Greater investment in autism research needed to give children a better start in life

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Researchers at the University of Birmingham are championing the call for increased investment into autism research on World Autism Day (Monday 2 April). Autism is a developmental condition that affects 1 in every 100 children in the UK.

Greater support for research into the early identification of language and social difficulties associated with the condition is needed to ensure children and their families receive tailored, high quality intervention and support as soon as possible. The University's Schools of Psychology and Education are pioneering a new community-oriented early assessment and intervention research model designed to ensure effective intervention with children with autism and related developmental difficulties at an earlier age.

Committed to helping the University's researchers tackle global health problems, autism research at Birmingham is an area supported by the Circles of Influence campaign, the University's innovative fundraising campaign which is successfully combining individual generosity with the University's support to achieve extraordinary results.

While general awareness of autism has grown in recent times, effective early intervention remains elusive for large numbers of children. Dr Joe McCleery, Lecturer in Developmental Neuroscience in the University's School of Psychology explains:

"Although many parents of children with autism express serious concerns about their child's language and social development between 18- and 30-months of age, currently autism cannot be effectively diagnosed until approximately 3-years of age. However, we can intervene before having a definite and accurate diagnosis with children who are delayed in the development of communication, language, or social interaction.

"Working with colleagues in the School of Education's Autism Centre for Education and Research, we are engaged in exploring the use of an early intervention with these young children. We are combining early psychological assessment and intervention with community-oriented methods with the aim of making a real-world impact on individuals and communities."

The goal of the research project is to develop and implement an assessment and intervention model that provides critical supports for increasing language and social communication skills at an age when the children are likely to benefit the most, ultimately increasing opportunity and quality of life across the lifespan. The researchers are also examining the differences between children who respond well to intervention and those who make less progress.

Due to the excellence in Dr McCleery's research and team, Autistica, the UK's leading autism research charity, has announced today that it will be awarding a fellowship in partnership with Fortis India. This fellowship will support a PhD student from India to join Dr McCleery's team at the University of Birmingham and initiate a study on early intervention for critical language and social imitation skills, which can then be utilised in India.

To make a gift to support the University's autism research, you can text AUTI00 followed by the amount you wish to donate to 70070.

Notes to Editors

Case Study and images available on request

Becky Heptinstall's three year old son, Robin, was diagnosed with autism by Dr McCleery's team. This diagnosis was vital to ensure Robin and his family has access to the appropriate support. His language and social skills were improved as a result of the 10 week intervention period of structured play sessions he underwent with the University's team of researchers.

Becky comments:

"My older son, Matthew, who is eight, has quite severe autism and when I started to think Robin was on the autistic spectrum as well, I brought him to the University for an assessment. On our first referral, the doctors didn't give him a diagnosis, but it was good to have back-up of the University team.

"When Robin first came to the University his play was very limited. He had no understanding of imaginative play and didn't really respond to body language or gestures. After the study, the change in him was just amazing. The researchers helped him engage with activities with other people and he began copying actions, gestures and even some words and phrases. The University helped give him the skills he needs to survive and he is now functioning with confidence at a mainstream school."

For more information, please contact Jo Kite, University of Birmingham Press Office via 0121 414 6681 or **j.r.kite@bham.ac.uk (mailto:j.r.kite@bham.ac.uk)** .

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