As More Autism Is Reported, Doctors Say Check Early

BY LINDSEY TANNER AP Medical Writer

CHICAGO — At 18 months, Cristina Astacio spoke only a few words, wouldn't respond to her name and shunned other kids in her day care group. Last October, her worried parents found out why.

She has a mild form of autism, a diagnosis being given to more U.S. children than ever before, largely because of more awareness and better diagnosis.

According to new government statistics, the rate is about 1 in 88. That means autism is nearly twice as common as it appeared in data the government gathered 10 years ago. The largest increases are in Hispanic kids like Cristina.

The definition of autism has changed over the years, and Cristina might not have been considered autistic two decades ago.

But experts say kids like her are lucky in a way, because her parents recognized early that something was wrong. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report issued Thursday found that

40 percent of kids weren't diagnosed until after age 4. Evidence shows that children who are identified early and get help have the best chance for reaching their potential, said CDC Director Dr. Thomas

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends autism screening for all children at age 18 months and 2 years.

Diagnosing the developmental disorder relies on observing behavior. Autism can't be cured, but treatment including intensive behavior therapy can help many kids function better.

The academy's Dr. Susan Hyman said many children who aren't making eye contact and aren't talking "may have autism, but they may have other things. She said it's important for parents to be persistent about their concerns with their doctor so their kids can be evalu-

Kristy Batesole, of Atascadero, Calif., says she suspected something was wrong with her son, Keegan, even when he was a hard-to-calm overly fussy baby. He learned words, but by age 2 stopped talking, would spend hours opening and closing doors and sometimes bang his head

on the ground. Though he started getting special help in preschool in Nevada, he wasn't formally diagnosed with autism until last year, at age 6, after the family moved to California, where there are more autism specialists.

Cristina Astacio gets two hours of behavior therapy six days a week. Her mom, Charisse, says the little girl now responds to commands and speaks about 50 words. The most special are two words Cristina never said before. "Now she says 'mommy' and 'daddy,"' Astacio said. "It's wonderful."

Christina's dad, Christopher, is a special-education teacher in the New York City; most of the kids in his class are Hispanic and many have autism.

"I remember back in the past, a few kids here and there had autism, not like the way it is now," Astacio said. "I'm really curious why so many kids are being

Experts, including CDC researchers,

think broader screening and better diagnosis have largely contributed to that. But autism's cause remains a mystery, and government researchers are seeking

The latest numbers are based on 2008 data from 14 states. The new rate is nearly two times higher than data suggested in 2002, roughly 1 in 150 kids. And it's 23 percent higher than a later estimate of 1 in 110 based on 2006 data. Rates are highest in boys and white children. But the biggest rate increase was among Hispanics, from 1 in 270 in 2002 to about 1 in 125 in 2008.

That rate increase also is likely due to better awareness. The CDC report says there's no strong evidence of any racial or ethnic difference in risk factors for autism and that it's likely the condition is underdiagnosed in blacks and Hispanics.

Melissa Miller, a St. Petersburg, Fla.,

mom whose daughter, Chelsea, was diagnosed last year at age 2, said many people still misunderstand the disorder. "I think many people hear 'autism' and

think 'Rain Man," she said, referring to

as the mathematically brilliant but socially impaired autistic savant.

'The autism spectrum is so vast, and all of our children are different. Many of them don't rock back and forth or have savant skills. They are sweet, affectionate, intelligent, goofy — and exhausting — kids," Miller said.

the 1988 movie featuring Dustin Hoffman

Proposed revisions in the manual that doctors use to diagnose mental illness would streamline autism criteria. Critics contend the suggested changes would be too narrow and exclude children who need educational and behavioral serv-

Hyman noted that since the manual's last revision, in 1994, much has been learned about autism. "There's a real possibility the new definition will be better for children," she said Thursday at a CDC news conference.

CDC officials say research into causes of autism will help determine if there's been a true increase or just better diag-

Cantata

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(When They Crucified My Lord?)" Choplin said. The performance features choir, orchestra and monologues from six Biblical characters affected by Holy Week and Easter.

"Some characters were present at the cross, and others weren't," he said. "They have different points of view. The centurion comes to the realization that, "Surely, this was the Son of God," and his focus is on that phrase.

Choplin said he wanted to bring a passion to "We Were There."

