

McPartland Lab

NEWSLETTER

The weather may be cooling down, but McPartland Lab research is staying hot! We are grateful that, as school and activity schedules have resumed, you have made time to visit the lab in your busy days. The atmosphere is increasingly lively. Many of us are being welcomed back into the office after an extended period of working from home, and it has been a pleasure to see one another and to see many of you. We are enjoying our new research facilities, and we appreciate the positive feedback we have received on the new space. If you have not yet visited, we look forward to hosting you!

This month our newsletter provides some timely advice for trick-or-treating. This issue we are also introducing a very exciting new feature of our website. Most of our scientific findings are published in journals that are designed for professional scientists and are often expensive to read if you are not affiliated with a university. So that everyone involved with our research has the opportunity to learn from this collaborative work, we are putting summaries of all of our study results online. We've included an example in this issue. We hope that this will help you all appreciate the value of your participation in our work! Happy Fall! As always, we welcome your feedback and ideas!

Best wishes,
Jamie McPartland



Practical Parenting Advice

Tricks and Treats for Facing our Fears this Spooky Season

by Gloria Han, PhD

As the leaves start turning and the nights grow chilly, there's no better time to talk about fear as we gear up for spooky season. This year's transition from summer to fall may be particularly overwhelming for many children with autism and their families as we gradually readjust to in-person activities. Children are experiencing longer school days and more social interactions with teachers and peers. Additionally, there are greater daily demands like getting dressed, brushing teeth, and completing homework assignments. When feeling anxious or nervous – emotions in the “fear family” – our gut instinct is to avoid these difficult situations or to freeze. In the moment, it's easy to let fear run the show. Though this response is understandable and instinctual, research shows that becoming more comfortable with the uncomfortable is essential for reaching our goals in *any* season.

For children with autism, entering an unfamiliar social setting is often the most daunting of situations. During social interactions, we face unpredictability and risk being misunderstood or rejected by others. Just like going for a swim on a hot summer day, the initial dip is always a little jarring. But by staying in the water rather than hopping out immediately, our bodies naturally habituate. Remarkably, the water doesn't change temperature – we are the ones becoming more comfortable with the uncomfortable.

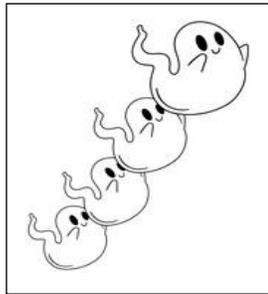
With this in mind, here are some tips and tricks that may be helpful for confronting, instead of running away from, anxiety-provoking events. By doing this with consistency, we learn to face our fears and thus become more courageous over time.

1. Notice what fear feels like: To confront our fears, we must first become skilled at noticing and labeling this emotion.

Research from our lab shows that recognizing and describing emotions may be particularly challenging for individuals on the autism spectrum (Trevisan et al., 2019; Trevisan et al., 2021). Thus, one helpful tool to enhance awareness of fear and anxiety is to help children identify and express the associated thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, and urges. Parents can help children build insight about fear by modeling the process of emotion labeling and expressing their own feared moments. For example, “I'm noticing some worry thoughts about an important meeting tomorrow. I'm worried that I won't know all the answers, which makes me feel a little tense in my chest. Even though I'm nervous, I'm going to do what I can to prepare for the meeting and still attend. This is how I can build confidence even though I'm feeling nervous.” These moments of emotional insight and expression can then encourage children to do the same.

2. Come up with a list of things that are scary or anxiety provoking. Once children develop an understanding of how to identify and describe fear and anxiety, brainstorm different situations that are anxiety-provoking. In this exercise, you may also ask questions to build additional insight, such as: “What worries you the most about this situation?”, “What does it feel like in your body to be worried?”, “What does this feeling make you want to do?”, or “What worry thoughts do you have?”. These questions help to pinpoint the exact source of anxiety, which allows us to be more skillful in knowing which specific aspects of a situation we can expose ourselves to and become more comfortable with over time.
3. Rank the feared events in order from easiest to hardest: This is often referred to as an “exposure hierarchy” and is a useful tool to help plan out how to gradually expose ourselves to anxiety. By starting with more manageable activities, we can progressively

build confidence in uncomfortable situations. For example, gradual exposure to social fears may involve first writing a letter to a friend, talking on the phone, talking over Zoom, doing an activity with a friend one-on-one, and then gradually adding more people to the mix. Below is a graphic you may use to try out these tips and tricks. Remember, the ultimate treat is the satisfaction and confidence gained from facing your fears!



Trevisan, D. A., Altschuler, M. R., Bagdasarov, A., Carlos, C., Duan, S., Hamo, E., Kala, S., McNair, M. L., Parker, T., & Stahl, D. (2019). "A meta-analysis on the relationship between interoceptive awareness and alexithymia: Distinguishing interoceptive accuracy and sensibility". *Journal of abnormal psychology*, 128(8), 765.

Trevisan, D. A., Mehling, W. E., & McPartland, J. C. (2021). "Adaptive and Maladaptive Bodily Awareness: Distinguishing Interoceptive Sensibility and Interoceptive Attention from Anxiety-Induced Somatization in Autism and Alexithymia". *Autism Research*, 14(2), 240-247.

