

O C D



# Developments

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Office of Child Development

***Pittsburgh Early Autism Study*****Focusing On Early Childhood To Better Understand Autism**

Mark Strauss was struck by a comment made several years ago by Temple Grandin, the Colorado State University professor who has become a leading advocate for those, like herself, who live with an autism spectrum disorder. She said it wasn't until she was 5 years old that she could tell the difference between dogs and cats—and even then by using a process much different and deliberate than the way typically functioning children make such distinctions.

“She taught herself how to do it by realizing that dogs have particular noses and cats have retractable claws,” said Strauss, PhD, professor of psychology and director of the Infant and Toddler Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh. “I had been studying the development of these automatically learned things in babies and it became appar-

ent from Temple Grandin's comments that she didn't have these built-in mechanisms. She had to explicitly teach herself things that babies automatically learn.”

Dr. Strauss is among the researchers investigating such developmental differences as part of the Pittsburgh Early Autism Study, a comprehensive effort to identify markers of autism in early childhood

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***Communicating Issues*****Rethinking How The Public Is Informed About Children**

New strategies are being explored for informing the public about the circumstances, characteristics, and conditions of children in ways that help to promote an accurate understanding of the issues, but also inspire hope, accentuate positive aspects of children, and make note of progress made toward improving their circumstances.

Recent research suggests that investigating such strategies has merit.

A growing body of evidence reports, for example, that the public generally perceives the rates of teen pregnancy, drug use, school dropout, and juvenile crime to be greater than

what statistical evidence shows them to be. At the same time, public awareness of positive youth-related activities, such as participation in volunteer services, tends to be low, according to the study published in the journal *Child Indicators Research*.

Such findings raise questions about the effectiveness of how children's issues are most often communicated, including the reliance on often dire statistics and dramatic anecdotes of children enduring hardship.

“To me, it's an argument against using more big numbers

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and gain a deeper understanding the developmental pathways of autism. Gaining such knowledge has implications for diagnosing autism earlier and intervening sooner to help children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Autism is a range of complex neurodevelopment disorders with no known cure. The causes of the disorders are not well understood. Although symptoms vary among those with autism, common characteristics include social impairments; communication difficulties; and restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior.

**A Growing Concern**

The number of people diagnosed with an ASD has risen sharply, but the precise reason why remains unclear. For example, it is not known the extent to which greater awareness and a broader definition of ASD has contributed to the rise in prevalence in recent years. One year ago, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention revised its estimate of the prevalence among American children from 1 in 150 children to 1 in 110 children.

An ASD diagnosis today is typically made when a child is around 36 months old. Autism can be diagnosed earlier in children who exhibit multiple and very apparent deficits in areas such as language, attention, and behavior. The difficulty is making a reliable early diagnosis among infants and young children experiencing a deficit in only one or two domains. It's not uncommon for some children, for example, to exhibit a language delay early in life that is corrected later.

Research suggests some children benefit from structured interventions, such as intense behavior modification therapies. Such interventions, while not a cure for autism, can be useful in helping children develop more appropriate behaviors and function better in society. Studies also suggest that the earlier interventions begin, the better.

Understanding the subtle early makers of the disorders and the developmental trajectory of autism symptoms are critical to finding a reliable, accurate tool for early diagnosis and being able to begin appropriate, well-targeted interventions as early as possible. At the moment, however, little is known about what is happening early in the development of children who are later diagnosed with an ASD.

"Parents will say they notice something in the first year. But we have no real sense of what the developmental course is," said Susan Campbell, PhD, a Pitt professor of psychology who is the principal investigator of one of three studies in the project. "A lot of parents will say their child was developing normally until, say, 18 months and then they started to lose skills. Unless we do these prospective studies,

we won't have a good handle on whether there are different subtypes with different developmental patterns, or whether people just weren't noticing things before."

**Investigating Early Autism**

Autism research is a relatively young field with the body of evidence consisting mostly of studies over the past few decades involving older children and adults.

In their effort to learn more about autism during the early months of life, researchers with the Pittsburgh Early Autism Study recruit infants with older siblings who have been diagnosed with an ASD. Studies indicate there is a genetic component to autism and it is estimated that 18 percent to 20 percent of infants with an older sibling with autism will later be diagnosed with an ASD. A sample of infant siblings of typically developing children is also included in the study.

