

**2020 ANNUAL REPORT**

# HELPING FAMILIES ACHIEVE A BRIGHTER FUTURE



**FIU**

Center for  
Children and Families

# ABOUT THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

With a team of more than 40 of the nation's best researchers and clinical experts, we are transforming the way we treat child and adolescent mental health disorders. We deliver state-of-the-art clinical services to more than 3,000 families each year and provide training through academic programs and continuing education opportunities.

Our mission is to improve the lives of children and families struggling with mental health concerns by advancing evidence-based knowledge of the causes, mechanisms, outcomes, and interventions for mental health and learning problems of youth; promoting the development of effective treatments services to children and families in South Florida; and disseminating knowledge to students, consumers, and professionals in mental health, education and primary care.

Our clinical services and research programs include early childhood services, individual and group programs for parents, group and home-based therapy for children, nationally acclaimed summer camps and video conferencing therapy. We help families facing challenges related to ADHD; anxiety and fears; conduct and behavioral problems; family stress and parenting support; mood problems and depression; academics and social skills; and trauma.

In partnership with Miami-Dade County Public Schools and The Children's Trust, we have trained more than 6,000 local teachers, contributing to improved classroom experiences for students and educators alike.









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# DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

The 2020 fiscal year (July 2019 - June 2020) began like any other at the FIU Center for Children and Families (CCF): Our faculty, staff, and students hard at work, seeking to fulfill our mission and meet our goals. Little did we know the last quarter of the year would be different; it would have us all flexing our creativity and working together to continue helping others and advance our research objectives in unprecedented times.

When it seemed as if the whole world came to a stop in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we stood with our community by establishing telehealth behavioral health services, allowing us to safely serve approximately 1,200 families throughout the year. We hosted a variety of mental health resources and online events for families who were seeking guidance during this uncertain period. The year 2020 was unpredictable, but we are honored that so many in our community relied on us to weather the storm and reimagine the future.

Our faculty's scholarly productivity remained high. They held \$85 million in external funding to support innovative research and received multiple awards for research excellence. They published an impressive 194 research papers in scientific journals, thereby sharing new

insights into the causes, processes, effects and treatment of child and adolescent mental health disorders. An example was Dr. Graziano's published article in *Prevention Science* on a new approach to motivate teens in therapy.

Through our virtual continuing education opportunities, our center provided more than 1,300 hours of training to thousands of educators and other professionals in our community and offered 2,804 Continuing Education credits to licensed mental health professionals. Furthermore, we continued training the next generation of mental health professionals—nearly 500 undergraduate students and 150 doctoral and masters-level students were involved in one of our affiliated labs and/or our clinic.

Although every year I thank our team, I would be remiss not to emphasize how important the hard work and flexibility of our faculty, staff and students was to our success this past year, particularly the end of the fiscal year. They overcame countless challenges to help us meet our goals and put the families we serve first. We were not able to serve as many as we normally do, or run our summer programs, and some of our projects had to be placed on hold; but what we did