Sibling's Corner

Keeping Yourself Safe

by Julie Wolf, PhD

Some autistic children do things that can be harmful to themselves and to other people – things like hitting, kicking, or biting. If you have a brother or sister who does these things, it's important to make sure you that you have a plan to stay safe, so that you don't get hurt. If your sibling starts to do things that are unsafe, don't try to intervene or stop the behaviors yourself – that's a job for grown-ups. Walk away from the situation and go get an adult to help. It's also a

good idea for your family to have a safety plan set up in advance so that everyone knows what to do when unsafe behaviors happen. Part of the plan can include strategies to help your sibling feel more calm. But the plan can also include a "safe space" where you can go to know that you are safe from harm. If you have your own bedroom, this could be a good choice, but if not, it can be any room in the house where you can close and lock the door. Talk to your parents about setting up a safety plan and having a safe space for yourself where you can go until your brother or sister feels more calm.

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.

Long COVID as a Disability Under Section 504 and the IDEA

By Special Education Attorney & Certified Child Advocate, Jeffrey L. Forte, Esq. | Forte Law Group LLC

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, children have unfortunately been contracting the virus. And, with the increase associated with the new COVID delta variant strain, medical experts are referring to what some call "long COVID." The United States Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services recently issued new guidance for public schools to follow whereby children with long COVID may be recognized as having a disability under either Section 504 or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Specifically, if symptoms persist in the form of long COVID, a child may need new or different related aids and services, specialized instruction, or reasonable modifications. Such services may be delivered through the IDEA with an individualized education program (IEP) under the disability

eligibility category of Other Health Impairment (OHI) if the child has limited strength, vitality, or alertness due to a chronic or acute health program that adversely affects the child's education performance.

Alternatively, under Section 504, a child has a disability if they: (1) have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity; (2) have a record of such an impairment; or (3) are regarded as having such an impairment. The most important thing that you can do as a parent is to request that your child be properly evaluated by both your local public-school team as well as any private or outside medical providers. You can also consider speaking with a special education lawyer that handles long COVID as a disability under the IDEA or Section 504.

Spotlight on – ASRC



Autism Services & Resources Connecticut, (ASRC) serves a vital role in helping to educate and empower individuals and families affected by autism.

ASRC provides services, supports, and resources to families and individuals living with autism as well as to the educators, medical and therapeutic professionals, and community providers who work with them. ASRC provides opportunities for parent networking, activities, social groups, training, advocacy, and events for all ages, as well as responding to hundreds of families who are new to the diagnosis or who need guidance navigating transition and adult issues. ASRC is a strong voice in Hartford for better services and funding for those with ASD.

Social & Recreational Programs

ASRC provides practical approaches for where people are in their autism

journey.

Support Groups

We work collaboratively, across groups, to develop resources.

Social Skills Groups

Expert speakers, professional training, events, live and on-demand training, and LifeNet, the independent living support program for adults.

Workshops, Training, LifeNet, & More

From 2.5 years to adult, and everything in between, ASRC provides social and recreational opportunities for those with ASD.

What ASRC Does:

- Child/Teen/Adult Social & Recreational Programs
- Support Groups
- Social Skills Groups
- Training Workshops for Parents & Professionals
- Peer Mentoring
- LifeNet -Independent Living Assistance
- Legislative Advocacy
- Autism Resource Fair
- Bridging Communities Forum
- Transition Forum
- Walk for Autism Family Festival
- Professional Resource Guide & Directory
- Meet the Experts Series
- Guest Speakers Series

Q&A with a Lab Member



Introduce Yourself!

Hello! My name is Lauren Pisani, and I am a Sara S. Sparrow Fellow in the McPartland Lab. I am

originally from Arizona, but I've been enjoying my time getting to explore the East Coast!

Why did you join the McPartland Lab?

I love working with kids and am very passionate about helping those with neurodevelopmental disabilities! In college, I studied biochemistry and psychology and spent four years as part of the Down Syndrome Research Group working with children with Down syndrome and ASD. As a member of the McPartland lab, I am grateful for the opportunity to continue to combine clinical work with research. I love being a part of such a collaborative team and working closely with our families!

Contact Us!

For more information about our research please contact Erin MacDonnell at 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.



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Yale Autism Program



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Article Summaries

Our lab has been working on an exciting new project! We have added an "Article Summaries" section to our website where you can find easy-to-understand summaries of some of our recently published scientific papers. We hope that this will allow more people to learn about our work and allow families to see what we do with the data we collect during their visits with us. You can find these summaries by visiting our website at <https://medicine.yale.edu/lab/mcpartland/>, clicking on the Publications tab, and then selecting Article Summaries. Below is an example.

"The N170 event-related potential reflects delayed neural response to faces when visual attention is directed to the eyes in youths with ASD"

Link: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33749161/>

This study looked at how children's and adolescents' brains respond when looking at different parts of a face. Typically developing children and adolescents processed eyes faster than other parts of the face, whereas this pattern was not seen in ASD. Children and adolescents with ASD processed eyes more slowly than typically developing children. These findings suggest that observed inefficiencies in face processing in ASD are not simply reflective of failure to attend to the eyes.

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.