Researchers are looking at a range of possible early markers of autism by studying early cognitive and social development, and also early language and communication development in studies led by Dr. Strauss, Dr. Campbell, and Jana Iverson, PhD, an associate professor of psychology at Pitt who has studied aspects of autism for nearly a decade.

The Pittsburgh Early Autism Study is affiliated with the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Excellence in Autism Research, which is directed by psychiatry and neurology Professor Nancy Minshew and is one of five such centers funded by the National Institutes of Health. The researchers are also among 22 investigators in the Baby Sibling Research Consortium, which is exploring issues related to early autism in infant populations around the world.

For his part, Dr. Strauss focuses on cognitive ability, attention, memory, and how knowledge is developed. Of particular interest is studying how children perceive faces and facial expressions.

Infants learn a great deal about their world by observing and interacting with it. Within the first year of life, they are learning enough about faces to make fine discriminations among different people, allowing them to recognize, for example, who is familiar and who is not. "Babies learn faces, expressions, that dogs—even though they look different from one another—are a different category than cats," Dr. Strauss said. "We know babies are learning this by 10 months of age."

But, as Temple Grandin's comments reveal, children with autism have difficulty doing what comes automatically to typically functioning infants. Even autistic adults exhibit similar deficits. Researchers are studying this issue by showing them movies and pictures and using a device that tracks

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and trends and creating a crisis,” said Junlei Li, PhD, director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD) Division of Applied Research and Evaluation. “I think this continuous effort to create crises using numbers or very sad stories is counterproductive. Crisis doesn’t surprise people. It just adds to this false impression that most things related to children are getting worse and there is nothing you can do to make them better.”

OCD and several partners are developing communication strategies for child-related issues as part of the project, Something Worth Giving. The idea is to create a standing, cohesive, and effective communications strategy for Western Pennsylvania to promote a better understanding of children’s issues, and mobilize support and volunteers around those issues as the need arises.

Working with OCD on the project are Carnegie Mellon University faculty, Saturday Light Brigade, Pittsburgh Cares, and other partners. The Grable Foundation provided the initial seed grant and a grant to continue the initiative.

**Perception and Policy**

An awareness of children’s issues and accurate understanding of children’s circumstances and conditions are important for a number of reasons. Public perception helps drive public policy and investment in children. And perceptions held by the public and policy makers are particularly critical in the wake of recession as sentiment for government financial support weakens and philanthropic organizations face their own economic constraints.

The public’s perceptions of the condition of children is shaped by information from several sources, including the news media, government, universities and research organizations, child advocacy groups, religious and community leaders, and personal experiences. The news media and personal experiences were the leading sources cited by respondents in a recent national study as informing their perceptions of children. Each source has shortcomings. Personal experiences, for instance, are likely shaped by anecdotal rather than empirical evidence. And news media accounts tend to ignore the positive and focus on the negative aspects of children and youth.

In fact, studies report that major newspapers do not frequently cover topics related to child well-being—a practice

likely to continue as financially distressed newspapers further trim their budgets, editorial staff, and content. But when news organizations do report on children, the children are often portrayed as tragic and the stories largely focus on their involvement in negative activities and events. For example, nearly 95 percent of child-related stories reported on television and in print focus on crime and violence, according to a Casey Journalism Center on Children and Families survey of national news coverage of child-related issues.

Studies conducted over the past two decades suggest that such sources of information have shaped public perceptions of children, their conditions, and behaviors that are largely negative and often disconnected from statistical evidence.

In one study, for example, nearly two-thirds of the respondents said school drop-out rates had increased when, according to statistical evidence, the rates had been declining. Another study, which looked at public misconceptions about trends in teen pregnancy and sexual activity, found that most adults were unaware that most sexually active teens report using birth control, teen pregnancy rates have declined since the 1990s, and teenagers account for only a small portion of all unintended pregnancies.

