



The New England Center
for Children®
Autism Education and Research

THE NEW ENGLAND CENTER FOR CHILDREN ANNOUNCES RESEARCH STUDY ON AUTISM IN INFANTS

*The Infant Sibling Project Seeks to Improve Early Identification
and Treatment of Autism in Infants*

Southborough, Mass. – March 7, 2019 – The New England Center for Children® (NECC®), a global leader in autism education and research for children with autism, announced today the Infant Sibling Project, a research study to identify early signs of autism in infant siblings of children with autism and to develop interventional treatments.

Led by Dr. Becky MacDonald, the Infant Sibling Project seeks to replicate and expand research by Graupner and Sallows (2017) of the Wisconsin Early Autism Project that identified early signs of autism in infants. While existing research on children with autism indicate that symptoms first appear after 6 months, some indicators may be detectable much earlier. The Infant Sibling Project will further identify and study these indicators in the first months of life. Currently, clinicians will not diagnose autism prior to a child’s first birthday, missing a potential opportunity for early intervention.

“Our hope is the Infant Sibling Project will reveal that earlier age and greater intensity of treatment will result in best outcomes for infants and children with autism,” said Dr. MacDonald. “If our findings resemble those of Graupner and Sallows (2017), we will have a robust set of data to add to the field of autism. By initiating treatment as soon as deficits are detected, under 6 months of age, we may increase the likelihood that these babies will not be diagnosed with autism by age 3.”

About the Infant Sibling Project: Identification, Intervention, Therapy

The Infant Sibling Project includes examination of potential early behavioral markers that may predict a later diagnosis of autism. These pilot data combined with the outcomes from Graupner and Sallows (2017) will be the first empirical evaluation of very early onset autism.

The Infant Sibling Project will entail weekly developmental screenings to detect and monitor the emergence of any symptoms at a micro-level. This procedure is unique in the field as most researchers evaluating symptomatology do not assess children at weekly intervals.

In NECC’s most recent work to date, one child has been identified as symptomatic based on these behavioral deficit markers beginning at 8 weeks of age. Once a baby is identified as symptomatic, treatment begins immediately, meaning that for some children, treatment begins

within the first few months of life. Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapists work 1:1 with each symptomatic baby for 15-20 hours per week using a treatment that includes a combination of ABA and the Carolina Curriculum for Infants.

Parents will also be trained to implement the Babies in Responsive Play (BIRP) curriculum to teach targeted skills in the child's daily activities using the principles of ABA.

In their current treatment work, Dr. MacDonald and her staff have seen increases in performance on targeted skills once therapy is initiated. This allows for the baby to start to "catch up" to typical performance and safeguards against losing skills over time.

Because this therapy is unique to children under 6 months of age, NECC will develop a manual that prescribes activities to teach autism-specific social skills to infants while remaining sensitive to the developmental needs of the infants. Using activities framed in the context of play and social interaction, NECC can provide many opportunities for learning in the natural environment. NECC's goal is to work collaboratively with Graupner and Sallows (2017) to create this manual for other practitioners and parents.

Seeking Further Infant Sibling Participants

The NECC study currently has 18 infant siblings of children with autism ranging in age from newborn to 8 months old. In order to determine whether these behavioral deficits are indeed related to a future diagnosis of ASD we will need a larger sample size. Dr. MacDonald continues to seek study participants. Babies must be under 6 months of age and be a sibling of a child diagnosed with autism. Please contact NECC at 508-481-1015 or email Dr. MacDonald at bmacdonald@necc.org.

About The New England Center for Children

The New England Center for Children® (NECC®) is a world leader in education, research, and technology for children with autism. For more than 40 years, our community of teachers, researchers, and clinicians have been transforming lives and offering hope to children with autism and their families. NECC's award-winning services include home-based, day, and residential programs; public school partnerships and consulting; the John and Diane Kim Autism Institute; the ACE® ABA Software System (www.acenecc.org) currently used by more than 6,100 students and teachers in 27 states and 10 countries; and ABAPLUS™, an online professional learning platform for educators. NECC received the 2017 Award for International Dissemination of Behavior Analysis from the Society for the Advancement of Behavior Analysis (SABA). A 501c3 non-profit, The New England Center for Children is based in Southborough, MA, and operates a center in Abu Dhabi, UAE. More information is available at www.necc.org.

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