The Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (CHAT) is a screening instrument which identifies children aged 18 months who are at risk for social-communication disorders.

Questions and answers about the CHAT

What is the CHAT?
The Checklist for Autism in Toddlers is a short questionnaire which is filled out by the parents and a primary health care worker at the 18 month developmental check-up. It aims to identify children who are risk for social-communication disorders.

How is the CHAT administered?
The CHAT can be found below. It consists of two sections: the first nine items are questions asked to the parents, and the last five items are observations made by the primary health care worker. The key items look at behaviours which, if absent at 18 months, put a child at risk for a social-communication disorder. These behaviours are (a) joint attention, including pointing to show and gaze-monitoring (eg looking to where a parent is pointing), and (b) pretend play (eg pretending to pour tea from a toy teapot).

How is the CHAT scored?
The CHAT is very easy to score. There are five key items: A5 (pretend play), A7 (protodeclarative pointing), Bii (following a point), Biii (pretending) and Biv (producing a point). If a child fails all five key items, they have a high risk of developing autism. Children who fail items A7 and Biv have a medium risk of developing autism.

What happens if a child fails the CHAT?
Any child who fails the CHAT should be re-screened approximately one month later. As with any screening instrument, a second CHAT is advisable so that those children who are just slightly delayed are given time to catch up and also to focus efforts on children who are failing consistently. Any child who fails the CHAT for a second time should be referred to a specialist clinic for diagnosis since the CHAT is not a diagnostic tool.

What happens if a child passes the CHAT?
If a child passes the CHAT during the first administration, no further action needs to be taken. However, passing the CHAT does not guarantee that a child will not go on to develop a social-communication problem of some form and if parents are worried they should seek referral.

What are the advantages of the CHAT?
Because there is no single known medical cause of social-communication disorders, it is very unlikely that there will be a medical test available in the near future. Whatever the cause of these problems, the behavioural characteristics have been identified and this is what the CHAT is based on. In addition, the CHAT is cheap, quick and easy to administer. Currently, autism is rarely detected before the age of three and for the other social-communication disorders, age of detection can be even later. The CHAT, however, is administered when the child is 18 months old. The earlier a diagnosis can be made, the earlier intervention methods can be implemented and family stress reduced.

Source: