



DIRECTOR'S INSIGHT

Shaping the Vision for Tomorrow with Research and Mentoring

This fall we've been hard at work advancing our research initiatives, driven by the purpose of shedding light on autism's intricacies and enhancing the well-being of those it touches.

We've embarked on a groundbreaking study that delves into the unique communication styles of autistic individuals and how these styles may influence their employment prospects. This research is vital in expanding our understanding of autism and creating opportunities for autistic youth to thrive in the workplace. Our commitment to this important work has been recognized with recent funding from the National Institute of Mental Health.

We are also dedicated to mentoring the next generation of research assistants, fellows, and clinicians, fostering their skills and enabling them to make meaningful contributions to science. During the fall, which marks the start of the school season, we've witnessed exciting developments among some of our staff members as they advance their professional careers, both within and outside the Foundation. **Mikayla Haas**, known for her work with youth on the autism spectrum in our research studies, started a graduate program this fall at Montclair State University. We are thrilled that she will maintain her position at our Center as course developer while pursuing a PhD in clinical psychology, focusing on spatial development in young children.

Jacob Gronemeyer, a former research assistant, started his graduate school career at Penn State University's Graduate Program in

Neuroscience. Read his reflections on his time at the Foundation. We also celebrate the achievements of **Drs. Heba Elsayed** and **Aditi Arora**, our postdoctoral fellows who recently completed their fellowships this past spring. Dr. Elsayed has stayed on as an associate research scientist in our Center.

We all share a strong determination to create a positive impact in the field of autism research and welcome you to stay connected with us as we continue to advance knowledge, foster inclusion, and enhance the quality of life for individuals on the autism spectrum. Whether you are an adult on the spectrum or a parent of an autistic child, we're open to discussing ways you can engage with the Center in research studies or focus groups. Share your knowledge with us by emailing autismresearch@kesslerfoundation.org. Thank you for being a part of our journey.

All the best,

Helen Genova, PhD

Associate Director, Center for Autism Research



STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Our Multi-talented Team Member



Meet **Michael Dacanay**, a versatile Foundation team member since June 2019. He's worn many hats here, from conducting neuropsychological tests and MRI scans to recruiting new families for research. Yet, his most important role today is primary interventionist, delivering innovative tools and interventions to youth on the spectrum.

Mike has made a meaningful impact across a range of studies, including helping youth and adults enhance their employment readiness skills. He finds true fulfillment in witnessing their progress week by week. He shared, "Every day, I'm inspired by our Center's mission to enhance inclusivity, wellness, positivity, and quality of life for people on the spectrum."

FROM RESEARCH ASSISTANT TO PHD: NURTURING A PASSION FOR SCIENCE

by Jacob Gronemeyer, former research assistant, Center for Autism Research, Kessler Foundation

Working as a research assistant in the Center has provided me with firsthand experience in autism research. Under Dr. Genova's guidance, I learned about employing positive psychology principles with individuals on the autism spectrum. This interventional approach focuses on recognizing and cultivating strengths in people rather than "fixing" their weaknesses, challenging traditional methods in use today. Upon reflection, I've realized the many ways I've integrated these principles into my own life.

One of my more rewarding tasks involved teaching young adults how to identify their strengths, enhance their skills, and boost their self-esteem through our clinical studies. Several of the Center's studies ask participants to complete the VIA Character Strengths Survey, a free quiz that helped identify their greatest qualities and strengths. After taking the quiz myself, I learned that my top three strengths are love of learning, perspective, and hope. These results resonated with me because they align with my experiences in the field of psychology and the tremendous support I've enjoyed along the way.

However, for individuals on the autism spectrum, discovering their strengths through this survey often comes as a surprise since their positive attributes often remain hidden due to societal pressures. To them, the world often appears as a convoluted maze of social norms and expectations in which they are told to change their natural behaviors to fit in.

Consequently, many of them struggle with lower self-esteem compared to neurotypical peers. Yet, with the right tools and support, they can achieve remarkable



success. I wonder what individuals on the spectrum would be able to accomplish if society expanded its definition of "normal."

As I begin my PhD studies in neuroscience, I will carry my experiences from the Foundation where my passion for science deepened. Witnessing the positive impact of research on individuals inspired me. In my future work, I aim to match the heart and dedication to the scientific process that I witnessed at the Foundation. I hope that everyone has the opportunity to discover and cultivate their strengths, because recognizing greatness in ourselves and those around us should be the norm.