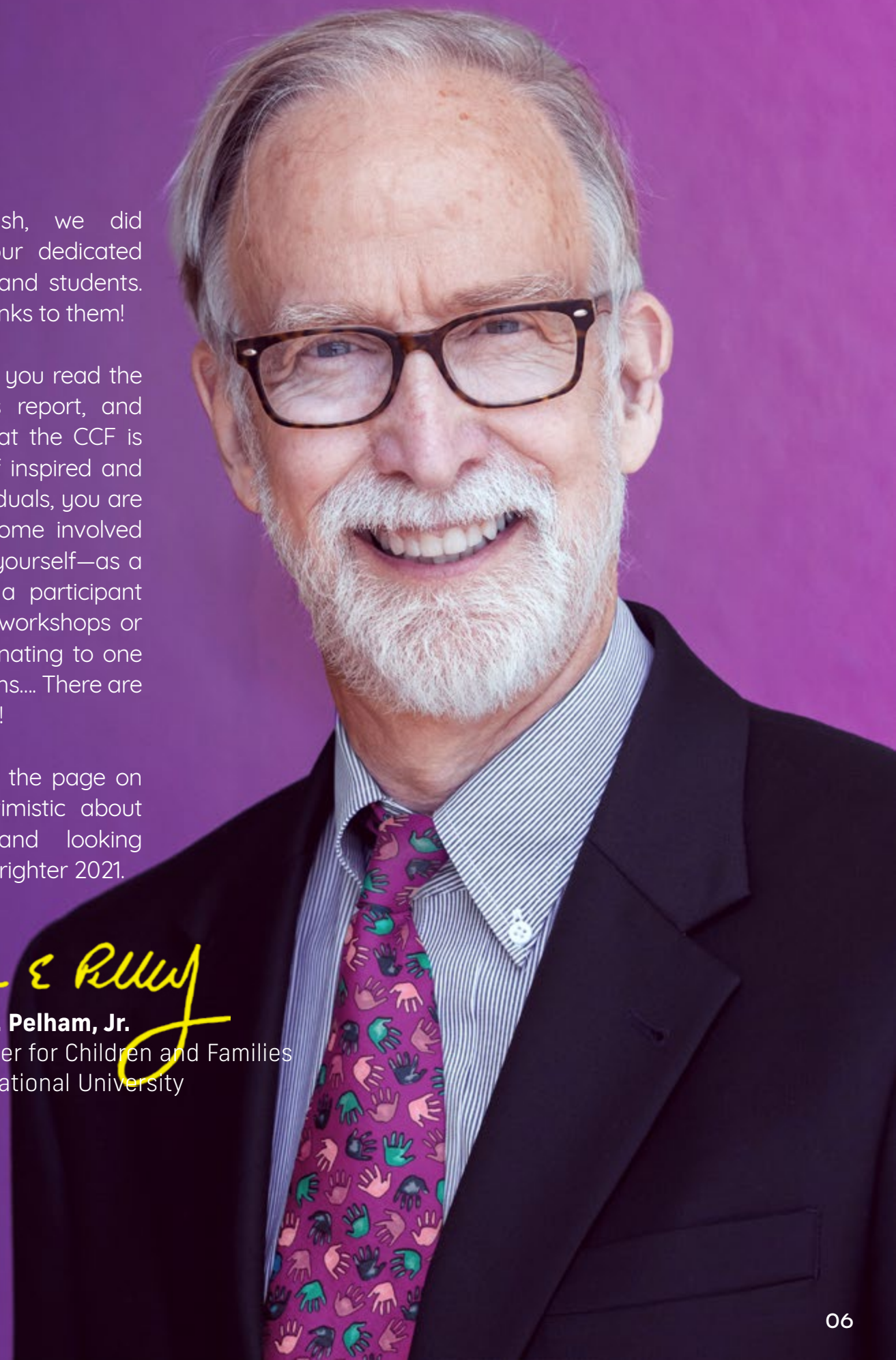


did accomplish, we did because of our dedicated faculty, staff, and students. A heartfelt thanks to them!

I hope that as you read the pages of this report, and you realize that the CCF is a collection of inspired and talented individuals, you are drawn to become involved with the CCF yourself—as a volunteer, as a participant in one of our workshops or studies, by donating to one of our programs.... There are so many ways!

As we all turn the page on 2020, I'm optimistic about the future and looking forward to a brighter 2021.

*Will E. Pelham, Jr.*  
**Dr. William E. Pelham, Jr.**  
Director, Center for Children and Families  
Florida International University



# FACULTY & STAFF

## AFFILIATED FACULTY

Allen, Timothy  
Azaret, Janellie  
Bagner, Daniel  
Bahrick, Lorraine  
Baralt, Melissa  
Bickman, Leonard  
Carson, Tana  
Coles, Erika  
Comer, Jonathan  
Coxe, Stefany  
Cumming, Michelle

Dick, Anthony  
Fabiano, Gregory  
Fava, Nicole  
Furr, Jami  
Gillam-Oztekin, Ilke  
Gonzalez, Raul  
Graziano, Paulo  
Hart, Katie  
Hawes, Samuel  
Hayes, Timothy  
Li, Tan

Lupas, Kellina  
Mattfeld, Aaron  
McMakin, Dana  
Musser, Erica  
Ng, Mei Yi  
Nichols-Lopez, Kristin  
Page, Timothy  
Parent, Justin  
Pelham, Jr., William E.  
Pettit, Jeremy  
Pruden, Shannon

Raiker, Joseph  
Reeb-Sutherland,  
Bethany  
Schatz, Nicole  
Soto, Caro, Fabian  
Sutherland, Matthew  
Timmons, Adela  
Trucco, Elisa  
Valente, Matthew

