



National Institute of Mental Health

Reducing the burden of mental illness and behavioral disorders through research on mind, brain, and behavior

[NIMH Home](#)

[Health & Outreach](#)

[Research Funding](#)

[Science News](#)

[About NIMH](#)

Back to: [NIMH Home](#) » [Science News](#) » [2007](#)

### Science Update

September 11, 2007

## NIMH Funds Additional New Research on Autism

NIMH is funding several new grants that will further our understanding of [autism spectrum disorder](#), which is marked by a pervasive impairment in communicating, expressing emotion, and relating to others socially. Two grants aim to better understand how the brains of people with autism differ from those who do not have the disorder. Another grant will develop a program designed to help adolescents with high-functioning forms of the disorder, such as Asperger's syndrome, successfully transition into adulthood. A fourth and fifth grant will further understanding of the genetics the disorder, and a sixth grant will develop a targeted therapy for children with autism

The new grants are described below.

Eric Courchesne, PhD, from the University of California, San Diego, will use functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology to compare autistic toddlers' responses to different stimuli (e.g., the sound of their name being called by their mother or another person, ambient conversations, a story being read to them, flashes of light) with the responses of normally developing toddlers. The study aims to pinpoint the functional abnormalities in the autistic brain, search for early biological bases of the disorder and possibly develop alternative therapies. This five-year study will collect some of the first data ever on how the brains of autistic children

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process and respond to information.

Janet Lainhart, M.D., of the University of Utah, will continue a long-term study to understand how the brain changes from childhood to adulthood. Using MRI and another brain imaging technology called diffusion tensor imaging (DTI), Lainhart is collecting neuroimaging data from 100 autistic males of varying ages at different times in their lives, over an eight-year period. This data will be compared to imaging data from males without autism. The study is providing baseline data on how the brains of people with autism develop and change at key transition points over time. The project is a collaborative effort among the University of Utah, University of Wisconsin and Brigham Young University.

Cynthia Baker, PhD, of Danya International, Inc. in Silver Spring, Md., is developing training materials for people with high-functioning autism and Asperger's Syndrome who are transitioning from late adolescence to young adulthood. The Supporting Transition in Vocation and Education (STRIVE) program aims to be a comprehensive resource to teach these young people the skills they need to take care of themselves as they enter college and/or the workforce.

Young Shin Kim, M.D., PhD, of Yale University has been awarded a five-year career award grant to develop expertise in the genetic epidemiology of autism spectrum disorder. Working with the Korean government, Dr. Kim will collect biological, genetic and behavioral data from 320 Korean children with autism, and will compare this data to 320 children without autism. Dr. Kim will also collect data on the parents of both groups of children. The study will help shed light on the genetics and prevalence rates of autism on an international level, and will help Dr. Kim develop expertise in an understudied area.

Eric Morrow, M.D., PhD, of Massachusetts General Hospital has been awarded a five-year mentored career development grant to study the genetic basis of autism among families affected by the disorder. Dr. Morrow intends to study populations from the Middle East and North America to identify possible genes responsible for autism in these families, a finding that could lead to a better understanding of the molecular basis of the disorder.

>Susan Williams White, PhD, of Virginia Commonwealth

investigators, from  
EurekAlert

University has been awarded a five-year career award to develop expertise in treating children with high-functioning ASD. She will design an evidence-based cognitive behavioral therapy that aims to help these children overcome anxiety and develop better social skills. Once an initial version of the therapy is developed, Dr. White intends to test it in a clinical trial.

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