



NAVIGATING AUTISM CONVERSATIONS: SUPPORTING FAMILIES THROUGH HONEST AND OPEN COMMUNICATION

ABBY HICKS, M.A.CO

PAM RAMSEY, M.C.D., CCC-SLP




Chatting
with
Abby & Pam
Straight
from
the Heart





QUICK OVERVIEW OF OBJECTIVES

- **Current statistics**
- **Identifying Autism Spectrum Disorder characteristics in toddlers**
- **Discussing Autism with caregivers**
- **Tools and resources**



Identify key characteristics that may indicate autism in young children and explain the importance of Early Intervention.

1





2

Describe techniques for engaging families in supportive, informative discussions about their child's development, especially when they are unfamiliar with autism.





3

List tools to respond to parental concerns, provide clarity, and dispel myths surrounding autism.





4

Explain how to guide families through the process of understanding what comes next after initial screenings, including referrals, evaluations, and early intervention opportunities.





5

Describe how to connect families with resources and support systems that can help families confidently navigate their child's journey.





Preparing for the conversation

Having the conversation

Follow up to the conversation



Preparing for the conversation

Know your stuff about ASD!



WHAT IS AUTISM?

“Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave.”

Source: nih.gov

DSM CRITERIA

- Deficits in social communication and social interaction
- Presence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities



PERSISTENT DEFICITS IN SOCIAL COMMUNICATION
AND SOCIAL INTERACTION ACROSS MULTIPLE
CONTEXTS AS MANIFESTED
BY THE FOLLOWING, CURRENTLY OR BY HISTORY:

- Deficits in social emotional reciprocity
- Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction
- Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships

- *** NEEDS TO MEET ALL 3



RESTRICTIVE, REPETITIVE, PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOR,
INTERESTS OR ACTIVITIES AS MANIFESTED BY AT
LEAST TWO OF THE FOLLOWING:

- *Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects or speech*
 - *Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines or patterns or verbal nonverbal behavior*
 - *Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus*
 - *Hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment*
- ***NEEDS TO MEET 2 of the 4**

Preparing for the conversation

Year	Number of ADDM Sites Reporting	Combined Prevalence per 1,000 Children	About 1 in X children
2024	11	29.4 (23.1-44.9)	1 in 31
2020	11	27.6 (23.1-44.9)	1 in 36
2016	11	18.5 (18.0-19.1)	1 in 54
2012	14	14.5 (8.2-24.6)	1 in 69
2008	14	11.3 (4.8-21.2)	1 in 88
2004	6	11.3 (4.8-21.2)	1 in 88



Social Communication

- Limited use of gestures such as giving, showing, waving, clapping, pointing, or nodding their head
- Delayed speech or no social babbling/chatting
- Makes odd sounds or has an unusual tone of voice
- Difficulty using eye contact, gestures, and sounds or words all at the same time
- Little or no pretending or imitating of other people
- Stopped using words that they used to say
- Uses another person's hand as a tool (e.g., putting parent's hand on a jar for them to open the lid)

Social Interaction

- Does not look right at people or hard to get them to look at you
- Does not share warm, joyful expressions
- Does not respond when someone calls their name
- Does not draw your attention to things or show you things they're interested in
- Does not share enjoyment or interests with others

Repetitive Behaviors & Restricted Interests

- Unusual ways of moving their hands, fingers, or whole body
- Develops rituals such as lining objects up or repeating things over and over
- Very focused on or attached to unusual kinds of objects such as strips of cloth, wooden spoons, rocks, vents, or doorstops
- Excessive interest in particular objects, actions, or activities that interferes with social interaction
- Unusual sensory interests such as sniffing objects or looking out of the corner of their eye
- Over- or under-reaction to certain sounds, textures, or other sensory input

16 BY 16 GESTURES

- 9 months: Give, shake head
- 10 months: Reach, Raise arms
- 11 months: Show, wave
- 12 months: Open hand, Point, Tap
- 13 months: Clap, blow kiss
- 14: Index finger point, Shh gesture
- 15 months: Head nod, thumbs up, hand up
- 16 months: Other symbolic gestures

PREPARING FOR THE CONVERSATION

16 Early Signs

Checklist of 16 Early Signs of Autism

16by16™

THE EARLY SIGNS OF AUTISM UNFOLD FROM 9 TO 16 MONTHS



The early signs of autism are easy to miss. Autism can be diagnosed by 18-24 months, but it's not usually diagnosed until 4-5 years. We developed a Checklist to help you detect autism before it's usually diagnosed.