## ADMINISTRATIVE & RESEARCH STAFF

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Almutairi, Aldana  
Alvarez, Carina  
Amazon, Judina  
Aristide, Stephanie  
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Beauboeuf, Regine  
Bejar, Mishel  
Bejarano, Andrea  
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Beyer, Christopher  
Bisono-Gonzalez,  
Sarah  
Boeckel, Amy  
Bonventre, Nicholas  
Bowley, Hannah  
Briceno, Delmy  
Brijmohan, Nisha  
Cadet, Geraldine  
Camacho Gonzalez,  
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Cardoso, Rossana  
Caron, Stacey

Castro, Rosalia  
Castro, Rosanna  
Contino, Kaityn  
Cortina, Jennifer  
Cortiza, Lorena  
Delgado, Amanda  
Echeveste, Isaura  
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Frech, Natalie  
Freitag, Josefina  
Genna, Tania  
Gil, Lissette  
Gnagy, Elizabeth  
Gomez, William  
Gonzalez, Yeilem  
Granja, Karen  
Greco, Lucia  
Greiner, Andrew  
Guaragna, Isabel  
Hernandez, Melissa  
Herrera,, Aileen  
Hidmi, Nasreen  
Isaac, Natalie  
Leon, Erika  
Limia, Jorge

Lozano, Cinthya  
Lurry, Sashay  
Madan, Brigitte  
Mas, Helen  
Mira, Sandra  
Morales, Gabriela  
Moreira, Enid  
Morera, Nailin  
Nicoletti, Alexandra  
Ospina, Brigitte  
Patriarca, Guadalupe  
Paula, Dayana  
Pita, Katherine  
Plata, Carolina  
Pulido, William  
Raut, Viraj  
Regina Ramirez, Ana  
Rejman, Emilea  
Rengel, Melanie  
Rey, Yasmin  
Rodriguez-Perez,  
Yanier  
Rodriguez, Isabel  
Rodriguez, Mabel  
Rodriguez, Mariangela

Rodriguez, Yesenia  
Rodriguez, Zulema  
Ruiz, Ericka  
Salem, Hanan  
Sanchez Garcia, Carlos  
Santos Soto, Tamara  
Santos, Sheila  
Shumway, Philip  
Silva, Karina  
Soler, William  
Sotolongo, Lissandra  
Torres, Enrique  
Tower, Devon  
Troya, Sarah  
Valdes, Bernardina  
Valledor, Valerie  
Vanegas, David  
Vargas Rodriguez,  
Maria  
Vicente, Elina  
Villar, Michelle  
Villate, Francisco  
Wang, Suyan  
Wilson, Maria  
Zuraw-Moya, Ruth

## POSTDOCS

Altszuler, Amy  
Boutris, Panagiotis  
Del Busto, Cristina  
Eschman, Bret

Fosco, Whitney  
Griffith, Shayl  
Kondracki, Anthony  
Maharaj, Andre

Martinez Pedraza,  
Frances  
Mikhail, Sarah  
Muncy, Nathan

Osibogun, Olatokunbo  
Rondon, Ana  
Shaw, Ashley





# SERVICES

1,214  
FAMILIES  
HELPED







# QUALITY CARE





The **Advancing Child Competencies by Extending Supported Services (ACCESS) for Families** program provides online treatment for families with children aging out of Early Steps to learn more about managing their child's behavior from the comfort of their own home. The program is funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and led by psychologists Daniel Bagner and Jonathan S. Comer.

The **ATLAS Project** is one of the first substance-use prevention programs in the U.S. designed for adolescents with ADHD. Led by psychologists William E. Pelham, Jr. and Nicole Schatz, the ATLAS Project helps teens with ADHD build the skills they need to make the best decisions when facing tough issues and common challenges.

Our **After-School Treatment Program (ATP)** is designed for children ages 6-12 at-risk for attention, behavior and academic problems at Dr. Carlos J. Finlay Elementary School. Led by psychologist Joseph Raiker and funded by The Children's Trust, the program works directly with children, their caregivers, administrative staff, and their teachers to improve across multiple settings, including the home, school, and interactions with peers.

