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SARRC: App-based pilot program can aid in autism diagnosis

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CONNECT

PHOENIX (CBS5) - Most experts agree, an early autism diagnosis gives children the best chance of overcoming the disorder.

But getting in to see a professional can take precious months, even a year.

Moniquea Luna, a Scottsdale mother of three, doesn't take her nearly 3-year-old son JoJo's enthusiasm and increased interaction for granted.

A year ago, before an autism diagnosis and behavioral therapy, he wouldn't even look her in the eye.

"Now, he will look me in the eye and he will play with me," she said.

Luna was first concerned about JoJo's development when he was 9-months-old.

But, she said her pediatrician wanted her to hold off on having her son tested for a developmental disorder.

"Time is really of the essence with these kids who are autistic, because they can get worse," Luna explained about finally reaching out to the [Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center](#) where JoJo got his diagnosis. "But if you catch it early on, you can help them."

That's why SARRC has developed a new program called [Naturalist Observation Diagnostic Assessment](#).

All parents need is a smartphone to upload video of their child's behavior through an [app](#).

"It's using technology to [connect](#) families to professionals who have the skills to diagnose autism," explained Dr. Christopher J. Smith, Ph.D., SARRC's Vice President and Director of Research.

Smith will oversee the NODA program, aimed at expediting the diagnosis of autism so parents can quickly get their children help.

"If you intervene early enough and the intervention is intensive enough, you can build skills in that individual, skills that are related to social communicative functioning, and you can change the course of that disorder, so they might not meet full criteria for the disorder in a year or so," he explained. "They could look like a completely different kid."

The 60-day pilot program, a joint venture between SARRC, Behavioral Imaging Solutions and Georgia [Tech](#), begins in January 2015 and is available to residents in Maricopa County.

The goal is to eventually roll it out nationwide.

Here's how it works: In January parents can [download](#) the NODA app and set up an account, to include their child's developmental history.



Courtesy: SARRC

Smith said the app will guide parents to collect clinically-relevant videos of the child behaving in certain situations that are most consistent with social communication.


Parents will upload four, 10-minute videos during the course of a week.

Clinicians from SARRC will then view the videos and look for behaviors that are consistent with a developmental delay.

Within two weeks' time parents will get a detailed report explaining how all of the criteria for autism have been met, or if they haven't, along with guidelines on the next steps to take if their child is diagnosed.

Parents can then take the diagnosis to their insurance company to get treatment approval for their child.

NODA has been in the works for several years now.

It began with a [small business](#)  initiative grant from the National Institute of Mental Health to develop user-friendly technology for both families and clinicians.

Earlier this year, SARRC started a clinical study to validate the diagnostic procedure in NODA against the gold standard in-person diagnostic assessment.

Smith said, preliminary results show an 87.2 percent agreement between the two methods.

The cost of NODA is \$495 compared to a \$550 in-person assessment at SARRC.

Assessments by other professionals can cost as much as \$2,000.

SARRC is taking names now and will give you a call once the program goes live in January.

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