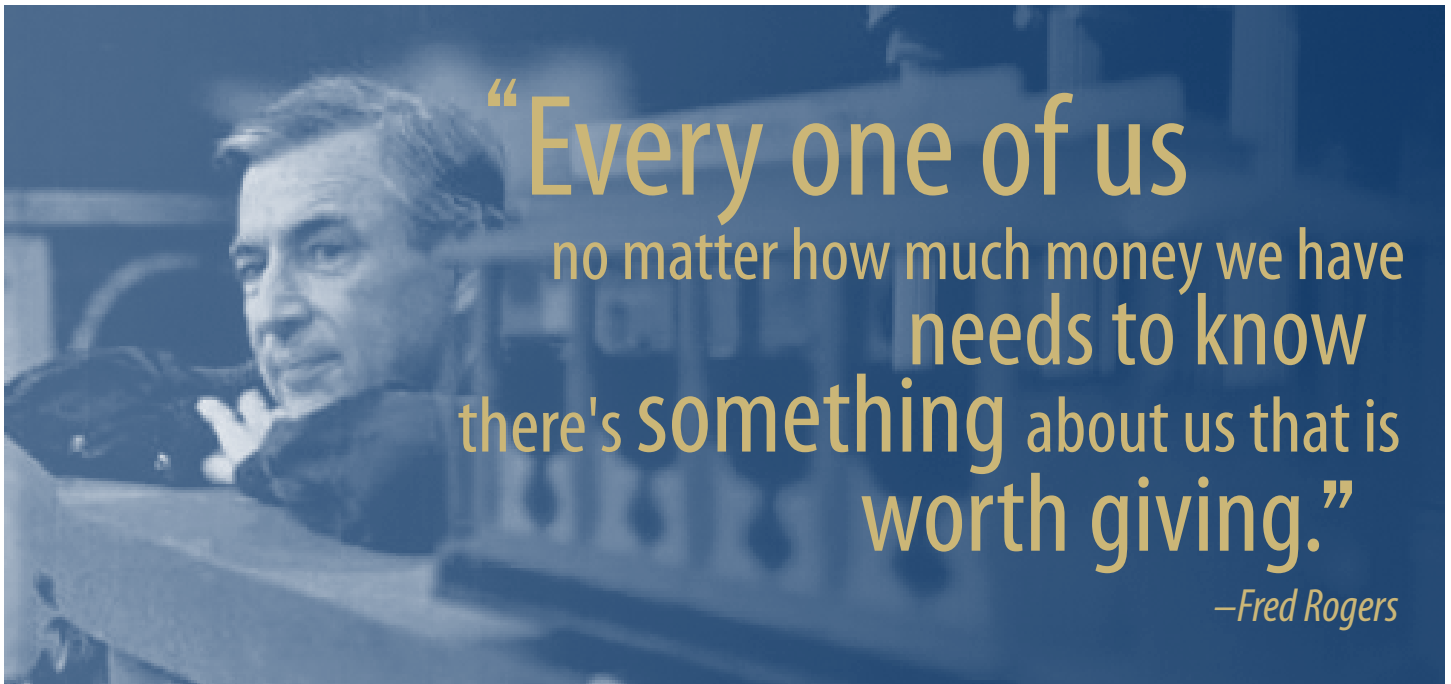
**Ineffective Strategies**

The news media, advocacy organizations, and others have long relied on strategies for reporting on children that research suggests are ineffective in terms of creating accurate understanding of issues important to children and youth. Among the most common strategies are the use of statistics and anecdotes, and both are often used to convey a crisis.

Anecdotes depicting individual hardships, such as living in poverty, are often used to present an issue in human terms. Research suggests, however, that rather than promoting empathy, such anecdotes can reinforce the perception that those depicted have some measure of control over their circumstances and are responsible for the hardships they are shown to endure. Researchers also report that when a problem such as poverty is perceived as individually caused, people are less likely to state a desire to help the poor.

Relying on statistics also has shortcomings, particularly when they are used with little or no interpretation. Statistical illiteracy has been reported to be high among the general public, as well as among professionals whose jobs involve

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interpreting or reporting statistical information. In a study of medical literature, for instance, high levels of statistical illiteracy were found among doctors, along with statistical errors in about half of the articles reviewed and misinterpreted findings.

**Exploring A New Platform**

OCD and its partners in the Something Worth Giving project began investigating how the public receives information about children one year ago as part of their effort to develop a new communication platform to effectively educate the region about issues important to children, youth, and families and mobilize support around key issues.