This Checklist is a companion to our Lookbook, which illustrates the 16 early signs of autism that unfold from 9 to 16 months. Explore the Lookbook at [BabyNavigator.com](https://www.babynavigator.com). You can also download, share, and print an 8-page version or a 1-page glimpse of *16 Early Signs of Autism by 16 Months*.



How to use this Checklist: Check yes or no for each early sign of autism that describes your child's behavior. You can click on each question to see photos of each early sign in the Lookbook. The number of early signs will be summed for you. Any one of these signs may not be a problem. But in combination, they may signal a need to conduct a screening or diagnostic evaluation.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Age in Months: _____ Filled Out By: _____

CHECKLIST OF EARLY SIGNS OF AUTISM

YES NO

1. Is it hard to get your baby to look at you?
2. Does your baby rarely share enjoyment with you?
3. Does your baby rarely share their interests with you?
4. Does your baby rarely respond to their name or other bids for interaction?
5. Does your baby show a limited use of gestures such as showing and pointing?
6. Is it hard for your baby to look at you and use a gesture and sound?
7. Does your baby do little to no imitating of other people or pretending?
8. Does your baby use your hand as a tool?
9. Is your baby more interested in objects than people?
10. Does your baby have unusual ways of moving their fingers, hands, or body?
11. Does your baby repeat unusual movements with objects?
12. Does your baby develop rituals and get very upset over change?
13. Does your baby have an excessive interest in particular objects or activities?
14. Is your baby very focused on or attached to unusual objects?
15. Does your baby have unusual reactions to sounds, sights, or textures?
16. Does your baby show interest in unusual sensory experiences?

Total Number of Early Signs of Autism: Calculate Total

WHAT IF YOUR CHILD SHOWS SOME EARLY SIGNS OF AUTISM?

If your child shows 4 or more of these early signs, use our free online [SoCo CheckUp](https://www.babynavigator.com) for children 9-18 months to screen your baby for autism.

If your child shows 8 or more of these early signs, ask your doctor for a referral for a diagnostic evaluation.

Talk to your child's doctor or teacher about any of these early signs or contact your local early intervention program. Share this Checklist with them.



BABY NAVIGATOR — WHAT EVERY PARENT NEEDS TO KNOW
Go to [BabyNavigator.com](https://www.babynavigator.com) to find out what every parent needs to know about early learning.
What you do and say can make all the difference.