Led by psychologist Jeremy Pettit, the **Child Anxiety and Phobia Program (CAPP)** provides cognitive-behavioral therapy and computer-based attention training programs to treat fears related to being separated from parents, sleeping alone, going to school, social situations, or specific objects or events. This program also provides services for children and adolescents who are experiencing depression.

Our **Individual Trauma-focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) program** funded by The Children's Trust and led by social worker Nicole Fava, provides evidence-based treatment for youth ages 3-17. The program teaches youth healthy ways of coping with their feelings, while caregivers learn stress management, parenting and behavior management skills, and communication skills.

The **CCF clinic** provides individually tailored treatment for a child or family, including parenting, depression, anxiety, anger management, disruptive behavior and divorce intervention.

Led by psychologists Jonathan S. Comer and Ashley M. Shaw, the **Mental Health Interventions and Technology (MINT) Anxiety Program** offers cognitive-behavioral therapy for childhood anxiety disorders, selective mutism, and OCD. Service options include in-clinic and telehealth treatments, which use secure

videoconferencing to deliver real-time, therapist-led treatment directly to families in their own homes.

One of MINT Anxiety Program's specialties, led by licensed mental health counselor Aileen Herrera, offers individual weekly, intensive, and group-based treatment programs for children with **selective mutism**. Using cognitive behavioral therapy, our programs target the difficulties of speaking in social or school situations with familiar and unfamiliar peers and adults.

Led by our clinical staff, our **Parenting Strategies Group and Saturday Treatment Program** gives both the child and caregivers the opportunity to learn new skills that will improve the quality of family life. Caregivers learn effective techniques to reduce their child's negative behaviors and promote positive changes at school and the home. At the same time, children learn to develop social skills that promote positive peer relationships by participating in classroom and recreational activities.

Led by psychologist Paulo Graziano, the center offers **Parent-Child Interaction Therapy** for children ages 2-6 who are experiencing behavioral difficulties and emotional disorders.

Our clinic offers low-cost **psycho-educational evaluations** for families with children ages 5-16 to help with diagnostic status and educational planning. The evaluation includes diagnostic clinical interview with the parent, rating scales, IQ testing, academic achievement testing and more.

Our center provides **school consultation** meetings with a child's school staff and parents to develop individualized interventions for school-based problems.

The **Supporting Teens Academic Needs Daily (STAND) program** provides family-based services that teaches parents and adolescents with attention, organization, and behavioral problems, to work together to improve organization and academic skills, parent-teen conflict and teen independence.

The **Teen Helping Overcome Perceptual Expectations (HOPE) program** offers group cognitive behavioral therapy led by clinical staff, for adolescents displaying depression and/or anxiety symptoms.

Our **Teens Power program** helps teens to build effective communication skills, social skills, improve problem-solving skills and learn how to manage challenging situations.

# SUPPORTING FAMILIES THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world, everyone's lives changed overnight. Parents, in particular, were suddenly tasked with balancing remote work, parenting their kids and homeschooling them full-time. Access to mental health care was more important than ever, and we stepped up to the challenge to serve families in need in any way we could. We supported our community by establishing telehealth services, which allowed us to safely serve approximately 1,200 families throughout the year. We also offered a variety of mental health resources and online events for families who were seeking guidance during this uncertain period.

## COVID-19 PARENTING VIDEOS





# COVID-19 PARENTING ARTICLES

## CASE News

12 TIPS TO HELP KIDS  
COPE WITH SOCIAL  
DISTANCING

Katie Hart, Ph.D.



## CASE News

SUPPORTING LGBTQ+  
YOUTHS' MENTAL  
HEALTH DURING A  
PANDEMIC

Nicole Fava, Ph.D.



## FIU News

WATCHING SMART,  
AVOIDING NEWS  
OVERLOAD IN THE  
TIME OF  
CORONAVIRUS

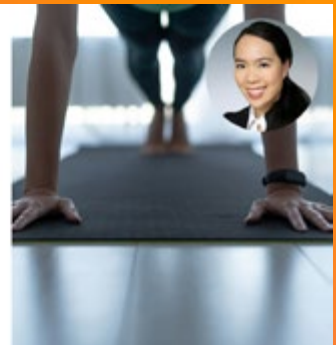
Jonathan Comer, Ph.D.