As part of the first stage, the project identified questions that are important for nonprofits to consider when informing the general public and policy makers about issues related to children and youth. Does a nonprofit's communications evoke care and inspire hope? The project published a guide exploring the questions and issues related to communication strategies that effectively promote a better understanding of the conditions of children, youth, and families.

The next stage involves convening a multidisciplinary team of experts and stakeholders to develop an alternative to the traditional, crisis-oriented strategies used to inform the public about children.

Research provides some suggestions for more effectively using elements such as statistics and anecdotes. Statistics, for example, have more meaning when interpretation is provided and numbers are blended with the narrative rather than

presented alone without the context necessary to understand their significance.

As Something Worth Giving moves forward, another important consideration is changing the tone of the messages that flow from the new communications platform—shifting away from relying on the “imperiled child” framework that has been a staple of the reporting on children’s conditions. “What we need is an alternative,” said Dr. Li. “Is there a way to tell uplifting, hopeful, positive stories that could educate people about the needs, but also educate people about the possibility of things getting better?”

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# OCD | Special Report

## *Incarcerated Parents*

### **Children Of Parents In Jail Or Prison: Issues Related To Maintaining Contact**

In prisons and jails across the United States there are parents serving time for the crimes they committed whose children face hardship and developmental risks as a consequence.

For these children, having contact with their incarcerated parents has been found to have implications for development issues, such as secure attachments and relationships. Others are also affected. Arranging and maintaining contact with inmates can, for example, be a source of stress for the child's caregiver. And studies suggest that contact with their children can affect inmates in positive ways as well as in ways that can make serving their sentences more difficult.

Many small-scale studies have looked at issues related to children's contact with parents in jails and prisons. Despite methodological limitations, such as small sample size, these studies provide some insight into how a parent's incarceration can affect such issues as a child's development and behavior, those who care for them at home, and family resources.

#### **The Problem**

The past several decades have seen major changes in judicial policies and attitudes regarding incarceration, including "get tough" policies toward drug offenders and mandatory minimum sentences applied to a range of felonies. As a consequence, incarceration rates have risen dramatically since the 1980s.

As incarceration rates rise, so do the number of children who have a parent in prison or jail. More than 1.7 million children had a parent in state or federal prison in 2007, an increase of 80 percent since 1991. Several million more children are estimated to have a parent in local jails. The precise number of those children is unknown because jails, corrections departments, schools, child welfare departments, and other systems do not systematically count them.

In Allegheny County, an estimated 7,000 children have at least one parent in jail or prison, according to a 2005 study by the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation. The study reports that about half of the children whose parents are in the Allegheny County Jail are white, half are African American, and about 75 percent of the children are under 13 years of age.

Research suggests that having a parent in jail or prison increases the likelihood of children experiencing a range of risks, including internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, truancy, substance abuse, school failure, and adult criminal behavior. Poverty, changes in caregivers, and substance abuse by their parents are other risks these children often experience.

#### **Contact With Parents**

Most parents serving sentences in state and federal prisons have some form of contact with their children. The most common is mail contact. In a 2007 prison survey, 75 percent of state and federal prisoners said they had mail contact with their children. More than half reported having phone contact with their children, and 42 percent of state prisoners and 55 percent of federal prisoners said they had visits with their children during the time they were incarcerated.

Several factors influence contact between inmates and their children, such as the length of the parent's sentence, jail and prison policies, and the distance between the correctional facility and the child's home.

State prisons, for example, house inmates whose sentences are longer than one year and are more likely than jails to be located in remote areas farther from the child's home. Jails are often located closer to where children of inmates live and are typically for short-term incarceration before and after ad-

judication. Studies suggest that the longer parents are incarcerated the less likely they are to maintain at least weekly contact with their children.

### Visitation Policies

Prison and jail policies can influence the quality and frequency of children's visits with their incarcerated parents. These policies vary across correctional facilities, and are based on security and safety concerns and strategies.

Key policy questions include whether to allow "full" contact visits, which allows physical contact; "open" visits that don't allow contact but do not involve separating parent and children with a physical barrier; and "barrier" visits, during which children and inmates are separated by a Plexiglas window or other type of barrier.

