

## Assessing Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) Challenges in Young Children in Dubai: A Qualitative Study, 2016

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**Abstract :** Background: Autism poses a particularly large public health challenge and an inspiring lifelong challenge for many families; it is a lifelong challenge of a different kind. Purpose: Therefore, it is important to understand what the key challenges are and how to improve the lives of children who are affected with autism in Dubai. Method: In order to carry out this research we have used a qualitative methodology. We performed structured in-depth interviews and focus groups with mental health professionals working at: Al Jalila hospital (AJH), Dubai Autism Centre (DAC), Dubai Rehabilitation Centre for Disabilities, Latifa hospital, Private Sector Healthcare (PSH). In addition to that, we conducted quantitative approach to estimate ASD prevalence or incidence data due to lack of registry. ASD estimates are based on research from national and international documents. This approach was applied to increase the validity of the findings by using a variety of data collection techniques in order to explore issues that might not be highlighted through one method alone. Key findings: Autism is the most common of the Pervasive Developmental Disorders. Dubai Autism Center estimates it affects 1 in 146 births (0.68%). If we apply these estimates to the total number of births in Dubai for 2014, it is predicted there would be approximately 199 children (of which 58 were Nationals and 141 were Non-Nationals) suffering from autism at some stage. 16.4% of children (through their families) seek help for ASD assessment between the age group 6-18+. It is critical to understand and address factors for seeking late-stage diagnosis, as ASD can be diagnosed much earlier and how many of these later presenters are actually diagnosed with ASD. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a public health concern in Dubai. Families do not consult GPs for early diagnosis for a variety of reasons including cultural reasons. Recommendations: Effective school health strategies is needed and implemented by nurses who are qualified and experienced in identifying children with ASD. There is a need for the DAC to identify and develop a closer link with neurologists specializing in Autism, to work alongside and for referrals. Autism can be attributed to many factors, some of those are neurological. Currently, when families need their child to see a neurologist they have to go independently and search through the many that are available in Dubai and who are not necessarily specialists in Autism. Training of GP's to aid early diagnosis of Autism and increase awareness. Since not all GP's are trained to make such assessments increasing awareness about where to send families for a complete assessment and the necessary support. There is an urgent need for an adult autism center for when the children leave the safe environment of the school at 18 years. These individuals require a day center or suitable job training/placements where appropriate. There is a need for further studies to cover the needs of people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

**Keywords :** autism spectrum disorder, autism, pervasive developmental disorders, incidence

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