



# *The Williams Syndrome Project*

## **Boston University School of Medicine**

### *Fall/Winter 2010*

#### *Update from the Project*

Greetings from the Williams Syndrome Project at Boston University! As the winter holidays are quickly approaching, we take great pleasure in remembering the summer days spent in St. Louis, Missouri, attending the National Convention of the Williams Syndrome Association this past July. We would like to thank everyone for their continuing support of our work, demonstrated again this year by the enthusiastic participation of many children and adults with Williams syndrome in several of our research projects, during the WSA Convention, as well as in our lab at Boston University.

In our recent experimental work we have continued the exploration of strengths and weaknesses in social perception and in social cognition shown by adolescents and adults with Williams syndrome, using innovative methods such as eye-tracking technology to examine attention deployment and visual preferences in response to various images with social and nonsocial content. Some of our recent findings have been, or will be, presented at the scientific meetings described on the next page.

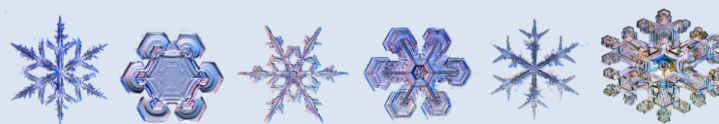
Another direction in our current research is to investigate the social-communication abilities and difficulties that young individuals with Williams syndrome demonstrate in a real-life communicative context. Specifically, we are examining how school-age children with and without Williams syndrome communicate with a collaborator during an interactive game activity. Successful linguistic communication requires knowing and taking into consideration various pieces of information about the experiences and mental states of the people we intend to communicate with, as well as taking into account the specific conditions of the communicative context.

We designed an interactive scenario similar to a board game that probes how children with and without disabilities respond to ambiguous verbal requests from the game-collaborator, and whether these children are able to adjust their own verbal requests to the informational needs of their collaborator. This study is in progress and we hope to interest you and your children in participating!

#### *Research Team News*

We recently said good-bye to **Christine André**, one of our research assistants who worked with many children, adolescents and adults with WS over the past two years in our lab. Christine was also the friendly voice many of you heard on the phone when being contacted to schedule research visits, arrange testing at the WSA Conference in St. Louis this past summer, or just answer your questions about our various projects. In August 2010 Christine began a doctoral program in Clinical Psychology at Suffolk University in Boston. We wish her well and we are happy she chose to stay in the area!

**Emily Ammerman**, who joined our team in the summer of 2009, has already met many of the children, adults and their families who attended the WSA Conference in July 2010, or who came to our lab in Boston in the last two years. Emily is eager to continue data collection with both children with Williams syndrome and typically developing 4 to 9 year-old children, using the interactive game we designed to probe social-communication abilities. Emily is also actively involved in processing and analyzing the wealth of data collected over the last few years from our participants with Williams syndrome and she has already contributed substantially to the presentation of our findings at several scientific meetings noted on the next page.





### *Scientific Presentations to the Media and at Conferences*

As many of you know, a film crew from ABC spent some time during the WSA Convention this past summer in St. Louis recording many aspects of the research conducted with children, adolescents and adults with Williams syndrome by several different research teams attending the Convention, including ours. As a follow-up, Dr. Helen Tager-Flusberg was invited to the ABC studios in New York City, to talk about the extremely interesting profile of social strengths and difficulties characteristic of people with Williams syndrome, and about some of the research findings that have contributed to defining this social phenotype. Helen was interviewed by Chris Cuomo for the TV Program 20/20, and we expect this episode to air early next year, possibly in January!

Another important scientific meeting where Helen presented an overview of the social and behavioral phenotype of Williams syndrome was held in October in Seattle, at the Allen Institute for Brain Science, co-sponsored by the WSA. This event was an exciting interdisciplinary symposium where leading scientists from diverse areas, ranging from genetics and neurodevelopmental disorders to therapeutics, gathered to discuss the most recent findings and to identify promising avenues for advancing research on Williams syndrome in the future. Helen gave a talk about the social profile of individuals with WS, based on findings from behavioral research, some of which suggested intriguing parallels to findings from research with recently created mouse models of Williams syndrome. We are looking forward to more cutting-edge findings from much needed interdisciplinary approaches to the study of this fascinating syndrome.

In May 2010 members of our lab presented a poster at the 2010 Annual Convention of the Association for Psychological Science, held in Boston, MA. Our poster entitled “Differential Appraisal of Social and Nonsocial Affective Images in Williams Syndrome” highlighted how adolescents and adults with Williams syndrome differ from age-matched controls in their preferences for images with emotionally-laden social or nonsocial content, as expressed in explicit and more implicit response measures (e.g., likability ratings, self-selected viewing time, pupil-size dilation).

In April 2011 our research team will present some of the findings from our interactive social-communication game at the Society for Research in Child Development Meetings in Montreal, Canada. In this project we examined whether the difficulties that children with WS sometimes have in maintaining a meaningful conversation with a social interaction partner may be related to deficits in attention monitoring, in verbal communication strategies, or both. The picture to the right shows one of our participants having just completed the game in our lab in Boston.



### *See You in Boston in 2012!*

We are pleased to announce that we are involved in planning for the professional conference to be held in conjunction with the WSA family convention in the summer of 2012. Both events will take place in Boston, Massachusetts, and we are looking forward to welcoming many families of individuals with Williams syndrome to our home town!

*Thank you to all of our dedicated participants!*

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