

Conversations with...

We had a chat with Dr Helen Leonard from the Great North Children's Hospital. Helen works as a Consultant Paediatrician as part of the pre-school autism diagnostic service.

We asked Helen some questions in relation to the diagnostic process for children entering the service.



What does the diagnostic process involve?

"The process involves gathering information about the child, including their development, medical history, strengths, difficulties and family life. We observe the child informally by watching them play or sometimes we complete a more structured observation which can be scored and analysed. This observation is known as the Autism Observation Diagnostic Schedule. We may also speak with the child's nursery or other professionals involved in the child's life. In Newcastle we usually offer blood tests as well as genetic testing to see if we can find a cause, but this varies from centre to centre."

How can parents best prepare for a diagnostic appointment?

"It is probably not best to prepare too much. The team are trying to build an accurate picture up of your child and you are already experts on this. There may be some questions you are not sure about and that is fine, it is not a test. "

How can you best prepare your child for a diagnostic appointment?

"If your child is being observed, prepare them by communicating to them that they are going in the clinic to play with some new toys."

How long does the diagnostic process take?

This varies a lot. For some children where the difficulties are very clear, and the assessment team already have some information it may only take one visit. For other children, who have more subtle difficulties or more complex concerns (such as a visual impairment) the process may take several visits over many weeks or months."

What should parents do if they have concerns about their child's development?

"If the child is pre-school aged, they should discuss worries with their health visitor."