## FIU News

10 TIPS TO MANAGE  
YOUR MENTAL  
HEALTH WHILE SOCIAL  
DISTANCING

Mei Yi Ng, Ph.D.



## FIU MAGAZINE

NUDGED BY SOCIAL  
DISTANCING,  
TELETHERAPY FOR  
CHILDREN TAKES OFF

Ashley Shaw, Ph.D.



## FIU News

RISK OF TEEN  
SUBSTANCE USE MAY  
INCREASE WHILE  
SOCIAL DISTANCING

Elisa Trucco, Ph.D.



## FIU News

#CORONACURIOUS: A  
PARENT'S HANDBOOK  
TO JUGGLING IT ALL  
DURING COVID-19

Daniel Bagner, Ph.D.



## FIU News

TIPS FOR PARENTS TO  
MANAGE BACK-TO-  
SCHOOL ANXIETY  
AMID A PANDEMIC

Jeremy Pettit, Ph.D.



The background of the entire graphic is a warm, golden-brown color. It features a soft-focus image of a draped fabric, possibly a tent or a decorative backdrop, with several strings of warm-toned, round string lights hanging from it. The lights are out of focus, creating a bokeh effect. The overall mood is cozy and celebratory.

# RESEARCH EXCELLENCE

**\$21.2MM**

IN RESEARCH  
FUNDING

**194**

RESEARCH  
PUBLICATIONS

**41**

AFFILIATED  
FACULTY







**Daniel Bagner, PhD, ABPP**

Faculty Award for Excellence in Research and Creative Activities,  
Office of the Provost and Faculty Senate, Florida International  
University, 2020

Elected Fellow, American Psychological Association Division 53,  
Society for Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 2019

# AWARD-WINNING FACULTY



**Melissa Baralt, PhD**

Top Scholar Award for Excellence in Research, Florida  
International University, 2020



**Jonathan S. Comer, PhD**

Taghi Modarressi Visiting Professor and Annual Memorial Lecturer,  
Department of Psychiatry, University of Maryland School of  
Medicine, 2020

Honorable Mention for Excellence in Research, Military & Veteran  
Families Award, Military Family Research Institute, 2019



**Michelle Cumming, PhD**

Faculty Award for Research, College of Arts, Sciences,  
and Education, Florida International University, 2019  
TEACHING Exceptional Children 2018 Reviewers of the  
Year, 2019



**Gregory Fabiano, PhD**

Fellow, American Psychological Association Division 53, Society  
for Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 2019



# WINNING CULTY



**William E. Pelham, Jr., PhD, ABPP**

Worlds Ahead Faculty Award, President's Council, Florida International University, 2019



**Jami M. Furr, PhD**

Anne Marie Albano Early Career Award for the Integration of Science and Practice, Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT), 2019

Faculty Award for Research, College of Arts, Sciences, and Education, Florida International University, 2019



**Shannon Pruden, PhD**

Faculty Award for Research, College of Arts, Sciences, and Education, Florida International University, October 2019



**Bethany Reeb-Sutherland, PhD**

Ignite Flame Award, Florida International University, 2019  
Faculty Award for Research, College of Arts, Sciences, and Education, Florida International University, 2019



**Adela C. Timmons, PhD**

Top Scholar Award for Junior Faculty with Significant Grants, Florida International University, 2020  
Faculty Award for Research, College of Arts, Sciences, and Education, Florida International University, 2019

# OUR FIU NIDA T32 TRAINING PROGRAM

The **FIU National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) T32 Training Program**, based in the Center for Children and Families, is a training program that prepares pre-doctoral and postdoctoral fellows to become leaders in interdisciplinary research. Its emphasis is the overlap between child and adolescent mental health and substance use and risk thereof, across a variety of methods and fields, including prevention, treatment, neurobiology, neuropsychology, and mental health co-morbidity. Three FIU academic units support the program:

Center for  
Children and  
Families

Center for  
Research on U.S.  
Latino HIV/AIDS  
and Drug Abuse

Department  
of  
Epidemiology







The two-year fellowship is delivered through **individually developed programs** of coursework, seminars, and research apprenticeships and is based on **three overlapping research emphases**:

Developmental  
psychopathology  
and child/adolescent  
risk factors for  
substance use