Most federal and state prisons allow for some physical contact with children, such as an embrace, handshake, or kiss before and after the visit. A survey of local jails in 10 states found that these facilities are less likely to allow physical contact. Some jails do not allow inmates and children to meet in person. Instead, visits take place across a closed-circuit television system.

Research suggests such policies can influence the quality and outcomes of visits. One study, for example, found higher levels of contact with their children associated with lower levels of depression among incarcerated mothers. Those mothers were housed in a single facility that provided child-friendly visitation opportunities. Another study found more visits with their incarcerated parents were associated with insecure attachment among children. Those visits, however, took place through a Plexiglas window in a large, noisy room, and children and caregivers were both frisked before entering.

Recognition of such issues led to new initiatives at the Allegheny County Jail. For example, a family activity center in the jail lobby includes a craft area for children, video nook, book corner, slide, and mock visiting booths to help them prepare for the visit with their jailed parent. The jail also opened a family support center. The program assigns select inmates with children to a special pod where they, their spouses or partners, and children work with specialists on issues critical to strengthening the family that were identified in personal assessments.

### Outcomes Of Contact With Incarcerated Parents

Studies that have assessed child outcomes related to having contact with an incarcerated parent generally report mixed findings. However, outcomes appear to be sensitive to several factors, such as the quality of visits and the relationship between a child's caregiver and the incarcerated parent.

For the incarcerated parents, the research generally re-

ports benefits from having contact with their children. Studies also suggest that caregivers are affected by having to arrange and maintain contact between children and parents in jails or prisons.

### Parent-Child Relationships

The relationship between parent and child is important. Studies find that the quality of early attachment is an important predictor of children's later social and emotional functioning. Studies that examined these relationships as an outcome of contact between children and incarcerated parents offer mixed findings, but suggest the quality of the contact is influential in determining outcomes.

In two studies, for example, visits with parents in correctional facilities were associated with insecure attachment relationships among children ranging in age from 30 months to 14 years. Those visits, however, occurred in prison environments described as not being child friendly.

Research suggests that negative outcomes related to child visits are more likely to be reported when visits are not associated with interventions aimed at improving the quality of child-parent contact and the child-friendliness of the setting. On the other hand, the majority of studies that report benefits from children visiting their incarcerated parents note that the visits occurred within the context of an intervention at the jail or prison focused on raising the quality of contact and making the setting less stressful to children.

In one study, researchers investigated a parenting intervention for fathers in a federal prison and their young children. They reported that children's self-esteem increased across the 10-week program. One of the features of the program was a weekly parent-child visit during which the fathers would interact and have physical contact with their children in a child-friendly setting.

Other studies have found child-parent contact to benefit the relationships between children and their incarcerated parents. A study focused on incarcerated mothers, for example, found that more telephone calls with their children—but not visits—were associated with the mothers having positive perceptions of their relationships with their children.

Studies also suggest that no matter how difficult arranging and maintaining contact with an incarcerated parent can be, not having contact can result in children having negative feelings about their relationships with their parents. For example, a study of participants in a mentoring program for children of incarcerated parents found that experiencing no parental contact led to feelings of alienation from the parent.

### Child Age

Early childhood is a critical time in the development of attachment relationships. A few jails and prisons, where nurs-

eries and other programs are available, have recognized the need for incarcerated mothers to have contact with their infants and young children.

For nearly two decades, for example, a New York correctional facility has had a program that allows incarcerated mothers to live with their newborns for the child's first year. Among the benefits reported in an evaluation of the program was the finding that infants who lived with their mothers in the prison nursery program for at least one year were more likely to have secure attachments than infants who were discharged from the nursery prior to one year.

### **Behavior Problems**

Studies report mixed findings about the relationship between children's contact with incarcerated parents and their behavior toward teachers, caregivers, peers, and others.

In a study of 58 adolescent children of incarcerated mothers, researchers reported that fewer instances of school drop-out and suspensions were associated with more mother-child contact, which included phone calls, visits, and letters. However, another study found more attention problems among children when they visited an incarcerated parent more often. Teachers interviewed reported that students often had trouble concentrating in school following weekend visits with their incarcerated parents. Teachers tended to have made more positive comments about the effects of mail contact between students and their incarcerated parents.