"One of the things that I think about often is turning the characters in the Bible from two-dimensional to three-dimensional," he said. "I want to take them out of the stained-glass windows and make them real people with real

Choplin sought to give the familiar story a new angle that catches people's attention.

'You have not only these characters but their experiences that people can relate to. I want to bring out the emotions of their story," he said. "The key is making

that you leave the listener behind.' 'We Were There" is usually performed during Holy Week, Choplin said. "This is more dramatic and has monologues, not just narrations between songs," he said.

it fresh without being so different

THE LOCAL PERFORMANCE

The Yankton area musicians are excited to perform "We Were There," said choir director Jennifer Powell. The cantata — which features six readers, 47 choir members and a 26-piece string orchestra - provides a fitting introduction to Holy Week, she said.

"Pepper Choplin does really fine work. We have done his work for three of the six years that we had a cantata. The choir has sung a significant amount of his work. He's a favorite of ours," she said.

The choir likes (this cantata) because it's very singable. They feel it's well written and very appropriate. It's challenging yet doable. It fits our choir well, and

we like the lyrics."

This year's cantata provides a different experience, Powell said.

"It's not necessarily a historical panorama. It's more personal vignettes," she said. "Mary is still by her Son, sharing how a mother feels about losing her child and reflecting back on their lives together. Peter's narrative is 'I Should Have Been There,' but he wasn't."

The six characters and local readers are: John, Lee Gass; Mary Magdalene, Chrissy Lesher; Centurion, Geoffrey Somer; Mary, Mother of Jesus, Nancy Sternquist; Peter, Terry Winter; and Narrator, Judy VanDerhule.

Ťhe soloists include Mary Pavlik of Verdigre, Neb.; Janine Tramp of Crofton, Neb.; and Kathy Grow, Pat Nelson, Sylvia Selgestad of Yankton, Jim Reimler and Kevin Opsahl of Yankton.

Grow, who has performed numerous solos through the years, said she was awestruck upon hearing the combination of music and monologue.

'This last Wednesday, we had our last full choir rehearsal before Sunday afternoon's presentation,

and it was the first time we'd heard form)," he said with a laugh. our readers do their parts," she said. "I have to admit that I blew my solo entrance because I was so moved by Nancy Sternquist's performance as Mary, the mother of Jesus, which came right before.

"Our church has been known for its musicians forever, but I don't know that people realize how many fine readers we have, too. They'll be a major part of the impact of this cantata.

Ted Powell began last Christmas to organize the string orchestra with professional musicians from Vermillion, Sioux Falls, Freeman, Tyndall and Yankton.

"We have a full range of strings, which is difficult to find," he said. "They are so professional. They are provided with the music and practice on their own so they are prepared when they arrive Sunday. They rehearse for the first time with the readers and choir at 1 p.m. We do a run-through, and that's it before the 4 p.m. concert."

The logistics of combining a mass choir and orchestra can pose a challenge, Ted Powell said. "The hardest part is finding a place to put all of them (when they per-

OFFERING A MUSICAL GIFT

Sunday's cantata is a gift to the community from the church, although freewill offerings will be accepted to defray expenses. The performance is supported in part by the J. Laiten Weed Memorial Trust Fund, a legacy of the longtime director of the Yankton College Conservatory of Music and of his wife, Lucy, both noted string players and teachers.

"We are fortunate to be able to share with our congregation and our community and region the experience of hearing singing with an orchestral accompaniment," Jennifer Powell said. "It's something that is usually cost prohibitive in our area. However, it's something that I feel Dr. and Lucy Weed would be pleased to be part of."

Jennifer Powell believes the audience will find an uplifting mes-

"The Easter message is one of salvation," she said. "The cantata is both somber and joyful, with the ending anthem that He rises from

For Choplin, he said the inter-

view with the Press & Dakotan provided an opportunity to hear about a local performance of his

His anthems consistently appear in the top seller lists of publishers and distributors. Since 1991, his choral music has sold several million copies. Each week, thousands of singers present his music in churches and schools in the United States and around the world.

Sunday's cantata in Yankton reminds him of the widespread impact of his work and the enjoyment and inspiration it brings.

"I might be at a church in Vermont, and I am struck that I'm in Vermont and have never seen these people before, and they are singing my music. It happens all over the country," he said.

"When I am scrawling the notes or working on my computer, I forget that real people are singing this, and it's bringing joy. Any given Sunday morning, there are thousands of people hearing this

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