Prevention and  
intervention  
for adolescent  
substance use  
disorders

Dissemination,  
implementation,  
and health services  
practice

### **STEERING COMMITTEE:**

Raul Gonzalez, Jr. Ph.D., Professor  
Elisa Trucco, Ph.D., Assistant Professor  
Jonathan Comer, Ph.D., Professor  
William Pelham, Jr. Ph.D. ABPP, Distinguished  
Professor of Psychology; Director, Center for  
Children and Families, an FIU Preeminent Program  
Wasim Maziak, MD, Ph.D., Professor & Chair of the  
Department of Epidemiology

### **PRIMARY MENTORS:**


Daniel Bagner, Ph.D.  
Mario De La Rosa, Ph.D.  
Gregory Fabiano, Ph.D.  
Paulo Graziano, Ph.D.  
Aaron Mattfeld, Ph.D.  
Dana McMakin, Ph.D.  
Jeremy Pettit, Ph.D.  
Joseph Raiker, Ph.D.  
Matthew Sutherland, Ph.D.

### **AFFILIATE MENTORS:**

Stefany Coxe, Ph.D. | Anthony Dick, Ph.D. | Andres Gil, Ph.D. | Katie Hart, Ph.D. | Timothy  
Hayes, Ph.D. | Erica Musser, Ph.D. | Madhavan Nair, Ph.D. | Justin Parent, Ph.D. | Nicole  
Schatz, Ph.D. | Adela Timmons, Ph.D. | Matthew Valente, Ph.D.

### **EXTERNAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE:**

Gerald August, Ph.D. - University of Minnesota | Brooke Molina, Ph.D. - University  
of Pittsburgh | Kenneth Sher, Ph.D. - University of Missouri | Anthony Spirito, Ph.D.  
- Brown University | Robert Zucker, Ph.D. - University of Michigan



# MEDICINES TO HELP SMOKERS QUIT ONLY **FIGHT HALF THE BATTLE**

***More than 90 percent of smokers who try to quit fail.  
The reason may be hiding in their brains.***

*Story By: JoAnn Adkins & Rosanna Castro*

Many people who try to quit often turn to smoking cessation medications, including NicoDerm CQ or Chantix. In a study published this week, Ph.D. psychology student Jessica Flannery at FIU's Center for Children and Families and a team of scientists found one part of the brain is involved in the formation of tobacco cravings and nicotine withdrawal symptoms, while an entirely separate part of the brain is linked to the severity of the person's actual addiction. Yet, these medications are only targeting one of those.

"This study suggests current medications only treat the symptoms as opposed to the core of the substance-use disease, which is how addicted a person is," said Matthew T. Sutherland, a cognitive neuroscientist in

the Department of Psychology and senior author of the study. "Instead of a single medication, perhaps multiple medications, each targeting different brain processes, are needed to improve quit rates."

The scientists administered smoking cessation medication to understand changes in brain activity between smokers and nonsmokers. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), the researchers conducted brain scans and found two areas of the brain exhibiting activity as participants performed different parts of a task. The scientists observed brain processes associated with how addicted a person reported being was related to activity in the part of the brain called the striatum. Meanwhile, a smoker's craving for cigarettes was related to



activity changes in the brain's habenula.

The World Health Organization estimates there are 1.1 billion cigarette smokers worldwide. More than half are expected to die from smoking-related diseases. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, 68 percent of smokers want to quit and half of those try to do so each year. But the nicotine in tobacco products is highly addictive and only 7 percent actually succeed. This new study linking specific brain processes to nicotine use offers a roadmap for developing new interventions or improving existing ones.

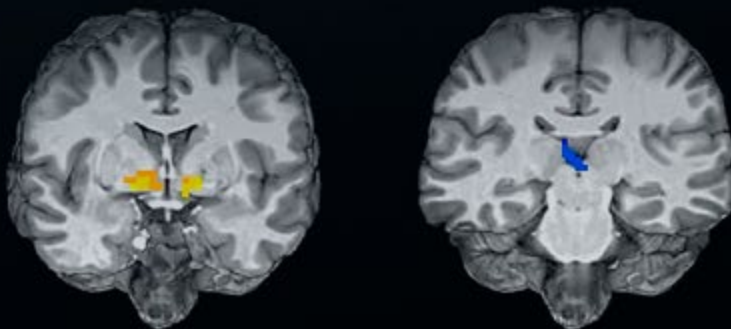
"Progress toward improving withdrawal management and/or relapse prevention is particularly timely as a new generation of nicotine addicted young adults may likely follow the wide-spread adoption of electronic cigarettes and vaping among today's youth," Flannery said.

