Welcome!

Welcome to the newsletter for the Duke Center for Autism and Brain Development. The Center brings together a diverse and talented group of physicians, clinicians, and researchers united by a single goal: to collaboratively work in partnership with the community, people with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), and their families to help each individual realize their full potential. This newsletter allows us to share our news and helps us keep in touch with you about the exciting research we are doing and potential opportunities for joining with us on specific studies.

I joined the center as associate director of the Duke Center for Autism and Brain Development in August of 2015. I have been very excited by how quickly the Duke Center for Autism and Brain Development is growing and all the progress that has been made over the past year. We are currently enrolling for 11 research studies that focus on finding innovative and novel approaches to screening and treatment of autism spectrum disorders!

We are studying all types of treatments including new medications, supplements and behavioral interventions. We are also developing better ways to tell whether autism symptoms and the brain
processes related to these symptoms are improving and to better recognize possible side effects so that future treatment studies are better at identifying the benefits and risks of potential new treatments. I am also a part of the team that helps trainees from many different fields including psychology, neurology and psychiatry develop and refine their skills, so they can provide state of the art clinical care directly to individuals with autism.

Finally, we want to thank each and every one of you for partnering with us to improve the lives of people with ASD. Your participation is essential for us to develop new treatment strategies, conduct clinical research studies, train new providers and researchers, and share the information about what works for whom with the community and policy makers. We look forward to working with you for years to come.

With very best regards,

Lin Sikich, M.D.
Associate Director, Duke Center for Autism and Brain Development

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**Why It's Important to Screen All Children for Autism**

Earlier this year, the US Preventive Services Task Force published a highly controversial report concluding there is 'insufficient evidence to assess the benefits of universal autism screening'. In response, JAMA Pediatrics sought Dr. Dawson's opinion which was published in the journal's February editorial. In the article, titled *Why It's Important to Continue Universal Autism Screening While Research Fully Examines Its Impact*, Dr. Dawson outlines key clinical, public policy, and methodological considerations that shape the interpretation of the task force's findings and highlights several concerns regarding the implications of their recommendations. Dr. Dawson further explains why continued research on autism screening is necessary and how broadly-accessible screening tools are needed to reduce racial and ethnic minority disparities in services that exist among children with autism.

Studies have shown that universal screening leads to earlier ASD diagnosis and earlier access to intervention. There is also evidence demonstrating that earlier intervention leads to better psychosocial and behavioral outcomes in children with ASD, and that these improvements are associated with adaptive changes in brain function. One of the reasons that the task force does not support universal screening is that the direct link between universal ASD screening and ASD outcomes has not been scientifically studied. Dr. Dawson explains that in order to demonstrate this direct causal association, individuals would need to be randomized to either "screening" or "no screening" and then followed-up longitudinally to compare outcomes. Although this type of study is warranted, research efforts must address other crucial gaps in the scientific understanding of ASD.

Research is needed to improve the already-demonstrated accuracy and sensitivity of early
detection tools. We also need to develop systems that will allow families of children who are “at risk” to more readily access services and information, and test strategies that improve diagnostic follow-up rates. Moreover, Dr. Dawson encourages researchers to leverage the growing evidence on the biological and genetic factors implicated in ASD in order to lower the age of detection even further. Although studying the direct relationship between screening and outcomes is warranted, there is a compelling evidence base that supports universal autism screening as currently outlined in the recommendations by the American Academy of Pediatrics. In conclusion, Dr. Dawson asserts that, "universal screening offers the best chance for individuals to reach their full potential and lead productive lives."

Read the full article here.

Trainee Spotlight: Jill Lorenzi

Dr. Jill Lorenzi is a postdoctoral fellow at the Duke Center for Autism. She joined the Center in July of 2015, after completing her doctorate in clinical psychology at Virginia Tech and her pre-doctoral clinical internship at Marcus Autism Center/Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta.

Dr. Lorenzi specializes in conducting comprehensive diagnostic assessments with children, adolescents, and young adults suspected of having or at high risk of developing ASD, and has administered assessments to children as young as 12 months of age. Additionally, Dr. Lorenzi delivers evidence-based treatment services to individuals and families affected by ASD, including parent coaching for challenging behavior and cognitive-behavioral therapy for emotion dysregulation and anxiety in ASD. She is currently training to deliver parent coaching in strategies based on the Early Start Denver Model (ESDM) to families with very young children on the autism spectrum. Dr. Lorenzi is eager to continue integrating her clinical and research interests in order to contribute positively to the lives of individuals and families affected by ASD.

Research at Duke Center for Autism - Partner With Us!

NIH Study of Social Development in 4-11 year old Children with ASD

Duke is one of five universities across the nation to receive funding from the National Institutes of Health for a $28 million project which aims to better understand social development in preschool and school age children with ASD. The goal of the study is to develop a better understanding of children's social communication abilities so that improved measures of social communication can help clinicians diagnose, track, and
assess treatments in children with ASD.

**Diagnostic and cognitive evaluations** with feedback to caregivers are conducted as part of this study. For those families who are interested, **genetic testing** with feedback will be offered. This study will launch in June. For more information, call 1-888-691-1062, email autismresearch@dm.duke.edu, or [click here](#) to read more on our website.