Researchers have also found that children may present behavioral and emotional difficulties when visiting a parent in jail or prison, which can worsen an already stressful prison-visiting environment and erode the quality of the interaction between child and parent.

### **Caregiver Relationships**

The quality of the relationship between children's caregivers and incarcerated parents can be a powerful influence on how often children have contact with their imprisoned parents.

Research has reported, for example, that when this relationship is characterized by warmth, children tend to visit their incarcerated parents more often and speak with them on the telephone more regularly. Studies also report that both incarcerated mothers and fathers are more likely to have contact with their children when they perceive coparenting arrangements as being strong.

### **Caregiver Stress**

Caregivers have important responsibilities when it comes to contact between children and incarcerated parents. They must often arrangement transportation to the jail or prison, for example, pay for collect calls to inmates, and deal with children's behavior related to their contact with and separation from their inmate parents.

In one study, caregivers reported both positive and negative feelings about children visiting incarcerated parents or maintaining telephone contact with them. Most caregivers expressed some level of concern that such contact with an incarcerated parent would be detrimental to children. And some caregivers reported that they limited contact between the child and an incarcerated parent because of perceived behavioral changes among children after contact, such as confusion, frustration, and upset.

Another study identified other sources of stress among caregivers. For example, many caregivers did not know how to support children around visits with their incarcerated mothers. Those caregivers identified the behavior of children before and after visits as a source of stress.

### **Incarcerated Parents**

Research suggests several ways in which contact with their children affects incarcerated parents. On one hand, difficulties in arranging and maintaining contact with their children is a source of stress for parents in jail and prison. For example, lost contact with their children is associated with parental identity confusion among fathers. And studies have found that most mothers say separation from their children is the most difficult aspect of their incarceration.

Other studies involving incarcerated mothers report that more visits with their children is related to fewer symptoms of depression and that lower levels of contact with their children lead to higher levels of stress.

In some cases, visits with their children have been associated with inmates experiencing emotional upheaval, anger, and other feelings that can get them into trouble while serving time. One examination of prison records, for example, found that mothers who received visits from their children were more likely to have violent or serious disciplinary infractions. In the same study, women who didn't receive visits were more likely to either not to commit infractions or commit only minor infractions.

### **Family Resources**

The distance from a child's home to the jail or prison, and the cost of transportation and long-distance phone calls, can all be key barriers to contact. These factors can also place additional stress on families with limited financial resources

State prisons can be 100 or more miles from the homes of children with parents incarcerated in those facilities. Many prison and jails restrict telephone contact to collect calls. In both cases, children in families of limited financial resources are at a disadvantage in terms of staying in contact with incarcerated parents.

One study, which looked at the costs of New York families staying in contact with family members in state prisons,

estimated that low-income families in the Bronx spent at least 15 percent of their monthly incomes on maintaining that contact.

### Policy Considerations

The majority of studies have generally found that both children and their incarcerated parents benefit from maintaining some form of contact.

Research also shows that contact between children and their inmate parents is a complex issue. A review of the research suggests that contact between children and incarcerated parents is related to a number of factors ranging from the inmate's relationship with the child's caregiver to family economic resources and jail and prison policies. And the key factor determining the outcomes of visits between children and incarcerated parents is the quality of those visits.

Policy considerations for improving the frequency and quality of contact between inmates and their children include the following.

- A child's early months and years are critical to developing secure attachments. Jail and prison interventions that address this issue include a New York program that allows mothers to live with their infant during the child's first year, which has shown positive outcomes in terms of building secure attachments.

- Limited family resources is a barrier to visitation. Prisons are often located far from a child's home. And some jails and prison require families to pay for collect phone calls in order to stay in contact with an incarcerated parent. Interventions that help offset transportation costs or changes in telephone contact policies are examples of steps that might encourage more frequent child-parent visits.

- Stress experienced by a child's caregiver and strained relationships between caregiver and an incarcerated parent discourage regular contact between inmates and their children. A positive relationship or parenting partnership, on the other hand, has been found associated with more frequent visits, suggesting the benefits of programs that help caregivers deal with stress and communicating with incarcerated parents.

