

Motor and Brain Development Lab

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A note from Brittany



Happy Spring from the Waisman Center's Motor & Brain Development Lab! It's been a bustling and vibrant year, and we are excited to share the highlights with you via this newsletter! As you will see, our science is scienc'ing, and our current and former trainees are out in the world doing awesome things.

I am grateful to continue to do this work with the best team there is and with such an amazing community. You and this community are why we do this work, so thank you for all you do! Please remember you can reach out to me and the team at any time. We are here if you have any questions, and we are eager to hear your perspectives, stories, and recommendations. Our vision is to have two-way, open lines of communication between the research and the community, and we are always grateful for the opportunity to connect.

May this next year bring about joy and flourishing.

Sincerely,

Brittany Travers, PhD

Carla and Mike Austin Faculty Fellow
Associate Professor, Occupational Therapy Program
Kinesiology Department
Waisman Center

Recent Findings

Motor Skills in Autistic Youth: What Changes—and What Doesn't—Through the Teen Years

Allison Block followed autistic and non autistic youth ages 6 to 18 to see how motor skills—like coordination and strength—change over time. The findings suggest that motor differences do not disappear in adolescence, but the pattern depends on the skill.

Differences in overall coordination and motor performance tended to stay steady or narrow slightly with age, while differences in physical strength—especially hand strength—grew larger during the teenage years. Overall, the findings suggest that autistic youth may benefit from continued, age appropriate motor and strength supports through adolescence.

Motor skills change with age from childhood through adolescence



Citation

Understanding Sensory Patterns in Autism: What They Mean for Movement and Function

Individual differences in sensory type help explain variation in motor skills



Citation

Sabrina Kabokov, Olivia Surgent, and Emily Skaletski identified four sensory subtypes ranging from mild sensory differences to more intense, mixed sensory challenges to see if these groups could help explain varied motor skills, daily living skills, and core autism features.

Children in the mild and attenuated-preoccupied subtypes tended to have stronger motor skills and better everyday functioning while those in the sensitive-distressed and extreme-mixed categories showed greater motor challenges, more pronounced autism features, and lower adaptive skills. The findings suggest that sensory differences are closely linked to how children move, function and participate in daily life.

Brain–Body Connections May Help Explain Differences in Facial Expression in Autism

In a study led by **Kimberly Bress**, researchers explored why facial expressions—like eyebrow raises or eye movements—can look different for some autistic people.

Using brain imaging, the team looked at how parts of the brain that feel facial movement communicate with parts that control facial muscles. They found that while brain connections worked similarly for lower-face movements (like the mouth) in autistic and non-autistic participants, connections related to the upper face (such as the eyes and eyebrows) worked differently in autistic participants.

These differences were linked to less movement in the upper face during expressions. The findings suggest that facial expression differences may be related to how the brain coordinates movement and sensory feedback, rather than a lack of emotion or interest in social interaction.

Facial differences in autism may reflect how the brain controls movement—not how a person feels.



Citation

How Autistic Children See Their Own Quality of Life—and How Caregivers See It Differently

A child's experience of everyday life isn't always the same as what caregivers see—so it's important to listen to both.

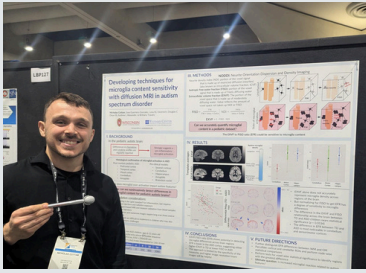
In a study led by **Emily Skaletski**, researchers examined how autistic children rate their own quality of life compared to how their caregivers rate it for them—and whether the two perspectives match.

The study included 74 autistic children ages 5 to 11 who were able to share their own views, alongside caregiver reports. The researchers found that children's and caregivers' ratings of quality of life often differed, with very little agreement between the two. Sensory experiences and sleep difficulties were linked to lower quality of life in both child and caregiver reports, while age and IQ were not. Autism and ADHD features were related to quality of life mainly in caregiver reports. The findings highlight the importance of listening to both autistic children and their caregivers, as each offers a different and valuable perspective on a child's well-being.



Citation

Presentations



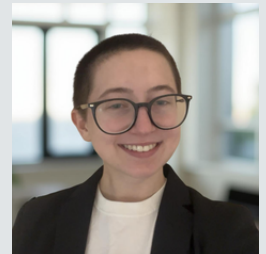
In November, **Allison Block** and **Nick Cottam** presented at the 2025 *Society for Neuroscience Conference* in San Diego, California. They focused on using MRI data to better understand how autism features relate to brain structures.