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**Currently Enrolling**

We are seeking adults and children *with* and *without* ASD to participate in our studies.

[Visit our website](#) to learn more about the research opportunities at Duke that might be a good fit for you and your family!

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**Staying Connected Through our Research Registry**

The Duke Registry for Autism Research is a great tool to stay connected and get involved. Being in the Registry means that you agree to be contacted periodically about autism related studies for which you or your child may be eligible. Joining the registry does not mean that you are signing up for a study. We will let you know about current and upcoming studies that you may be eligible for, and you will decide if you want to participate. If you do decide to participate and change your mind later, you may withdraw from a study at any time.

[Click here](#) to read more about the registry, or email autismresearch@dm.duke.edu to get enrolled today!

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**Events: What We've Been Up To, What You Won’t Want To Miss**

**Autism Awareness Month Special Guest: José Velasco**

In honor of Autism Awareness Month, The Duke Center for Autism and the Duke Institute for Brain Sciences will be hosting a guest speaker, José H. Velasco, head of the Autism at Work Initiative for SAP, at the Nasher Museum of Art in Durham.
In May of 2013, SAP announced its objective to have 1% of its global workforce represented by employees on the autism spectrum. At almost three years into this journey, SAP has hired more than 100 employees into more than 15 different professional roles. José H. Velasco will share inspiring stories of SAP employees as well as the history of the program and the processes to course, train, onboard and retain employees on the autism spectrum.

Please join us on Thursday, April 21, 2016 at 6 p.m. in the Lecture Hall of the Nasher Museum of Art. The special event is free and open to everyone, but registration is required. We hope that you will join us! If you are interested, please register here.

Basketball Clinic with Duke Men's Basketball Team

In October our center partnered with the Duke Men's Basketball team to host a 2-hour clinic at Cameron Indoor Stadium. Youth from our community were able to come and learn basic basketball skills from the experts!

The clinic included watching a closed Duke Basketball practice, a hello from Coach K, and a variety of basketball drills including dribbling, shooting, and passing. Afterwards, the players took photographs and signed autographs with the attendees. Click here to see video footage from the clinic!

This clinic was the second of many sports clinics we hope to host. We are already looking forward to hosting our second annual Els for Autism golf clinic at the Duke University Golf Club later this year.
The 2016 Autism Society of NC conference successfully brought together a vibrant group of parents, self-advocates, professionals and clinicians. On the first day of the conference, Drs. Geraldine Dawson and Katie Davlantis took the stage to provide captivating and mutually complementary presentations on the Early Start Denver Model. Drs. Dawson and Davlantis provided an overview of the ESDM framework that included both the biological basis of
the treatment as well as its clinical applications and practical strategies for implementation.

Dr. Dawson explained the scientific basis and support for ESDM: how and why it is important to experience social interactions both early and later in life, and how every interaction is a learning opportunity. In Dr. Davlantis’ presentation we were able to observe specific examples of how to apply ESDM. Professionals, clinicians, and self-advocates attended the lecture.

**Autism Speaks Walk at Duke**

On Saturday 4/9, our team joined families, advocates, and resource vendors who braved the chilly early morning to attend Durham’s 4th Annual Autism Speaks Walk. It was great to partner with Team Vanilla Ice for the second time this year.

Members of our Center walked the Duke East Campus Wall and took the opportunity to share about resources and opportunities available through the Center such as joining the Research Registry. Raffle prizes, games, crafts, and snacks, were also provided so that every member of the family could be involved. The day was considered a success with over 1,500 people in attendance and over $70,000 raised to fund Autism awareness and research. The Center for Autism ended the day with reinforced ties to the local community; and together one step further on the road of Autism awareness.

[Click here to download a PDF](#) with instructions on how to make the “I love you to pieces” picture frames that we created with families who stopped by our booth!

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**Advocacy: New Legislation in North Carolina**

Efforts into securing coverage of services for individuals with Autism in North Carolina finally came to fruition with the passing of the Autism Health Insurance Coverage Bill (Senate Bill 676). On October 15, 2015 we celebrated as Governor McCrory signed the autism insurance bill mandating coverage for autism behavioral health treatments. Dr. Katherine Davlantis, shown in the picture with Governor McCrory, was able to attend and represent the Duke Center for Autism. The signing of the bill is an important step for North Carolina - it addresses a profound need for greater access to interventions and will help
reduce the financial burden involved in obtaining these services, particularly among families who cannot afford to pay out of pocket.

The mandate provides up to $40,000 for “adaptive behavior treatment” from time of diagnosis through eighteen years of age. Adaptive behavior treatment covers a wide range of empirically-supported behavioral health services, including services that can be delivered by paraprofessionals under the supervision of a licensed professional.

The Duke Center for Autism is committed to providing integrated, comprehensive care to individuals on the spectrum and their families. Part of our mission entails supporting policies that will enable access and support families from all backgrounds. We celebrate with all families and individuals who will now have greater access to the treatments they need. The Center looks forward to the implementation of the bill, which will take effect on July 1st, 2016.