Social Skills Program for Young Adults

Beginning in late 2011 or early 2012, VTAC will have open slots for young adults (ages 18 to 22) with a diagnosis of high-functioning autism, Asperger’s Disorder, or PDD-NOS who are interested in participating in an experimental social skills intervention program.

The program requires attendance by the young adult and a familiar adult assistant (e.g., parent, caregiver, academic coach) at fourteen 90-minute sessions over 14 weeks. The young adult group will cover a new social skills topic each week, including conversational skills, appropriate use of humor, and handling teasing and bullying. Young adults will also have the opportunity to participate in group activities to offer the chance to interact and practice new skills.

The familiar adult assistant will attend a separate session, held at the same time and location as the young adult sessions. Assistants will have the opportunity to report on their young adult’s home behavior over the past week and will review the lessons from that week’s young adult session. The program is based on an evidence-based intervention approach (PEERS, UCLA). Please contact VTAC to be put on the waitlist or request more information.

Highlight on Research

Eye-Tracking Research with Virginia Tech Undergraduate Students

Brenna Maddox is currently using eye-tracking technology to investigate the broad autism phenotype (BAP). The BAP describes a range of individuals with sub-clinical levels of social-behavioral, language, and personality characteristics similar to people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. The research study involves collecting scores on a self-report measure of ASD traits and tracking eye gaze patterns toward a series of facial photographs. Results may help to validate and characterize the BAP in the general population.
Meet Our Directors

Susan Williams White is Co-Director of the VT Autism Clinic and Assistant Professor of Psychology at VT. She joined the Clinic in 2008, coming from VCU where she directed a clinic for treatment of children and adolescents with autism and related conditions. Dr. White is a clinical psychologist whose primary applied and research interests involve developing evidence-based assessment and treatment tools, and identifying effective strategies to promote improved quality of life and independence in young adults with ASD. She and her team recently completed a clinical trial to evaluate the impact of a novel therapy program for anxiety and social skill deficits in adolescents with ASD. She has published widely in the scientific field, has a book (Guilford Press) published in 2011 on evidence-based approaches for improving social competence in children with ASD, and presents regionally and nationally on work in this area.

Angela Scarpa is an Associate Professor of psychology at VT, licensed clinical psychologist, and Founder and Co-Director of the VT Autism Clinic. Before joining the VT faculty in 1997, she received her PhD from the University of Southern California and held faculty positions at Eastern Washington University and the University of Georgia. She conducts research and treatment related to the mental health of children, adolescents, and young adults, with a focus on autism spectrum disorders as well as disruptive behavior problems. Her work integrates biological and social perspectives to understand and treat emotional and social functioning in individuals with ASD. Her team recently published their work on a stress and anger management program for young children with ASD. She has published widely in academic journals, presents at scientific and community meetings, chairs the New River Valley Autism Action Group, and is co-editing a book on cognitive behavioral interventions for youth with ASD.

Meet Our Staff

Clinic Coordinators:

Caitlin Conner is a first-year graduate student and co-clinic coordinator at VTAC. She received her bachelor’s at the University of Pittsburgh, where she began to study co-occurring conditions and family history in ASD. Before graduate school, she worked at the Autism Center of Excellence at Pitt and volunteered with a group that assisted college students with ASD and ADHD. She also has experience as a teacher aide in a summer program that provided community-based instruction to children with ASD. Her general research interests are in evidence-based treatments for individuals with ASD. She will be running a social skills group at VTAC beginning this fall.

Katrina Ostmeyer is a third-year graduate student and co-clinic coordinator at VTAC. She received her bachelor’s at the University of Kansas and received her master’s degree in psychology at Washburn University. Katrina is a Board Certified assistant Behavior Analyst (BCaBA) and is the behavioral consultant for the COACH program, helps supervise PRT clients, and does behavioral consultation for VTAC. She is interested in novel treatments for ASD and improving the availability of evidence-based and ABA treatments. Her current projects include an eye tracking study examining viewing processes of dynamic faces and a developing a treatment to improve social and academic outcomes in children with ASD in schools.

Jonathan Waldron received his BS from Virginia Tech in 2010. Jonathan conducts treatment related to the mental health of adolescents and adults with a focus on disruptive behavior problems, anxiety, and depression. His re-
search examines the psychological and physiological factors associated with violence perpetration and victimization. Jonathan is currently working on several research projects, including an examination of immune functioning in adult survivor’s of child abuse, the protective nature of communication devices after the events of April 16, and aggression in college students.

Our Staff:

Tyler Hassenfeldt is a second-year student in Clinical Psychology. She received a B.A. in Psychology in December 2008 from Clemson University. After completing her undergraduate degree, she gained experience with children and adolescents with a variety of developmental disabilities, including ASD, in school, home, research, and outpatient settings. As a first year student, she was Coordinator of the Virginia Tech Autism Clinic, conducted family and couples therapy, and co-led social skills groups for children with ASD and adults with Traumatic Brain Injuries. This fall, Tyler will continue to provide family, individual, and group therapy to children and college students with ASD. Her research interests include social skills and externalizing behaviors in school-aged children with ASD.

