the outskirts of Chicago, but the children we serve come from as far away as West Virginia. It is one of the most heart-rending experiences to watch a parent of an autistic child, who struggled for years to care for him or her at home, leave that child in the care of strangers.

But the intensive help children with severe autism need requires the nearly constant attention of a highly skilled person – an impossibility for a parent who is raising other children, working outside the home, or simply managing the daily responsibilities of a life and home.

It is not uncommon for us to take in teenagers who never learned to use the bathroom, feed themselves, wash or dress themselves. Children who come to us often have few life skills, no ability to communicate, and severe acting out behaviors. In fact, the inability to communicate fuels the frustration that finds expression in destructive, out-of-control behaviors. Giving an autistic child a means of communicating, whether through sign language, a picture card system, or a method adapted just for them, unlocks a whole new world and is truly transformative.

Which leads me to another critical take-away from the CDC report: Early detection and intervention is essential. While we make near miraculous progress with many of the older autistic children we serve, the greatest opportunity for helping children reach their fullest potential exists with the very young. If we are facing a future in which one of every 150 children has autism, it becomes a societal imperative to identify autistic children very young and get them the intensive help they need.

Lastly, one of the greatest challenges in treating autism is the great degree to which it varies from individual to individual. From a child who needs constant sound stimulation

to one who can't tolerate any noise. From a child who is soothed by flashing lights to one who is soothed by the dark. A one-size-fits-all approach to autism doesn't work. Any truly effective program for children with autism will meet them where they are, acknowledge their unique needs, and adapt just for them.

Parents need to know that hope is possible, even with a diagnosis of autism. But they can't and shouldn't have to go it alone. As a society, we must make early detection and effective treatment a priority.

***Sue Young is Assistant Executive Director of the Camelot Schools of DesPlaines,  
[www.camelotforkids.org](http://www.camelotforkids.org)***