*Know your
stuff about the
child!*



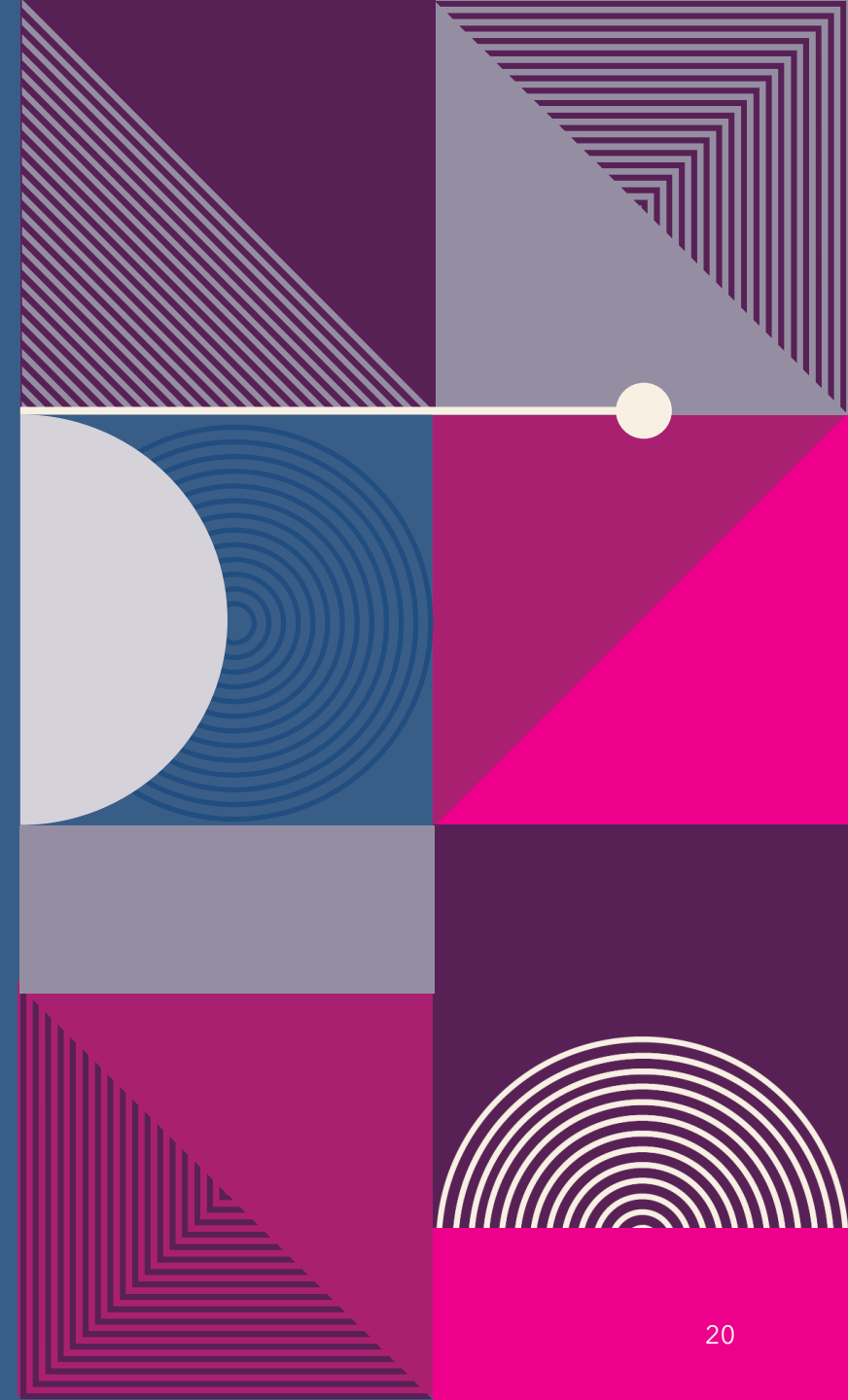
PREPARING FOR THE CONVERSATION

Child's personal and medical profile:

Any medical issues

Family history of ASD

*Environmental exposures
(lead) or traumas*



PREPARING FOR THE CONVERSATION

Child's strengths -

What does the child do well?

What makes the child happy?

Child's difficulties-

What are ASD Characteristics you have noticed in the child?

What does the child have difficulty doing?

PREPARING FOR THE CONVERSATION

- *Who can bring up ASD? We can!*

EI MCHAT pilot study findings

Our unique perspective into the child and family in their natural environment gives us information most other medical professionals don't have.

BE AWARE OF WHO IS BRINGING UP THE CONVERSATION

- Parent
- Provider-- If you are going to bring it up, most important things to remember are to be prepared and to do it with compassion
- Daycare provider—
 - Ask daycare provider what they see
 - Have they talked with the family about their concerns

HAVING THE CONVERSATION

*Have a conversational
flow and potential script
in mind!*





Having the Conversation

- **Timing and Environmental Factors:**
 - *Make sure the environment is set up appropriately
 - *A quiet, uninterrupted opportunity to talk
 - *Enough time and free of distractions
 - *You are in a good place (not trying to get to another visit or between meetings)

Having the Conversation



• Conversational Starter Phrases:

- *Are there things that you find particularly difficult or surprisingly hard as you parent this child?
- *Would you give me permission to say something that may be difficult to hear?
- *Have you noticed any differences in parenting this child compared to others?