The research was published in **Science Advances** and was conducted by psychologists in the Center for Children and Families and Department of Physics in FIU's College of Arts, Sciences & Education as well as a team from the National Institute on Drug Abuse.



#### MATTHEW T. SUTHERLAND, PH.D.

Dr. Sutherland's research focuses on understanding the impact of drug abuse on human brain function. Specifically, his research aims to understand the brain mechanisms that contribute to continued drug use with specific emphasis on nicotine addiction, marijuana use, and attentional process. Towards this goal, Dr. Sutherland's research employs multiple neuroimaging tools (e.g., pharmacological, task-based and 'resting-state' functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), simultaneous EEG/fMRI) to identify potential biomarkers for diagnosis and tracking of disease progression, new targets for therapeutic interventions, and strategies for expediting the implementation of personalized treatment. Dr. Sutherland is currently applying his cognitive neuroscience and drug abuse background to better understand the consequences of marijuana use on the brain function of individuals living with HIV/AIDS. His research is funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse/NIH.



#### INSIDE THE BRAIN

The **striatum** (*left*) is linked with nicotine addiction, while the **habenula** (*right*) is linked with nicotine withdrawal.

*Since 2013, the Reading Explorers Program has helped over 10,000 children and families and annually serves more than 2,000 children across Miami-Dade County.*



#### **KATIE C. HART, PH.D.**

Dr. Hart is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at FIU. She is a core faculty member in the Clinical Science in Child in Adolescent Psychology Doctoral Program and the CCF.

She is the Program Director for the Summer Treatment Program for PreKindergarteners (STP-PreK), the Reading Explorers Program, and the FIU Summer Academy Program, all operated through the CCF. She is a member of FIU's ACCESS partnership with Miami-Dade County Schools and has coordinated several of the CCF's school-based initiatives to promote positive behavior across schools here in Miami-Dade County. She currently serves as a member of the Superintendent's District Advisory Panel for Students with Disabilities, Early Childhood Special Education Sub-Committee, FIU's Special Education Advisory Board, and has served as the Co-Chair of the Young Children with Special Needs and Disabilities Council of Miami-



# 8-YEAR-OLD OVERCOMES FEAR OF READING

Story By: Rosanna Castro

Just a few months ago, 8-year-old Angelica Aguirre was terrified of reading aloud in class, fearing her classmates would mock her. She even refused to read at home with her mother, believing she simply could not do it well.

“Angelica used to always tell me that she hated reading,” recalled Natalia Hoyos, Aguirre’s mother. She struggled so much with reading last year that she failed second grade.

Hoyos was desperate. She decided to get help for her daughter before she continued to fall further behind in school. That’s when she discovered the Reading Explorers Program.

Managed and operated by the FIU Center for Children and Families in partnership with Nova Southeastern University, the Reading Explorers Program offers services funded by The Children’s Trust to providers and families to help improve foundational reading and reading comprehension skills for rising kindergarten, first and second graders.

“Research shows that reading at grade level by the third grade is a leading indicator of school success and high school graduation,” said Katie C. Hart, assistant professor in the FIU Department of Psychology and program director of the Reading Explorers Program. “Unfortunately, 39 percent of kids in Miami-Dade County are not reading at grade level. We are hoping to change that by helping to boost and improve children’s early reading skills during the summer months when there is typically a learning loss.”

Students reading at or below reading level receive free small group reading tutoring services provided by certified teachers over the summer. The program is tailored to each child’s reading

ability. It is structured, interactive, and follows an evidence-based reading curriculum.

The Reading Explorers Program offers parents school readiness workshops focused on encouraging children to read at home every day. It also provides year-round consultation for afterschool care providers funded by the Children’s Trust to improve their literacy instruction strategies for all children.

“This is the only program of its kind in the state of Florida and just this summer alone, we provided this program across 70 community sites,” Hart said. “Children reading below grade level have experienced up to 50 percent improvement in their reading skills after completing our program.”

Hoyos was shocked to see how, after a few short weeks of completing the program, Aguirre was reading aloud at home and announcing every time she conquered a “big word.” She even asked her mother to pick up fantasy books from a local bookstore, so they can go on their own book-based adventures.

