



DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Happy March!

There is a lot of exciting news to share this month about the work we're doing at the Center for Autism Research Center at Kessler Foundation.

First, read about scientific staff members who showcased their autism research at the International Neuropsychological Society Meeting (INSM) in San Diego, CA. You will also learn more about Mikayla Haas, a staff member who plays an integral role in developing new research tools in our Center.

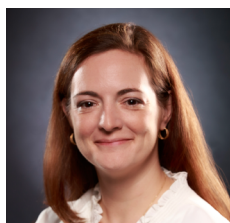
Nadine Wright-Arsubakrr, a New Jersey advocate for children with autism, joined me in a collaborative article to highlight the importance of including individuals from underrepresented communities in scientific research. Wright-Arsubakrr is president of Nassan's Place, a New Jersey based nonprofit organization that serves children and families affected by autism in and around underserved communities by providing educational and recreational programs, social outings, and resources. She's also the mother of an adult child on the spectrum. I'm honored to know her and can't wait for you to meet her too!

Please reach out to learn more about what we do or to join a research study at the Center for Autism Research. I would love to hear from you.

Our email is autismresearch@kesslerfoundation.org.

All the best

Helen Genova, PhD



STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Mikayla Haas, Course Developer



Our staff member Mikayla Haas received a new title this year: she has been promoted to course developer in the Center for Autism Research. She has taken a lead role in supporting the development of new training tools to make web-based programs for youth on the spectrum more exciting. Haas began working at Kessler Foundation as a research assistant in August 2020. She was promoted to research coordinator a year later before receiving this latest title change. As a research coordinator, she began to help with creating new tools for youth on the spectrum.

"Mikayla is extremely creative and has a knack for making lessons fun and engaging, especially for kids on the spectrum," explained Helen Genova, PhD, who leads the Center. "The more we worked together on creating training programs, the more I could see her innate talents shining through. Being a dedicated 'course developer' will allow her to spend more time designing new programs based on our research at the Center," she added.

"Dr. Genova and I have been applying some innovative techniques such as employing animated characters to teach complicated, job-interview skills to youth on the spectrum," explained Haas. "In addition, our team has been developing cell phone apps to help kids learn new skills. Kids and young adults are more likely to use phone apps as they already spend time on their phones throughout the day," she added.

"The most rewarding thing so far has been seeing how youth on the spectrum respond to our tools in such a positive way," Haas asserted.

Fun Facts: Haas earned her bachelor's degree in psychology at Rutgers University-Newark. She loves her cat and expressing her creativity through art projects like painting.

Center for Autism Research team introduces new findings on job-seeking skills to assist youth with autism

Presentations took place during the 51st Annual International Neuropsychological Society Meeting

Participating in a job interview can be difficult for anyone, but it can be even more of a challenge for youth on the autism spectrum. Fortunately, there are new research findings using virtual reality, voicemail, and text mining to help individuals on the autism spectrum improve their communication skills needed for the job interview. Three researchers from Kessler Foundation's Center for Autism Research presented their findings this February at the 51st Annual International Neuropsychological Society Meeting in San Diego, CA.

Helen Genova, PhD, associate director of the Center illustrated her research on virtual reality that assists youth on the autism spectrum at improving their job interviewing skills. "My findings showed that after participating in a 12-session training program, youth on the spectrum enhanced their skills. They were able to practice in the privacy of their homes because the program was virtual," said Dr. Genova. "The job interview program is being evaluated and refined in ongoing research studies at our Center, with funding from the Reitman Foundation, The Alfiero and Lucia Palestroni Foundation, and the National Institute of Mental Health," added Dr. Genova.

Heba Elsayed, MD, postdoctoral research fellow, focused her presentation on how youth on the autism spectrum communicate on the job, specifically by listening to how they leave voicemail messages. "Voicemails can tell you a lot about how a person communicates," said Dr. Elsayed. "For example, is the person polite, saying 'please' and 'thank you'? Do they identify themselves first and say 'goodbye' when they are ready to hang up? By looking at these types of speech patterns, we can figure out where someone needs to improve their 'on-the-job' communication skills," Dr. Elsayed explained.

Lastly, research assistant Jacob Gronemeyer presented his research concerning an innovative data analysis technique called "Text Mining." Text mining is the process of transforming unstructured text into a structured format to identify meaningful patterns and new insights. "Text mining is commonly used to analyze tweets, online shopping reviews, and online forums to get a sense of how people talk about certain products, ideas, or events," explained Gronemeyer. "We applied it to see how youth with autism talk about themselves in job interviews compared to neurotypical peers. Our findings show that not only do youth on the spectrum use more negative words during job interviews, the youth who use more negative words also have lower self-esteem," he concluded. Thus, text mining may be an innovative technique that can be used in future studies to examine how autistic youth view themselves.

