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ATLANTA - About 300,000 U.S. children have been diagnosed with autism, according to the largest national study so far of the prevalence of this complex behavioral disorder.

That means about 5.5 out of every 1,000 school-age children have been diagnosed with autism. Past estimates have ranged from 1 to 9 out of every 1,000 children, based on smaller studies. The government-run study released yesterday reports findings from national surveys of tens of thousands of families.

The study by the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also found boys are nearly four times more likely than girls to be identified with the condition. And it found Hispanics had lower autism rates, though it's possible that may be related to health-care access problems.

"There's somewhat of a dearth of information how autism impacts children and their families," said lead author Laura Schieve, a CDC epidemiologist.

Because of its national scope, the CDC report "is probably one of the best" studies of how often autism is diagnosed, said Dr. Eric Hollander, an autism expert at New York's Mount Sinai School of Medicine.

The new research is being published this week in the CDC publication Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

Autism is usually not diagnosed until after age 3. It is characterized by a range of behaviors, including insistence on sameness, difficulty in expressing needs and inability to socialize. Schieve's study pulls together results from surveys done in 2003 and 2004. In both, parents were asked: Has a doctor or health-care provider ever told you your child has autism?

Researchers believe some parents may have answered yes for two similar but less severe diagnoses, Asperger disorder and pervasive developmental disorder (which is sometimes called "atypical autism"). For that reason, the study's prevalence rates may reflect other autism spectrum disorders and not just autism alone, officials said.

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