



*The Williams Syndrome Project
Boston University School of Medicine*



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Project Updates

Greetings from everyone at the Williams Syndrome Project at Boston University. We hope you stayed warm this winter and are ready for spring just around the corner! We at the lab have been quite busy since our last newsletter and are thrilled to report that this issue will cover both the Social Perception in People with Williams Syndrome Project and our new Social Emotional Development in Children with Williams Syndrome Project!

Social Perception in Williams Syndrome

We are happy to report that we're making good progress in our investigation of various aspects of social perception in adults and adolescents with Williams syndrome, following the competing renewal of the project's grant by the National Institute of Health! Our current research focuses on implicit, unconscious processing of social and emotional information by adults and adolescents with Williams syndrome, as well as on their autonomic responses (e.g., skin conductance and heart rate) to such stimuli. We have had the opportunity to begin data collection on several new experiments this past summer at the 2006 National Convention of the Williams Syndrome Association. Our research team was delighted to see some familiar faces and to make the acquaintance of some new adults and adolescent participants at the WSA National Convention in Richmond, VA this past July. Since the convention, we've been working hard at our lab in Boston to collect data on typically developing adults and adolescents so that we can present some preliminary group findings based on our testing at the conference this summer.

We're also excited to try out some new technology that will allow us to track where our participants look as they watch brief videoclips or static visual images (e.g., faces displaying emotions) on a computer screen. We hope this new equipment will enable us to learn a great deal about how individuals with Williams syndrome process visual information and we look forward to bringing it with us to the next WSA conference! Thanks again to all of the adults and adolescents who participated in our studies in Richmond, Virginia!

Social Emotional Development in Children with Williams Syndrome

We've had a terrific time working with the toddlers on our newest project exploring the social and emotional development of children with Williams syndrome, funded as a pilot study by the NIH! This study explores the development of emotions, temperament and attachment to primary caregivers in toddlers with Williams syndrome. We were very excited to meet and work with our first families of young children with Williams syndrome at the national convention in Virginia and had a great time playing with the children and their families. In the months since the conference, we've enjoyed having toddlers with Williams syndrome and Down syndrome as well as typically developing children come into our laboratory in Boston to complete our activities. Based on these data, we are excited to have some preliminary findings regarding helping and empathy in children with Williams syndrome, which will be presented at an upcoming conference.

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Conference Presentations

In addition to our ongoing work in the lab, we are looking forward to presenting preliminary findings from both our Social Perception and Social Emotional Development of Children Projects at two upcoming conferences. These conferences provide an important avenue for researchers to share and discuss their findings and explore new directions for future research.

Jean Piaget Society

At the end of May, Helen Tager-Flusberg and Daniela Plesa Skwerer will travel to Amsterdam, the Netherlands for a conference on topics in Developmental Social Cognitive Neuroscience, where they will present preliminary findings from our Social Perception in People with Williams Syndrome Project. While these results are only preliminary and we hope to collect more data in the next four years of our grant, we are eager to share with our colleagues some of the differences we have found between people with Williams syndrome and typically developing individuals in the processing of emotional information displayed in faces.

Society for Research in Child Development

We are also excited to share some of our early data from the newly begun Social and Emotional Development of Children with Williams Syndrome Project at the upcoming meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development to take place right here in Boston at the end of March. At this conference, Lucia Ciciolla and Daniela Plesa Skwerer will present a poster exploring the differences in helping behavior and empathy between children with Williams syndrome and typically developing children. We are now recruiting a control group of children with Down syndrome, matched on age and developmental level to the children with Williams syndrome, to better understand what features of social emotional development may be unique to the group with Williams syndrome.

So far we found that, while toddlers with Williams syndrome did not display more helping behavior than their typically developing peers, they did display more empathy towards others, showing greater concern for a person in distress than their typical peers, and sharing the excitement of a person who receives good news.

Publications and Findings

We are pleased to announce the most recent publication of our findings in the March 2007 issue of *Language and Cognitive Processes*. This article reports results from our research exploring the ability of adults and adolescents with Williams syndrome to recognize and interpret prosodic cues in speech and masked vocalizations. Our findings indicate that individuals with Williams syndrome performed better in recognizing emotional tone of voice in speech sounds when the content of speech was not intelligible than were individuals with learning or intellectual disabilities.

Thank you again to all of those individuals and families that we saw in Richmond at the national convention of the Williams Syndrome Association! We enjoyed seeing old and new faces! For those of you in the Boston, MA area, we are excited to begin our new wave of testing on our Social Perception Project for adults and adolescents, so we hope that we may see you in our lab sometime in the near future! We would also love to see toddlers with Williams syndrome between the ages of 2 to 5, so don't hesitate to contact us if you're interested in participating in our fun and exciting research at our lab in Boston! Thanks again and happy spring!

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