

# McPartland Lab

## NEWSLETTER

---

The McPartland Lab is enjoying Summer in many ways; we hope the same is true for you. After months of being inside and away from valued relationships in the lab and in our personal lives, it is wonderful to be enjoying the outdoors and to be enjoying one another. Our research and clinical teams are now permitted to work in person in groups, and it is exciting to see one another face-to-face. Research studies are moving ahead at a pre-pandemic pace, and our study teams are enjoying the opportunities to see you all during your visits to the lab. We remain so grateful to you for your partnership in helping us understand the brain and the unique ways it works in autism.

We are coming together in a special way this Summer. For many years, our research group has been split between two facilities, on South Frontage Road and on 40 Temple Street. Over the past few months, we were able to renovate additional space at 40 Temple Street to accommodate our studies and staff. Our whole group is now united in a common suite, which is of great benefit to our teamwork! We have included some pictures of our new space, and we hope many of you have the opportunity to visit for a tour in the coming months.

In this month's newsletter, you will see a description of a newly funded study designed to examine a potential social skills treatment based on directly stimulating the brain. We will also offer the opportunity for another member of our team to introduce herself and for our clinicians to provide practical advice. Enjoy Summer, stay cool, and keep in touch!

Best wishes,  
Jamie McPartland

---



## Exciting New Research Study



Many people with ASD describe difficulties making eye contact or decoding emotions from facial expressions. Neuroscience research suggests that these experiences may reflect different levels of activation in certain brain regions that support face processing. For example, some studies measuring brain metabolism have shown that there is less activity in these regions when a person with ASD views a face. Interestingly, when people with ASD participate in social skills activities, as their comfort with eye gaze and face processing increases, these brain regions become more active. For these reasons, we presume a relationship between the activity level in these brain regions and comfort level experienced during face-to-face interactions.

A new study in the lab will attempt to directly “activate” these brain regions to understand how it affects how people with ASD engage with faces and describe their social feelings. To do so, we will use a technique called transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS). TMS uses a device that looks like a ping pong paddle to emit magnetic pulses that, when placed alongside a person’s head, can increase activity in nearby parts of the brain. Despite sounding like science fiction, this is a safe and established technology that is already FDA-approved for treatment of other conditions, like depression. The work starting in our lab will see if these techniques can also be helpful in autism.

If you’d like to hear more about this approach from a first person perspective, a colleague of the lab, John Elder Robison, wrote a book about his experience with TMS at a Harvard lab (<https://amzn.to/3igKcbV>). John will actually be collaborating with us on this project to help us take into account the experience of people with autism in planning these studies. We are very excited about this new line of research and the potential to provide new options for people who wish to improve their comfort during social interaction. Call us if you would like to participate!

**If you would like to find out more about this exciting new study, please contact Erin MacDonnell at (203) 737-3439 or [autism@yale.edu](mailto:autism@yale.edu).**

## Practical Parenting Advice

### Tips for Increasing Flexibility

by Christine Cukar-Capizzi, PsyD, BCBA



Inflexibility and strict adherence to routines often present as common obstacles for children with autism and their families. These challenges can range from insistence on taking a particular route to the supermarket, eating the same foods every day, or watching specific television shows before bed. Unexpected changes to these routines can result in significant distress for children with autism and lead to disruptions to family life. Importantly, children with autism can be taught to increase their flexibility just as they are taught other new skills through shaping and reinforcement.

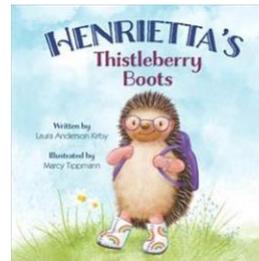
With creativity and willingness to try new things on behalf of both parents and children, daily routines and activities can offer opportunities for teaching flexibility. Parents can intentionally set up “fun changes” or “flexibility drills” for their children with autism with the intention that changes can be pleasurable rather than anxiety-provoking. For example, instead of driving your child home on their regular route from school, tell your child there is a change in plans and stop somewhere fun on the way home (e.g., the ice cream shop!). After dinner when it is typically time to clear the table and bring dishes to the sink, tell your child there is a change in plans and that it’s time to go play on the playground, jump on a trampoline, or blow bubbles. Even small changes can make a sizeable difference and help children not only *endure* but *enjoy* moments of flexibility:

- Switch baseball caps with your child for the day
- Change places where family members typically sit at the dinner table
- Eat dessert before the main meal
- Play a preferred game and allow your child to change one small rule
- Eat breakfast for dinner
- Get ready for the day in a different order than usual
- Tell silly jokes instead of reading the same story before bed
- Choose your own fun change!

When your child is accepting of a change, whether big or small, call attention to it and reinforce them for being flexible. These strategies help children with autism reduce discomfort related to inevitable changes throughout the day and learn to associate change with positive outcomes. Embedding “fun changes” as opportunities to practice and being rewarded for moments of flexibility reframes these often-difficult events from something to tolerate toward opportunities to allow change with pleasure and ease. This is an essential skill as after all, change is the only constant in our

unpredictable lives!

