

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT LAB

NEWSLETTER

SUMMER/FALL 2019

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Social Development lab receives large grant from NIH to study the transition to kindergarten and school readiness!

The PEERS project served as the foundation for a new project in collaboration with Dr. Dianna Murray-Close at the University of Vermont. The FRIENDS Project is a study of preschoolers' social development and school readiness as children transition to kindergarten. The FRIENDS Project examines how family and peer relationships impact school readiness, which is broadly defined to include academic and social-emotional domains of development. In addition, the project examines the influence of the stress hormone cortisol. The FRIENDS Project is funded (R01HD095832-01A1) by the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), which is part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). A press release, recent media coverage of this project, and link to a formal abstract may be found on the lab website.

This project will include the collection of teacher reports, parent reports, and child interviews conducted at schools. In addition, we will collect saliva from participating children in order to measure the stress hormone cortisol. We will also schedule individual sessions with parents at drop-off or pick-up times in order to collect samples of hair (and finger nails) for measuring cortisol. We plan to conduct these assessments in the fall and spring when children are in the year prior to kindergarten. One additional assessment will occur in kindergarten. We look

forward to partnering with local schools and child care centers as well as families in conducting this important project to inform our understanding of school readiness. Consent forms and invitations to participate will be sent home to families via our school partners in September.

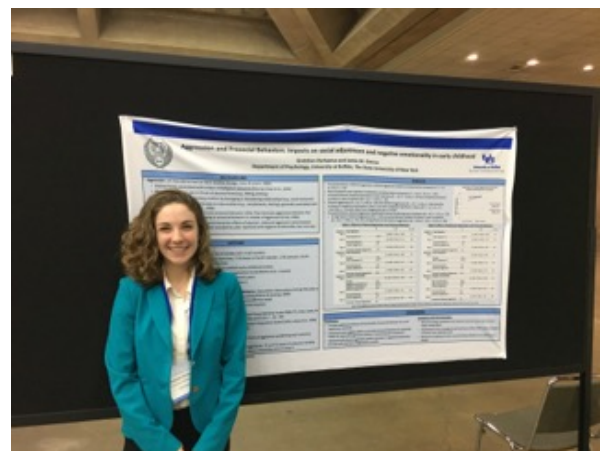


Figure 1. Doctoral student Gretchen Perhamus presenting PEERS findings at the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) in Baltimore, MD

EARLY FINDINGS FROM PEERS PROJECT!

At long last the Social Development lab is wrapping up the PEERS Project!

Beginning in 2015, the PEERS Project set out to examine how biological and personality factors may impact social behavior-- specifically, these social behaviors include aggression, social exclusion, and helping behavior. Now that all the data from 300 children and families has been collected, the lab has been busy performing analyses and would love to share some early findings.

One major question the PEERS Project asked was whether emotion dysregulation (the inability to control your emotions) is related to reactive aggression (aggression that is usually in retaliation to a threat). Preliminary analysis illustrated that emotion dysregulation was indeed associated with concurrent and future reactive aggression. Furthermore, this association held for both physical and relational (being harmed in a way that uses the relationship, e.g. social exclusion) reactive aggression. Prior to beginning the project, it was hypothesized that the relation between emotion dysregulation and reactive aggression would be explained by whether the child tended to interpret social situations in a hostile manner. Interestingly enough, early analyses seemed to show that this was not actually the case. Instead, results showed that peer rejection (i.e., dislike by peers) partially explains emotion dysregulation predicting later reactive aggression. Along with reactive aggression, the PEERS Project also examined proactive aggression (i.e., the use of aggression to achieve a goal). It was believed that fearlessness may act as a predictor to proactive aggression; however, results showed this was not the case and rather decreased prosociality (e.g., helping or sharing) was associated with both concurrent and

future proactive aggression. In fact, this association was significant for both physical and relational proactive aggression.

Early findings also showed differences by gender. In boys, emotion dysregulation appeared to be a stronger predictor of physical, more so than relational, aggression. On the contrary, for girls, emotion dysregulation was associated more with future relational aggression as opposed to physical.

Several families participated in our laboratory visits where we measured children's physiological changes to a video depicting an episode of social exclusion. Our initial findings on this subsample (87 children) revealed that those children who had a lot of sweat on their fingers and experienced social exclusion from their peers showed an increase in their own displays of relational aggression (social exclusion behavior). These findings support the notion that we can measure physiological indicators of the Autonomic Nervous System among young children and that heightened reactions to stress interacts with experiences of peer stress in the development of aggression.

These results are only the beginning and we look forward to continuing with analyses and delving even deeper into the data. Thanks so much to everyone along the way who helped bring the project to fruition, including teachers, parents, and our undergraduate research assistants!

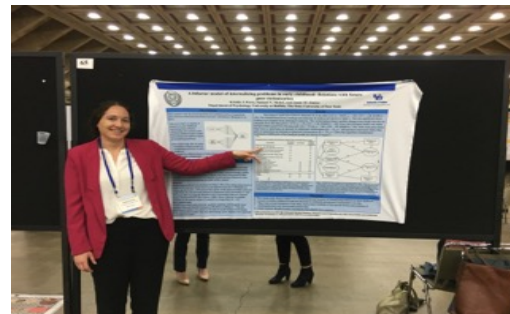


Figure 2. Doctoral student Kristin Perry presenting PEERS findings at the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) meeting in Baltimore, MD

RECENT PEER REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS FROM THE LAB

Kamper-Demarco, K.E., & Ostrov, J.M. (2019). The influence of friendships on aggressive behavior in early childhood: Examining the interdependence of aggression. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, 50, 520-531. doi: 10.1007/s10578-018-0857-x

Perry, K. J., & Ostrov, J. M. (2019). The reciprocal relations between male and female play partners and aggression in early childhood. *Child Development*, 90, 127-135. doi: 10.1111/cdev.13178

DR. OSTROV IS SERVING ON THE BUFFALO ANTI- BULLYING TASK FORCE:

Informed by findings from the PEERS project, Dr. Ostrov recently provided a presentation to the Buffalo Anti-Bullying Task Force, a collaboration between the Buffalo Public Schools and the Erie County Family Court. Dr. Ostrov is a member of the task force and served on the data and research sub-committee. Results will be shared in a public forum in the near future.

STAFF CHANGES AND UPDATES:

This year we say goodbye to longtime staff member, Samantha Kesselring. Sam started working in our lab when she was an undergraduate student and continued as a volunteer graduate assistant while enrolled in the School Psychology program. We are pleased to report that Sam will be a PhD student in school psychology at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. We wish Sam well as she starts this exciting phase of her training!

Sarah Blakely-McClure has successfully defended her dissertation (using data from the PEERS project) and will begin her new role as an Assistant Professor of Psychological Science at Canisius College at the end of August. Congratulations Dr. Blakely-McClure!

The lab welcomes Sarah Nowalis who will be our new research support specialist and project coordinator on the FRIENDS project. Sarah earned her M.S. in experimental psychology from the Rochester Institute of Technology and has most recently been working on federally funded projects at Kansas University.

The lab also welcomes Danielle Rice who will serve as the Research Technician on the FRIENDS project. Danielle is a recent graduate of the University of Vermont where she studied psychological science.

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STAFF MEMBERS AS OF FALL 2019

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