

## Look for Early Signs of Autism

Parents are being urged to examine their children's responsiveness and behaviour during the early stages of development in an effort to identify and treat any disorders, including autism.

The advice, from Professor of Child Health, Child Development and Behaviour at the University of the West Indies (UWI), Professor Maureen Samms Vaughan, comes as Jamaica joins the world in marking World Autism Awareness Month in April. The UWI Professor, who was addressing a Jamaica Information Service (JIS) Think Tank on April 10, said that autism, "at present, is the single commonest developmental disorder affecting children." She noted that the disorder affects at least one in every 50 children, and is more likely to affect boys than girls. Additionally, she said, statistics reveal that an estimated 900 children are diagnosed with autism each year in Jamaica. Citing the importance of screening, Professor Samms Vaughan noted that "early identification and early intervention are absolutely the most important aspect of improving that child's life." "We want you to take your child to see the health provider and ensure that the child is assessed because the earlier the intervention, the better the outcome is for that child," she added. Professor Samms-Vaughan, who is Chairperson of the Early Childhood Commission (ECC), informed that autism is identified when the child reaches 18 months old. "The first sign that parents notice about their children is speech delay (which) can present in many different ways," she said, noting that the child may not be able to say the usual words like "mama" and "dada," make small three-word sentences, or speak at the required pace, and later regress. Other symptoms include lack of social interaction with peers or family members and repetitive behaviour by the child. Professor Samms-Vaughan noted that although the direct cause of autism is unknown, research has indicated that the disorder can be spread through genetics. Environmental factors, such as the presence of lead and mercury, as well as children born to parents over 35 years of age, are also risks for autism. She stated that the observance of Autism Month will be used to effectively educate the Jamaican populace about the condition, its implications and interventions. Source: JIS