Nemours Children's Health Program Taught Medical Residents to Conduct Autism Evaluations in Primary Care Setting

Initiative boosted confidence, could provide a model to reduce delays in screening children

WILMINGTON, Delaware (May 26, 2026) — When families are concerned that their child may have autism, the wait for answers can feel endless—often 6 to 12 months to get an initial screening appointment. But an innovative Nemours Children's Health program is changing that story by teaching medical residents to conduct diagnostic assessments for younger children in primary care.

> *"By providing more comprehensive training to future physicians, we can help more children and families get the support they need when they need it most. That can make all the difference in their long-term health and well-being."*

In 2021, recognizing the need to serve more families concerned that their child may have autism, a small group of physicians and psychologists at Nemours Children's, in collaboration with the Nemours Swank Autism Center, began assessing children for autism in primary care settings. Physicians also saw an opportunity to train medical residents who receive primary care training at one of these clinics on how to evaluate children for autism.

These physicians conducted a study between March 2022 and June 2024 to evaluate the educational program's success. Results from their data were recently published in *The Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* and demonstrated that the participating residents reported improved confidence in recognizing symptoms of autism. Patients evaluated through the program were able to access timely autism resources.

"Families who suspect a child may have autism often face lengthy delays in accessing care. That's unfortunate because early diagnosis and intervention are critical to improving patient outcomes," said Meghan Harrison, DO, a Primary Care Pediatrician in the Behavioral and Developmental Access Clinic, Nemours Children's Health, Delaware Valley. "Finding creative ways to increase access to critical diagnostic services can have enormous impact on long-term health and well-being for children with autism."

Through this initiative, medical residents at Nemours Children's studied educational material on autism, including information from the American Academy of Pediatrics and guidelines for administration of a play-based autism assessment. They worked with supervising pediatricians to review skills related to history taking, behavior observation, diagnostic decision making, and intervention planning. They also learned how to discuss autism with families in a sensitive, strengths-based manner, which can be different than traditional models that largely focus on deficits.

During the study period, residents participated in 30 autism evaluations of children who had been identified for the program following parental concerns, pediatrician suspicion of autism, or a qualifying score on an autism screening questionnaire. In these 80-minute appointments, the residents independently collected patient history, conducted interviews based on guidelines from the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), and completed behavior observations. They then participated in administration of a standardized autism assessment (ASD-PEDS) with the trained pediatrician. After completing the evaluation, the resident and supervising pediatrician discussed their findings and recommendations with patient families, including referrals to developmental therapies and early intervention services as necessary.

"This hands-on training program helped residents gain confidence in assessing patients for autism," said Brittany Perry, DO, Primary Care Pediatrician and Clinical Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, Nemours Children's Health, Delaware Valley, who was lead author of the study. "We are hopeful that programs like ours can build the community's capacity for conducting autism evaluations, especially for children with clearer symptom presentation. By providing more comprehensive training to future physicians, we can help more children and families get the support they need when they need it most. That can make all the difference in their long-term health and well-being."

##

About Nemours Children's Health

Nemours Children's Health is one of the nation's largest multistate pediatric health systems, which includes two freestanding children's hospitals and a network of more than 70 primary and specialty care practices. Nemours Children's seeks to transform the health of children by adopting a holistic health model that utilizes innovative, safe, and high-quality care, while also addressing children's needs well beyond medicine. In producing the highly acclaimed, award-winning pediatric medicine podcast Well Beyond Medicine, Nemours underscores that commitment by featuring the people, programs and partnerships addressing Whole Child Health. Nemours Children's also powers the world's most-visited website with health information

written for parents, kids and teens, Nemours KidsHealth.org.

The Nemours Foundation, established through the legacy and philanthropy of Alfred I. duPont, provides pediatric clinical care, research, education, advocacy, and prevention programs to the children, families and communities it serves. For more information, visit Nemours.org.

For further information: Beth Hegde Beth.Hegde@nemours.org 302.704.8414

---

https://nemours.mediaroom.com/news-releases?item=123225