Having the Conversation

- Share observations

- *Start with the child's strengths and the strengths of the family

- *Share observations/characteristics of possible ASD

- *Provide specific, clear examples

Having the Conversation

- Share observations, continued

*Avoid labels (i.e. don't say he has poor eye contact, say, I've noticed he often doesn't look when I call his name or speak to him)

*Avoid jargon or technical phrases

*Share other providers reports or impressions

HAVING THE CONVERSATION

- Invite their perspective
 - Have they noticed similar or different things?
 - Normalize their feelings and concerns
 - If they bring it up and are afraid/nervous/sad
 - If you bring it up and they are shocked and angry
 - What are their thoughts and perspective on this
 - Make sure to collaborate with them and you hope to form a partnership

HAVING THE CONVERSATION

Offer to provide more information:

- Screening (tools, videos, examples, etc.)
- Offer resources (provide in writing since they may be overwhelmed)
 - Developmental testing facilities
 - Websites
 - Developmental checklists
 - Support groups
 - Other therapies
 - EI NBDI strategies so they know we are providing the best thing for their child right now even in what we are doing



Having the Conversation

Ending the conversation

**Reminder that we are here to partner and support and will walk through this with them and be on their team*

**This can be an ongoing conversation*

**Encouragement that they have started early*

**ASD is a spectrum and a developmental difference, not a death sentence and there is a lot of hope still present*

Follow up to the conversation

*Revisit conversation after they have had more time to process the information.

*Offer more resources, if needed.

*Offer to discuss next steps.





Follow up to the conversation

Things to keep in mind:


- The conversation may not end as you hoped, but at least the door has been opened and the table has been set for potential future conversations. Would hate to have a family leave EI without having this conversation if I felt like it was truly necessary.
- Encourage parents to take one step at a time—the burden is too heavy to accept it all at once.
- Don't ignore cultural contexts and differences.



Follow up to the conversation

Screening for Autism:

MCHAT-R



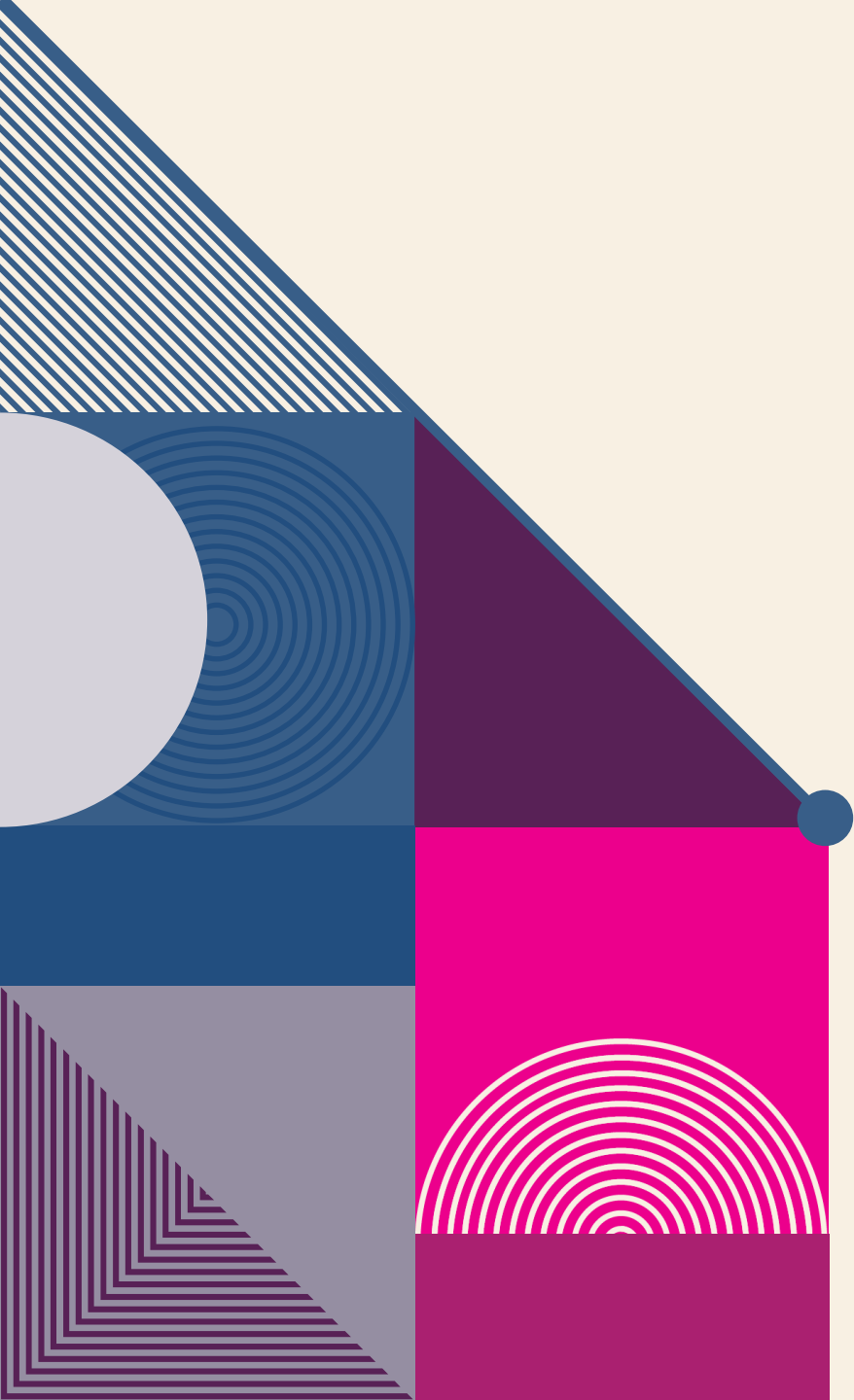
Red Flags of Autism in Toddlers checklist
(Autism Navigator)

