



*Social Perception in Williams Syndrome Project & Social
Emotional Development of Children Project
Boston University School of Medicine*

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Project update

Greetings from Boston University, and happy fall! We hope you all have had a wonderful summer and a happy Thanksgiving holiday. During this past summer we have been completing data analyses from our last wave of experiments, writing up findings for publication, and developing new experiments and research activities to continue investigating how individuals with Williams syndrome process social information.

We are pleased to announce that our Social Perception project's grant renewal received an excellent score from the National Institutes of Health, and we will continue our research program for another 5 years! The focus of our new round of research activities will be on several innovative ways to explore processing of social and emotional information at implicit, autonomic levels – specifically, by using measures of skin conductance and heart rate variability while participants view pictures with or without emotional content (e.g., faces displaying emotional expressions, scenes of natural disasters, landscapes, scenes involving people interacting, etc). We will also use eye-tracking methods to better understand how adolescents and adults with Williams syndrome pay attention to the social and nonsocial aspects of their environment.

This greater emphasis on implicit emotional processing of social and nonsocial situations was motivated by the very interesting findings from our previous group of experiments in which we collected physiological data. We found that, compared to control groups, individuals with Williams syndrome showed lower levels of physiological arousal to viewing faces displaying emotions, as measured by skin conductance responses. However, measures of heart rate variability indicated that the participants with Williams syndrome showed greater interest in facial expressions than the control groups. We plan to follow up on these findings with our new round of experimental activities. These will involve viewing computer images, listening to sounds, and using a button box to record responses. In addition, as mentioned in our spring newsletter, we will be working closely with our colleagues from Yale University to collect information about where individuals with Williams syndrome are looking when viewing these different images and movie clips. Nicole will be in touch with you over the next few months to begin recruitment for our new wave of testing!

Most of our new experiments will be conducted in the General Clinical Research Center at Boston University School of Medicine, and we look forward to seeing all of you in Boston.

Toddler Project

As mentioned in our previous Newsletter, another direction in our research is to start investigating the developmental origins of the unique social profile of people with Williams syndrome. We are pleased to announce that our new grant proposal entitled 'Development of Social-Emotional Functioning in Children with Williams Syndrome' has been accepted for funding by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and we are currently finalizing the activities to begin recruitment for this project as well!

The main focus of this project is to investigate social emotional development and attachment patterns in 3 and 4 year old children with Williams syndrome compared to control groups of children with Down syndrome and of typically developing children. Most of these activities will involve play, social interaction, and measures of temperament and emotion regulation. Standardized measures of developmental level and early language will also be administered. All of these activities are designed to be enjoyable for the young children and we hope to bring many new families to our lab for this new research project. Families will be visiting our lab over the course of two years, and two visits are planned for each year.

Nicole and Lucia are very excited to begin working with the little ones, and we will continue to keep you updated on the progress of this project.

We look forward to seeing all of you here in Boston!

Contact information

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