We are so proud of a recent graduate of our own psychology training program, Dr. Laura Kirby, who has recently published a book to help children increase flexibility. *Henrietta’s Thistleberry Boots* is a wonderful children’s book in which the main character, Henrietta navigates many changes in her life with the support of her family. You may find this book as a helpful tool in talking about change with your child.



<https://www.amazon.com/Henriettas-Thistleberry-Boots-%20Laura-Kirby/dp/1736985116>

## Sibling’s Corner

### How Much Do You Know About Autism?

by Julie Wolf, PhD

Are you an autism expert? Or do you feel a bit confused about what autism is? If you feel like you have a lot to learn, don’t worry, you’re not alone! Research<sup>1</sup> has shown that siblings of kids with autism actually know less about their sibling’s diagnosis than kids who have siblings with medical illnesses. That might seem strange, but there are some possible reasons. Since your sibling has had autism pretty much their whole life, and you live with them, adults might assume that you are already an expert about it, so they don’t think they need to teach you. Or maybe people assume that autism is an emotional topic for you, so they shy away from talking to you about it. The problem is that if adults don’t teach you about autism, you are left to try to figure it out on your own – and sometimes kids get things

wrong. For example, some young siblings think that you can catch autism from your sibling – which you definitely cannot!

So, what *is* autism, anyway? Autism is a developmental disorder that has two categories of symptoms. The first is difficulties in “social communication,” which means how people communicate and get along with others. Kids with autism might have trouble carrying out a conversation, making friends, knowing how to act in a social situation, or using nonverbal communication like eye contact and facial expressions. The second is “restricted and repetitive behaviors” which are behaviors that a person does over and over again or that might seem unusual to other people. Kids with autism might say the same things over and over or repeat what you just said. They might have repetitive movements like flapping their hands or rocking their bodies. Or they might have an intense interest in a particular topic that they want to talk about all the time.

If you want to learn more, Autism Speaks has a sibling toolkit you can download which has more information about autism:

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/toolkit/siblings-guide-autism>. Also, don't be shy about asking your parents questions. They will probably be glad you asked!

1. Lobato, D. J., & Kao, B. T. (2002). Integrated sibling-parent group intervention to improve sibling knowledge and adjustment to chronic illness and disability. *Journal of pediatric psychology, 27*(8), 711-716.
2. Harris, S. L., & Glasberg, B. A. (2003). *Topics in autism: Siblings of children with autism; A guide for families*. Woodbine house.

Please [click here](#) to listen to Dr. Wolf's recent talk, “Siblings of Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder”, to learn more about the sibling experience.

## Q&A with a Lab Member



### Introduce yourself!

My name is Marie Johnson and I'm starting my second year as a Sara S. Sparrow Fellow in the McPartland Lab. I'm originally from Virginia and I earned my degree in Psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University. I became interested in autism when I worked as an education coach for young adults with ASD and other developmental disabilities.

### Why did you join the McPartland Lab?

I'm passionate about working with kids with ASD, developmental disabilities, and communication disorders. I hope to apply for my PhD in Clinical Psychology with a focus in Pediatrics. I am thankful to work on a collaborative, supportive team, and it brings me joy to meet our families! Thank you for participating in our research!

## Vacation ideas in CT



Governor Ned Lamont's office announced the launch of [Connecticut Summer at the Museum](#) – a new state program created in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic that allows Connecticut children to receive free admission at more than 90 museums across Connecticut during the 2021 summer months.

Under the finalized program, from July 1 to September 6, 2021, all Connecticut children age 18 and under – plus one accompanying adult – will receive free admission to any of the participating museums, including historic house museums, historic sites, historical societies, art museums, children's museums, science centers, special-interest museums, natural history museums, university museums, arboretums, botanical gardens, and zoos.

Some of the participants include the Connecticut Science Center, Connecticut's Beardsley Zoo, the Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk, Mystic Aquarium, and Mystic Seaport Museum, among many others. The full list of participating museums is available at [www.CTSummerMuseums.com](http://www.CTSummerMuseums.com).

## Contact Us!

For more information about our research please contact Erin MacDonnell at [autism@yale.edu](mailto:autism@yale.edu) or (203) 737-3439.

[Click here](#) if you would like us to contact you about participating in our studies or scan the QR code.



## Follow us on Facebook and Twitter:



Yale Autism Program



@YaleAutism

The McPartland Lab stands in solidarity with the Black community, and we pledge to work to actively fight systemic racism. As a lab within an institution of higher learning, we are committed to providing education around issues of diversity of all kinds, standing up against injustices, and ensuring that our work reflects and benefits the diverse community that we serve. We strive to create a space in which all feel welcome and respected, from our employees, to our students, to the families who participate in our research.

Sent by The McPartland Lab  
Yale Child Study Center  
New Haven, CT  
(203) 737-3439  
[www.mcp-lab.org](http://www.mcp-lab.org)