

early diagnosis set to help children with autism

PARENTS of children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) could benefit from a new early-intervention program at La Trobe University.

La Trobe's Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre will this month introduce the program, which can help infants as young as 12 months.

"When you identify early, you get a young child with autism without the full-blown syndrome," centre director Associate Professor Cheryl Dissanayake says. "That means it's easier to work with them and prevent some of the secondary symptoms of autism.

"For example, some of the ritualistic behaviours, you don't see those in very young children. They tend to be an outcome of their inability to cope with a very stimulating environment."

The term Autism Spectrum Disorder is used because the severity and combination of each area of impairment varies from person to person, according to Autism Victoria.

Autism Spectrum Disorder may also co-exist with other conditions or disorders, including intellectual disability, speech and language disorders, anxiety and attention disorders.

Dissanayake says people often think behaviours such as rocking and head banging are symptoms of autism.

"They are actually the secondary manifestations that can be prevented," she says.

The university will use the Early Start Denver Model, developed by Prof Sally Rogers, of the M.I.N.D. Institute at the University of California.

Rogers will visit Melbourne this month to train staff and parents.

Dissanayake says the program is play-based and designed to meet individual needs.

"It's about helping the child and

family or care-giver to communicate and to push the child towards a more normal developmental trajectory," Dissanayake says.

The US leads the way in autism research and many high-profile actors, including Jenny McCarthy, Jim Carrey and Kim Raver, have helped raise money and promote the need for more research.

February 24, Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre, Southbank. Visit www.latrobe.edu.au/otarc/rogersforum/index.html



Acting the part: Kim Raver is among the Hollywood celebrities who help raise awareness of autism.

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