Nicole Kreiser is a third year student in the Clinical Psychology program at VT. She completed her master’s thesis in spring of 2011, which involved the development of a self-report measure of social anxiety for adolescents and adults with ASD. Her general interests involve the assessment and treatment of psychosocial difficulties faced by adolescents and adults with high functioning ASD. Specifically, her research interests are related to the assessment of co-occurring anxiety disorders in individuals with ASD as they are uniquely manifested in this population. In her clinical work she is interested in utilizing components of Cognitive Behavioral and Structural Family therapies in treating some of the unique challenges faced by individuals in this population. Currently she is working on publishing the measure she developed for her thesis along with a review of the assessment of social anxiety in individuals with ASD.

Jill Lorenzi is a third year graduate student in the clinical psychology program, where she studies under the mentorship of Dr. Angela Scarpa, and is a graduate clinician at the Virginia Tech Autism Clinic and Psychological Services Center. She received a B.A. in Psychology and Economics from the University of Virginia in 2007, and worked as a research assistant on the Sensory Experiences Project (PI: Dr. Grace Baranek) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) from 2007-2009. Jill recently completed a clinical externship during the summer of 2011 at UNC-CH’s Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities. She has worked with children with ASD and their families in both community and school settings. Her research interests include the early identification and evidence-based treatment of autism spectrum disorders, particularly in young children, as well as the use of eye tracking technology to explore the development of social attention.

Brenna Maddox is a graduate student in Virginia Tech’s Clinical Psychology PhD program. She graduated from Davidson College in 2008 with a B.S. in psychology. She then worked as an applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapist and residential teacher for two years at the New England Center for Children. Her research interests include evidence-based treatment for autism spectrum disorders, eye-tracking methodology, and the overlap between high-functioning autism and anxiety. Her clinical experience at VTAC includes individual and group therapy for children, adolescents, and adults with ASD.

Michelle Patriquin is a fourth-year student in the clinical psychology program. Her research interests are in the neurophysiological underpinnings of typical and atypical social engagement. Currently, she is exploring the neural and autonomic response patterns that contribute to social difficulties in individuals with autism spectrum disorders. In the future, Michelle hopes to bridge the gap between neuroscience, psychophysiology, and psychosocial treatments by integrating the investigation of these fields in her research and by improving social behavior through biologically-based interventions.

Nuri Reyes is a graduate student in the Clinical Psychology doctoral program at Virginia Tech. She graduated from UCLA, earning a B.A. in Psychology and a minor in Applied Developmental Psychology. She is interested in studying the developmental trajectory of emotions in children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. One of her research questions is to investigate children’s emotion regulation abilities and ultimately create interventions to address these difficulties in ASD.

Amie Schry is a third year student in the Clinical Psychology program. She earned her bachelor of Arts in psychology from Mercer University in Macon, Georgia in May 2008 her Master of Science in clinical psychology from Virginia Tech in May 2011. Ms. Schry’s research interests are related to social anxiety and how social anxiety affects individuals’ level of functioning. She is also interested in predictors of sexual victimization and how different types sexual victimization affect individuals’ psychological health. She recently completed her master’s thesis in which she examined the relationship between social anxiety and sexual victimization in college women. She is currently working on a manuscript based on her thesis data and an additional manuscript on the psychometric properties of a measure of social anxiety.

Cara Pugliese is a doctoral candidate in the Clinical Psychology program at VT. She earned her MS in psychology at the University of Exeter in England and is currently in...
**Treatment Study**

“Problem Solving Skills: 101” is a program for college students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) to improve problem solving abilities. Problem Solving Skills: 101 is designed to help students recognize problems they may encounter in their daily lives and teach skills to develop effective solutions and put them into action.

This program will be held in a group format, consisting of up to ten students at Virginia Tech (VT) who have an ASD diagnosis, such as Autism, Asperger’s Disorder, or PDD-NOS. Participants must be at least 18 years of age. Participants will meet for 9 weekly group sessions lasting approximately 1.5 hours each. Contact Cara Pugliese at cpugliese@vt.edu for more information.

**Eye Tracking Study**

We are recruiting 7-12 year old children with ASD and 4-12 year old typically developing peers view social information and how this affects their ability to identify emotions. Children and a parent will attend a 1-1.5 hour session for eye tracking, a brief cognitive assessment, and questionnaires. Contact Jill Lorenzi at lorenzi@vt.edu for more information.

**VTAC Group for Fall**

The Virginia Tech Autism Clinic (VTAC) currently has open slots for teenagers and pre-teens (ages 11 to 16) with an Autism Spectrum Disorder interested in participating in a social skills group this Fall. A wide range of topics, such as conversations, friendships, school, and family life will be addressed. Each session will also include unstructured time for board games, outdoor activities, or arts-and-crafts, to facilitate social interactions and friendship building. Parents will meet at the same time for a parent component. The group will meet Mondays from 7-8:30 pm at VTAC starting September 19. Fees are on a sliding scale.