16 Gestures by 16 Months (First Words
Project)



16 Early Signs of Autism

RESOURCES





M-CHAT

Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers, Revised

- *For toddlers between 16 and 30 months of age*
- *20 yes or no questions about the child's behavior*
- *Free to take online*
- *Gives an immediate result for risk of autism high, medium, or low risk*
- *Parents can take the results to their pediatrician*

Pocket Conversation Guide

CONVERSATION GUIDE

Talking with Families About Possible Autism (ASD)

1. PREPARE

- Review child's strengths & concerns
- Choose a calm, private setting
- Have resources ready (EI info, referrals)

2. START WITH STRENGTHS

- "Your child is making progress with..."
- Highlight what the child enjoys and does well

3. SHARE OBSERVATIONS (NOT LABELS)

- "I've noticed Sam doesn't always respond to his name."
- "He's more interested in toys than in playing with others."

4. CONNECT CONCERNS TO DEVELOPMENT

- "At this age, most children are starting to use simple words..."
- Emphasize: This is about supporting development early

CONVERSATION GUIDE

Talking with Families About Possible Autism (ASD)

5. INTRODUCE ASD GENTLY

- "Sometimes these differences are related to autism..."
- Avoid definitive diagnosis—frame as a possibility

6. EMPOWER THE FAMILY

- "Getting more information early can help your child grow and learn."
- Offer next steps: screening, referral, resources

7. SUPPORT EMOTIONS & QUESTIONS

- Normalize feelings: "It's okay to feel worried or unsure."
- Invite dialogue: "What are your thoughts after hearing this?"

