

Social Perception in Williams Syndrome Project

Boston University School of Medicine

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Project update

Greetings from Boston University! We hope that this letter finds you and your families well at a time of great unease in our world. Here in Boston, we have been very busy since our last newsletter, and we wish to give you an update of our recent work. Over the last few months, we have completed the first phase of data collection for our current project exploring social perception and understanding in adolescents and adults with Williams syndrome. We would like to thank all the families once more for so graciously giving their time and support to our project.

Currently, we are piloting a new series of activities for our next phase of testing. This wave of research will further examine a number of facets of social perception and understanding, including perception of spoken words, interpretation of irony, and recognition of emotions in dynamic video clips. We will be collecting data based on a variety of measures in this phase – both behavioral and physiological. Past work has led us to believe that we may obtain interesting results when using multiple measures to examine the different ways in which adolescents and adults with Williams syndrome respond to various emotions presented dynamically. Our research team hopes to begin this wave of testing in the late spring/early summer of this year. We are all looking forward to meeting with new families and, as always, to bringing back our old friends.

Visit to Berkshire Hills Music Academy

In late January, our research team (Helen Tager-Flusberg, Daniela Plesa Skwerer, Shiri Pearlman-Avni, Casey Schofield and Alyssa Verbalis) made a visit to South Hadley, Massachusetts to meet with the wonderful staff and students of the Berkshire Hills Music Academy.

This post secondary school provides students with special needs a music-centered education with an emphasis on enhancing personal independence and optimizing their musical abilities. We were given a fabulous tour of the historic mansion in which the students live and attend classes, as well as a detailed overview of the day-to-day life of the faculty and students. We were also able to sit in on some of the classes attended by the students, including a music class, a social skills class, and a computers class. We found ourselves learning new things right alongside the students.

At noon, we joined the students in the cafeteria for lunch, and we had a wonderful opportunity to talk with individual students. We all exchanged stories of what each of us spent our days doing, the things that are important to us and what we hope to do in the future. After lunch, the students and faculty were kind enough to put together an impromptu concert, so we were able to witness the outstanding music abilities of all of the students at Berkshire Hills. We were impressed not only by their talent but also by their enthusiasm and dynamic stage presence. Needless to say, spending the day with the students and staff at Berkshire Hills Music Academy was quite the treat for us.

Our experience at the Berkshire Hills Music Academy sparked a great deal of interest within our team on the role that such an institution plays in the lives of young adults with special needs. We became especially interested in exploring the potential influence that being involved in a supportive learning and socializing experience, such as the Music Academy offers, might have on the development of an individual's self concept and understanding of friendship relationships. During our visit Helen Tager-Flusberg presented some of our group's past findings on the social understanding and self-concepts of adolescents and adults with Williams syndrome to the staff of the Music Academy. Following the presentation the group engaged in a lively discussion of how these measures may be improved by an experience such as the one that this academy provides.

Since our visit, we have spent some time drafting a proposal for a research project in which we would collect measures of individuals' self-concept and of their understanding and feelings about friendship upon their enrollment at Berkshire Hills Music Academy, and at several later points in time, including after graduation. We are looking forward to the potential opportunity to work closely with such a wonderful and talented community of staff and students.

Conference Presentations

This spring, some of our group's work will be presented at two professional conferences. Our project coordinator, **Daniela Plesa Skwerer**, and our post-doctoral fellow, **Shiri Pearlman-Avni**, will be sharing findings on social understanding in individuals with Williams syndrome. Shiri's work explored the performance of children with Williams syndrome and children with autism from Israel on tasks involving false belief and understanding of irony. This research was presented in early April at the Cognitive Neuroscience Meeting in New York City. In our next wave of testing, our lab intends to do some follow up activities on this interesting work with children as well as adolescents and adults with Williams syndrome and other developmental disorders.

In late April (23rd to 27th), both Shiri and Daniela will travel to Tampa, Florida to attend the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development. Daniela will be presenting the results of our work on face processing and on recognition of emotions from static faces and from vocal prosody by adolescents and adults with Williams syndrome. We discussed some of the results of this work in our last newsletter. In brief, we concluded that people with Williams syndrome rely on the same mechanisms as the general population in processing and recognizing faces. Although they are less accurate than age-matched typically developing individuals in recognizing emotions expressed in faces and voices, their patterns of performance suggest the use of similar mechanisms for processing affective information as well. The findings on face recognition in Williams syndrome are reported and discussed in a paper that was recently accepted for publication by the journal *Cognition*. We will be sure to keep you updated on the status of this and any of our other publications.

Unfortunately the busy conference schedules of Helen, Daniela and Shiri will prevent them from being able to attend the WSA regional conference at the Berkshire Hills Music Academy on April 26th. However, **Alyssa Verbalis** and **Casey Schofield** will be able to attend and are looking forward to this event. They both joined the project this past summer and thus have yet to meet many of the families of our participants. They are very excited to meet with some of the people who have been so helpful to our project, as well as visit with the families they have already met.

Future Plans

In the near future, we hope to begin data collection for the next wave of our project. We expect to start working with participants in the early summer, so you can expect to hear from Casey soon!

We are also working on developing more projects for the future, such as the Berkshire Hills Music Academy proposal described above.

We are happy to keep you informed of the new activities and data analysis in which we have been involved! Please be sure to contact us with any address changes or updates.

As always, thank you for your support!

Our research is made possible by the enthusiastic involvement of each and every family of our participants. Thank you again for your commitment to our work, and to our shared goal of understanding and improving the lives of people with Williams syndrome.

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