- Remote forms of contact, such as letters and phone calls, have been associated with positive outcomes and are a particularly important vehicle for allowing children to stay in contact with a parent incarcerated far from home. Technologies, such as text messaging and e-mail, offer new opportunities for remote contact.

Finally, studies report that when visits between children and their incarcerated parents occur within the context of an intervention aimed at improving the quality of the visiting experience, positive outcomes are more likely to result, such as better parent-child relationships, a lower likelihood of children feeling alienated from their incarcerated parent, and fewer symptoms of depression among incarcerated mothers.

However, interventions such as nurseries inside correctional facilities and programs that enhance the visiting experience of children are not staples in prison and jails around the country. In fact, local jails are more likely to restrict physical and face-to-face contact between parent and child. In doing so, research suggests correctional institutions are missing opportunities to offer inmates and their children experiences that could benefit both and help strengthen their families.

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### *Announcement*

#### **Parenting Guide Series Available From OCD**

The University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development is offering a series of easy to use parenting guides offering information and advice on 50 parenting topics. These guides are available free of charge to parents and organizations, agencies and professionals who work with children and families.

The You and Your Child parenting guide series, written and edited by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, covers topics ranging from how to deal with children's fears, finicky eating habits, and aggressive behavior to getting a child ready to read, setting rules, and coping with grief.

Each guide is based on current parenting literature and has been reviewed by a panel of child development experts

and practitioners. The series is made possible by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.

To receive a printed set of all 50 guides by mail, send a request along with your name, organization, mailing address, and telephone number to:

Parenting Guides  
University of Pittsburgh  
Office of Child Development  
400 North Lexington Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15208

The parenting guides are also available on the OCD Web site as portable document files at: [www.o.cd.pitt.edu/Default.aspx?webPageID=61&parentPageId=5](http://www.o.cd.pitt.edu/Default.aspx?webPageID=61&parentPageId=5) ■

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**Autism Study** *continued from Page 2*

what they are looking at, how long they are looking at it, and how they distribute their attention. In doing so, they hope to identify when the deficits begin and what type of deficits they are. In one study, researchers are finding differences at 6 months of age between the infants whose older siblings have autism and infant siblings of typically developing children.

“The way they are paying attention to pictures is different,” said Dr. Strauss. “They are paying attention to smaller details and they are not seeing holistic things. That is critically important to children’s early learning because the way you know, for example, that two different dogs are dogs—that a German shepherd and a collie are both dogs—is by being able to see their general shape, not focusing only on the color of the nose or ear.”

Dr. Campbell is studying early social development, paying particular attention to the interactions between mother and infant. She studies mothers and children in several situations during different developmental stages to examine social reciprocity, pretend play, empathy, and emotion regulation.

When studying social reciprocity in infancy, Dr. Campbell observes face-to-face interaction between mothers and their 6-month-old children. For example, she observes mothers engage their babies in play and notes such things as the infants’ reactions to exaggerated facial expressions as well as their reactions when their mothers are asked to be non-responsive. Typically developing toddlers spontaneously begin to enjoy pretending, something that is difficult for children with autism. Dr. Campbell is studying the development of pretend play in these children during their second year.

In another scenario, she is observing the reaction of children between the ages of 11 and 16 months when they are shown a toy elephant that walks and makes noises. It’s the kind of toy that typically developing infants would be interested in, but wary of, and would tend to look to their mothers for cues about whether to approach it or not.

“We are looking at the give and take of parent-child interaction and how infants use mom as they explore the world,” Dr. Campbell said. “The assumption is that the high-risk infants who are later on going to have a diagnosis (of autism) are going to make much less use of their mothers as a base for exploring the world, or as a way of getting information about what is okay to touch.”

Rounding out the scope of the Pittsburgh Early Autism Study is Dr. Iverson’s work, which includes investigating of the emergence of communication skills, such as language and gesturing, beginning with babbling.

The early markers of autism most consistently reported in research literature are related to early social communication. Most infants are able to speak a few words by the age of 18 months and nearly all are able to use gestures of

some sort to communicate their interests, wants, and needs. The exceptions are infants with an ASD who typically do not communicate at such levels during their first 18 months or do so infrequently.