Unlocking Potential: An Intern's Transformative Experience



Aysha Syeda, a sophomore at Haverford College, interned with us over the summer, gaining valuable professional experience. If you know a college student seeking a summer internship, please contact us at autismresearch@kesslerfoundation.org.

"My time at the Center for Autism Research fueled my curiosity and passion for research. As an intern, I wasn't just a student; I felt like an integral part of the team. I discovered a new facet of research beyond Petri dishes, and as a pre-med student, it opened my eyes to the potential for research in my future. I'm grateful to have worked with such bright minds and inspiring personalities, motivating me in my journey towards medicine. Thank you for this rewarding opportunity!"

WHEN MAKING SMALL TALK AT WORK IS A BIG CHALLENGE

By Helen Genova, PhD, Associate Director, Center for Autism Research

The way a person speaks to others – especially on the job – often reveals a great deal, including their personality and respect for others. However, individuals on the autism spectrum may encounter challenges in the workplace if their communication style diverges from what others perceive as “typical.” For example, they may have social anxiety, which can make “small talk” a difficult task or might not realize that sharing jokes during lunch with colleagues is appropriate, but continued joking during working hours may not be well-received by a supervisor. These communication differences frequently pose challenges for autistic employees in the workplace and could potentially result in job loss.

Analyzing speech patterns

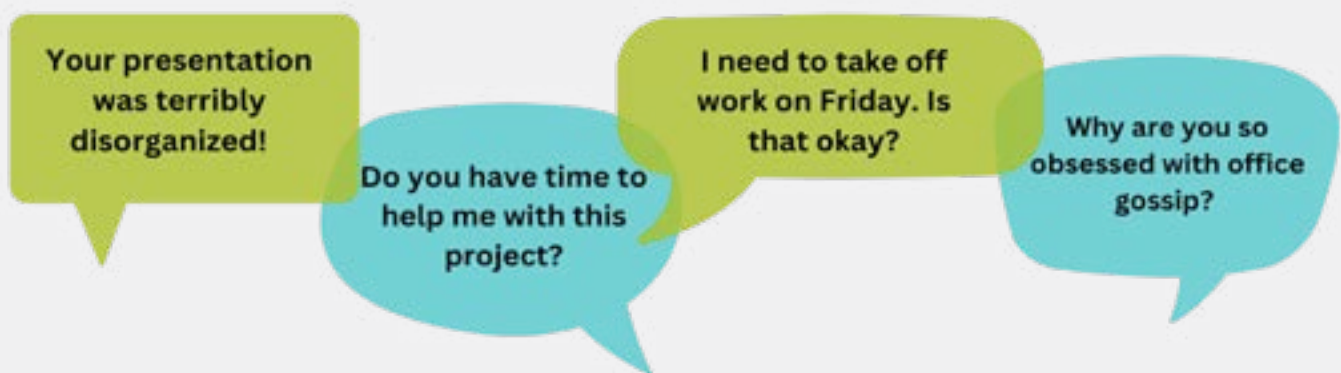
Heba Elsayed, MD, and Helen Genova, PhD, are spearheading a study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health that focuses on analyzing speech patterns and styles in individuals on the autism spectrum. The aim of this research is to understand how the speech patterns and styles of these individuals

may potentially impact their employment prospects. By studying distinctive language profiles in autism and comparing them to those of neurotypical individuals, the team seeks to identify effective strategies for assisting individuals on the spectrum.

Alarming unemployment rates

This research is critical due to the alarming unemployment rates faced by individuals with autism, with nearly 80% remaining jobless. Dr. Elsayed holds optimism that the study’s outcomes will ultimately make a difference. She explains, “Effective communication is often a vital factor in retaining employment, a challenge that individuals on the autism spectrum may grapple with. If we can identify the underlying causes of this difficulty or develop strategies to improve communication skills, we can provide valuable support to numerous individuals in this community.”

To learn more about this study contact us at autismresearch@kesslerfoundation.org



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Center for Autism Research



Kessler Foundation

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The Center for Autism Research — Our team is developing accessible and evidence-based research that provides new interventions for children, adolescents, and adults on the spectrum, with particular focus on the critical transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Center for Autism Research Staff

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Editorial

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Help us explore new ways of assisting young people on the autism spectrum

- We welcome all volunteers, with and without autism, ages 11 to 26
- Most studies can be completed online
- All volunteers are compensated for their time

Scan the QR code to learn more



Volunteers are the heart of our research



Kessler Foundation research helps people with disabilities live better lives.

Join our research studies at
[KesslerFoundation.org/join](https://www.kesslerfoundation.org/join)