[Learn more about the studies](#) conducted at the Center for Autism Research at Kessler Foundation and how you can become involved or participate.



Heba Elsayed, PhD, postdoctoral fellow, **Helen Genova, PhD**, associate director, **Jacob Gronemeyer**, research assistant from Kessler Foundation Center for Autism Research attending the 2023 International Neuropsychological Society Conference in San Diego CA.

The importance of including underserved communities in autism research

Scientists in the autism field struggle to ensure that their research is meaningful to all members of the community. In this article, Helen Genova, PhD, and Nadine Wright-Arbubakkr, advocate and founder of Nassan's Place, discuss the importance of the inclusion of underserved communities in autism research. Nassan's Place is a nonprofit focused on helping children and families affected by autism in underserved New Jersey communities.

Why do you think it is important to include underserved communities in autism scientific research?

Helen Genova, PhD. Considerable racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic gaps persist in scientific research studies. Most autism research studies have overrepresentation of Caucasian families. It's important to ensure that our results represent diverse communities and it is up to us as scientists to break through the barriers that continue to create unbalanced study results.

Nadine Wright-Arbubakkr. I agree. Underserved and underrepresented populations must be involved in research. If not, scientists are missing a big piece of the picture. For example, there are a number of differences among races: we are culturally and genetically different. If certain populations are not involved in research, then we don't know how these differences affect the research results.

Which recruitment methods do you recommend to increase diversity in scientific autism research?

Helen Genova, PhD. I have found that the typical ways to recruit individuals with autism for our research studies (e.g., posting on social media or distributing flyers in schools and physician offices) were not effective in reaching diverse communities. I decided to get the help of experts by creating a community advisory board representing different ethnicities and cultures to help guide me with this diversity initiative. I contacted Nadine after hearing about the amazing work she and Nassan's Place are doing for the community. She had helpful ideas on how to make our recruitment accessible to a broader community.

Nadine Wright-Arbubakkr. First things first, we need to educate parents on why they should be involved in research! Members of any research team should attend community support groups or conduct programs, which share the work being done directly in the community.

Also, scientists need to make research studies easier and more accessible for families to contribute. For example, after-work appointments may be difficult to schedule for single-parent households. Why not provide transportation or additional stipends to cover the cost of childcare so families can participate more easily? Even better, offer virtual studies so busy families can participate at home.

How will Nassan's Place and Kessler Foundation work together to improve the lives of underserved communities?

Helen Genova, PhD. I'm honored to be involved with Nassan's Place and thrilled to have Nadine's expertise on my community advisory board. I look forward to working closely with Nassan's Place in the future. My staff and I are attending Nassan's Place Autism Awareness Day on April 2, 2023, in Newark, NJ, scheduled on World Autism Awareness Day. We can't wait to meet everyone and share our current research studies.

Nadine Wright-Arbubakkr. This is a win-win opportunity! Through our partnership, Kessler Foundation and Nassan's Place can reach more people in need. The Foundation will expand autism research to underrepresented communities and families will have access to a new resource to help their children on the spectrum.



Sixteen-year-old Nassan and his mother Nadine Wright-Arbubakkr, the founder of Nassan's Place, a nonprofit focused on helping children and families affected by autism in and around underserved communities in New Jersey.

Center for Autism Research



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The Center for Autism Research — Our team is developing accessible and evidence-based research that provides new interventions for children, adolescents, and adults on the spectrum, with particular focus on the critical transition from adolescence to adulthood.

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Help us explore new ways of assisting young people on the autism spectrum

- We welcome all volunteers, with and without autism, ages 11 to 26
- Most studies can be completed online
- All volunteers are compensated for their time

Scan the QR code to learn more



Upcoming Event



- 2nd Annual -

Autism Awareness
Family Fun/Resource Day



April 2, 2023

Mulberry Commons, 110 Edison Place,
Newark, NJ 07102

Join Kessler Foundation at Nassan's
Place 2nd Annual Outdoor Autism
Awareness Event "Empower You"

Food Truck Meals * Police, Fire, and Health
Departments * Kid Zone * Sensory Games and
Toys * Story Time * Kessler Foundation Study
Recruitment * More than 40 Resource Tables

Register at <https://AAD.eventbrite.com>

or

Scan the QR code to
register for event.

