Research tool can detect autism at 9 months of age

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The ability to detect autism in children as young as nine months of age is on the horizon, according to researchers at McMaster University.

The Early Autism Study, led by Mel Rutherford, associate professor of psychology in the Faculty of Science, has been using eye tracker technology that measures eye direction while the babies look at faces, eyes, and bouncing balls on a computer screen.

Rutherford presented her peer-reviewed research at the 7th Annual International Meeting for Autism Research in London. (www.autism-insar.org).

“What’s important about this study is that now we can distinguish between a group of siblings with autism from a group with no autism – at nine months and 12 months,” says Rutherford. “I can do this in 10 minutes, and it is objective, meaning that the only measure is eye direction; it’s not influenced by a clinician’s report or by intuition. Nobody’s been able to distinguish between these groups at so early an age.”

Currently, the earliest diagnostic test for autism is reliable around the age of two, and most children in Ontario are diagnosed around age three or four. The earlier the diagnosis the better the overall prognosis, says Rutherford.

“There is an urgent need for a quick, reliable and objective screening tool to aid in diagnosing autism much earlier than is presently possible,” she says. “Developing a tool for the early detection of autism would have profound effects on people with autism, their parents, family members, and future generations of those at risk of developing autism.”

Source: McMaster University