8. CLOSE WITH HOPE & PARTNERSHIP

- "You're not alone—we'll support you through this process."
- Reassure that early support makes a difference

KEY REMINDERS

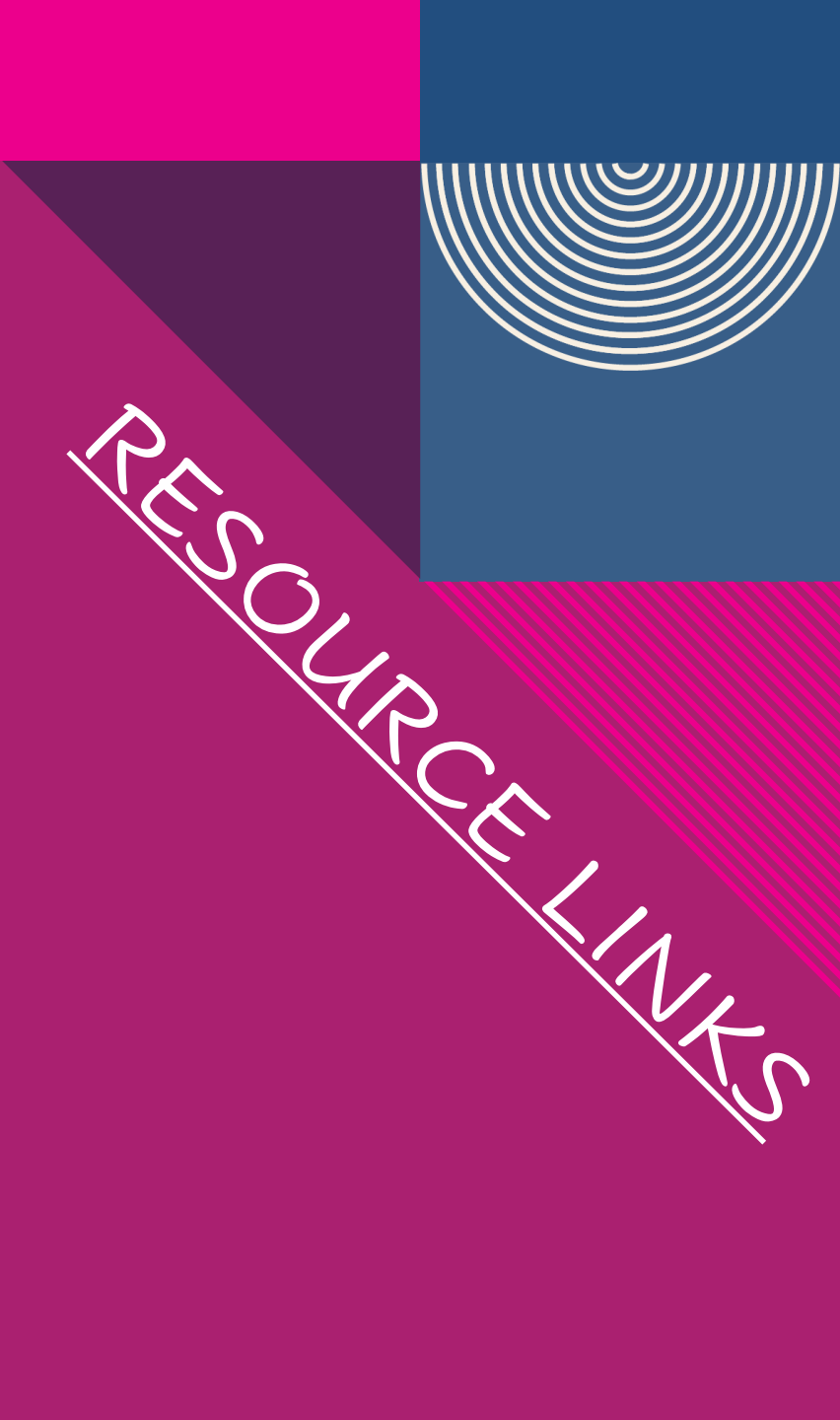
- Use family's language & values
- Stay collaborative, not prescriptive



NBDI strategies and chart with
outcomes and examples

Autism Navigator website
(videos of typical and atypical
development)

Speech Sisters—typical vs.
atypical language
development



RESOURCE LINKS

Alabama Department of Mental Health:
Autism Services

Autism Navigator

MCHAT

16 Early Signs of Autism

Regional Autism Network

AUTISM SPEAKS: FIRST CONCERN TO
ACTION TOOLKIT

Characteristics of ASD

WHEN TALKING WITH A FAMILY ABOUT AUTISM

REMEMBER

*You're not talking about a
statistic.*

*You're talking about their
heart.*