Dr. Iverson begins observing children when they are 5 months old. A key aspect of her work is that she regularly videotapes the children in their homes. “What is important to us,” said Dr. Strauss, “is that she is getting a diary snapshot, if you will, of every month of development, which allows us to look at a variety of things.”

Although each researcher is investigating separate issues, those issues are often related. One example is gesture and social interaction.

“One of the things people talk about with children with autism is they use certain gestures to get something they want, but they don’t use gestures that children use for sharing,” said Dr. Campbell. “In my lab, we look at how often children show mom a toy. Showing is a social gesture. They are showing mom a toy to share something. Or they point at something interesting as a way to sharing it. Those are gestures that seem to be delayed in children with autism, which fits with Jana Iverson’s work.”

Taken together, their work could reveal a comprehensive profile of early autism that today remains elusive. Such information would help identify more precise early markers of autism and perhaps a reliable method of early diagnosis. “There is a big push now within pediatrics and child psychiatry toward early intervention,” said Dr. Campbell. “But we don’t really know who to intervene with unless we can be sure we are picking up the right cues.”

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Parents with infants – regardless of whether or not they also have an older child with autism—can get more information about the project including how to participate by calling 866-647-3436 or going to [www.pitt.edu/~peas](http://www.pitt.edu/~peas) ■

**Announcement**

**OCD's Family Foundations Serves Infants, Toddlers, And Families**

The University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development's Family Foundations Early Head Start promotes healthy prenatal outcomes for income-eligible pregnant women, the development of very young children, and healthy family functioning in communities across Allegheny County.

Family Foundations was one of the first federal Early Head Start programs established in the nation to provide a vehicle through which every young child with the support of their family and community can achieve optimal development. Family Foundations serves and partners with infants and toddlers, their parents, extended family members, and their community to self-assess, identify goals, and develop and implement action plans to enhance children's development.

The program, recently expanded with additional funding, serves more than 300 income-eligible pregnant women and children from birth to the age of three years at six Allegheny County community sites. Family Foundations' caring and qualified staff supports positive parent-child relationships and works to make sure young children and their families receive innovative services that enhance social and emotional development, cognitive functioning, physical performance, social skills, and communication development.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, contact Angela Tookes at 412-233-9430. ■

**Announcement**

**Free Background Reports Cover Children's Issues**

University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development offers a recently updated series of free background reports providing concise overviews of current topics important to children and families.

New topics in the series, Children, Youth, and Family Background, include childhood obesity, foster care, early literacy, parent-teen relationships, and the trend among non-profit agencies to help support their missions by starting money-generating social enterprises.

The reports, originally produced to keep journalists and policymakers up to date on children's issues, are available free of charge to anyone interested in learning about the latest developments in areas ranging from education and child

development to child welfare and juvenile crime. These reports are written, edited, and reviewed by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

All Children, Youth, and Family Background reports are posted on the OCD Web site as portable document files (.pdf) for viewing and downloading at the following address: [www.ocd.pitt.edu/Default.aspx?webPageID=49&parentPageId=5](http://www.ocd.pitt.edu/Default.aspx?webPageID=49&parentPageId=5). ■

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- Interdisciplinary education and research
- University-community service demonstrations
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### Announcement

#### Free OCD Parenting Columns Well Suited For Newsletters

Dispensing parenting advice, long the domain of grandmothers and other family relations, is drawing more attention from policymakers and others looking for ways to strengthen families and communities—and for good reason. Studies show effective parenting improves a child's chances of healthy development.

Sound parenting advice on more than 50 topics is now available free of charge in a series of columns written by Robert B. McCall, PhD, codirector of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and former columnist for *Parents* magazine.

The columns, well suited for newsletters and community newspapers, provide clear, concise, and accurate information

on topics such as dealing with a child's lying, how to toilet train, what to do about nightmares, discipline and finicky eaters, and how to recognize and address grief in children.

OCD offers the columns free of charge as Microsoft Word documents. All columns are available on OCD Web site at: [www.ocd.pitt.edu/Parenting-Columns/151/default.aspx](http://www.ocd.pitt.edu/Parenting-Columns/151/default.aspx).

The public service initiative is made possible by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education, whose contributions support production of the columns and other Office of Child Development projects. ■