In February, **Allison Block** presented the lab's work on early distinguishing behavioral features of co-occurring ADHD in autistic youth at the *World Federation of Occupational Therapy Conference* in Bangkok, Thailand. There, she learned about the varying priorities and different types of occupational therapy research occurring around the world.



In February, **Brittany Travers**, **Monica Duran**, and **Jacqueline Cano** presented at a meeting of *Familias Unidas con Niños con Necesidades Especiales*.

In March, **Jamie Kortanek** presented on exploring partnership possibilities, community needs and institutional requirements at the *Wisconsin Idea Conference*.



Also in March, **Brittany Travers** gave an online [presentation](#) through the Autism Research Institute, titled: *Understanding Autism through the Lens of Sensorimotor Features and Early-Developing Brain Regions*. The recording is available through this QR code.



In April, **Brittany Travers** and **Jamie Kortanek** caught up with former lab members, **Olivia Surgent** and **Emily Skaletski** at the *International Society for Autism Research* conference in Prague, where they also presented on recent lab findings.

Lab Member Updates

We welcomed . . .

First year OTD-Phd Student, **Jamie Kortanek**



3 new undergraduate students:
(L-R) **Emma Eisenberg, Verena Sonnleitner, Max Kostopolus**

High school volunteers from local high school: (L-R) **Arya Yavuz** and **Kayla Blitz**



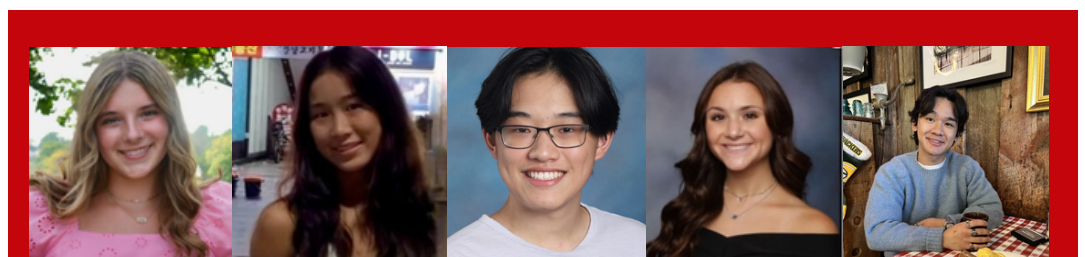
6 new entry-level occupational therapy doctoral (OTD) students: (L-R, top to bottom) **Lily Blase, Tiana Edwards, Megan Haas, Natalie McDonald, Nate Navarro, and Louisa Shromoff**

We said farewell to . . .



6 entry-level occupational therapy doctoral (OTD) students: (L-R, top to bottom) **Rebecca Alterson, Maddie Caples, Cece Hayman, Maddie Hyland, Pearl Kler, and Andrew Knoke**

Undergraduate Students: (L-R) **Mary Gruber, Diane Li, Jason Shao, Dhani Skole, and Jetli Yang**



Research Opportunities

UW LINK Study

Children between 4-7 years old with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder are invited to participate in our new research project about autism and ADHD. Families will be asked to visit the Waisman Center once per year for three years. During these visits, a parent completes a clinical interview and questionnaires about their child, while their child completes cognitive assessments and an MRI brain scan. Both parent and child will be asked to provide a saliva sample. In-person study activities total 4 hours in the first year and can be broken into multiple visits. In Year 1, families will receive up to \$120 for completed participation. Mileage reimbursement and travel support are available as well.



To learn more, visit: <https://uwlink.waisman.wisc.edu/>



Discover, Play, & Learn: Brain Research for Kids

Who: We are looking for English-speaking children 5-13 years-old, on or not on the autism spectrum, who are excited to learn about their brains!

What: 6-hours of study activities, including a 20-60 minute MRI. Study activities can be done in one day or multiple days.

Where: The Waisman Center in Madison, WI.

When: We'll work around your schedule!

Compensation: Earn up to \$200 while contributing to important research. We'll take care of travel arrangements (up to \$249) and meals during study activities.



Interested or have more questions?

We would love to hear from you! BrainyMovtStudy@waisman.wisc.edu

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