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Government Develops 10-Year Research Plan to Battle Autism

Associated Press

The government has developed a broad, decade-long research plan to help fight autism, including hunting genetic causes of the complex brain disorder and providing better educational services for children who have it.

Aiding the work will be a research partnership between government scientists and a parents group, the National Alliance for

Autism Research.

The alliance has been gathering databases of affected families for both the gene hunt and separate research to find ways to diagnose autism earlier. National Institutes of Health scientists will work with the group on those projects instead of starting similar ones from scratch, a collaboration that the alliance said represented a joint commitment of more than \$5 million.

Autism is a neurological disorder featur-

ing a wide range of symptoms that include problems communicating and interacting socially. Some studies suggest it might affect at least 40 per 10,000 children in the United States. That is 10 times higher than estimates a decade ago, which many scientists think reflects better diagnosis. The exact cause of autism is unknown, although both genetics and environmental factors are suspected of playing a role.

Under demand from Congress, the NIH

came up with a broad strategy to improve scientific understanding of autism and how to help patients. There are few specifics, and no details on how NIH will fund the work.

The 10-year plan calls for a mix of research into biological markers that signal autism before today's usual diagnosis around age 3; genetic and environmental causes; and what behavioral, educational or other services best treat different degrees of autism.