“Angelica was able to make six months of progress in just six weeks over the summer, which is incredibly remarkable,” Hart said. “We are so happy our program helped Angelica significantly improve in her reading skills in such a short time, but more importantly, that we helped her discover her love for reading and equipped her with the confidence and skills she needs to take on second grade again.”

Hoyos says her daughter’s confidence and attitude toward reading has enormously improved and that she has been performing very well so far this school year. She attributes this success to the great work the Summer Reading Explorers Program teachers did and the invaluable guidance they provided.





## HOW WELL TEENS RESPOND TO PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS MAY DEPEND ON THEIR **PARENTS' MENTAL HEALTH**

*Story By: Rosanna Castro*

A parent's level of psychological distress may influence how well adolescents in the juvenile justice system respond to mental health interventions for substance use and sexual risk, according to a researcher at FIU's Center for Children and Families.

The study found that adolescents with highly distressed parents did better with a family-based intervention, whereas adolescents with mildly or not distressed parents did better with an adolescent-only intervention.

"There is little research on how parents' mental health issues affect how well adolescents respond to psychological interventions, especially for interventions that target adolescents' use of substances and their sexual risk behaviors," said Mei Yi Ng, assistant professor in the FIU Department of Psychology and lead author of the study. "These findings may help clinicians match adolescents with the intervention that is likely to benefit them the most, especially adolescents involved in the juvenile justice system."



Researchers recruited 47 sets of parents and their adolescent children, who were charged in juvenile drug court for non-violent offenses, to participate in five sessions of a family-based or an adolescent-only intervention, intended to reduce substance use and prevent HIV.

In the family-based intervention, parents and adolescents learned strategies to handle their emotions in healthy ways, and ways to help the adolescent build the motivation and skills to avoid using substances and practicing unsafe sex. In the adolescent-only intervention, adolescents learned information about commonly abused substances, HIV and sexually transmitted infections, as well as health behaviors such as exercise and sleep.

The study found that among the teens with highly distressed parents, those who participated in family-based intervention were less likely to use marijuana and used marijuana less frequently than those who participated

in the adolescent-only intervention. Among the teens with mildly distressed parents, those who participated in adolescent-only intervention were less likely to use alcohol than those who participated in the family-based intervention.

Researchers also found that the teens with highly distressed parents engaged in a larger number of unprotected sexual acts compared to teens with mildly distressed parents, regardless of which intervention they received.

“Questionnaires or interviews that include questions about parents’ psychological distress may help clinicians to identify the type of intervention that may be most helpful to each adolescent,” said Ng. “This screening approach can help us improve behavioral health services for them in the future.”

The study was funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and published in the **Journal of Research on Adolescence**.



#### MEI YI NG, PH.D.

Dr. Ng conducts research with the goal of advancing the science and practice of psychotherapy for youths, especially adolescents with depression. She employs two main strategies in her research program. First, she examines change mechanisms and processes of evidence-based psychotherapies such as cognitive behavioral therapy to better understand how they work. Second, she studies how to personalize mental health interventions by developing and applying methods to select and tailor therapies to maximize benefit to each individual youth.

A current focus of her research at the Mechanisms Underlying Treatment Technologies (MUTT) Lab is to track depressed adolescents’ emotions, cognitions and behaviors in real-time. The aims are to learn how each of these variables change over time, which variables drive changes in other variables, and whether these “drivers” and longitudinal relationships differ across individuals. It is hoped that this research may inform the personalized sequencing of treatment modules for individual youths.



# BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION REDUCES NEED TO MEDICATE KIDS WITH ADHD

*Story By: Rosanna Castro*

Most children with ADHD who receive behavioral intervention do not need medication, according to a new study by researchers at FIU's Center for Children and Families.

Researchers evaluated 127 unmedicated children with ADHD, ages 5 to 13, during the school year, following their participation in the center's Summer Treatment Program, a comprehensive summer camp program for children with ADHD and related behavioral, emotional and learning challenges. Children were randomly assigned after the end of the program to receive low or high behavioral intervention, or no behavioral intervention, and were evaluated by teachers and parents each week to determine if medication was needed.

Researchers found that the children who received continued behavioral intervention after the end of the Summer Treatment Program were about half as likely as those who did not receive intervention to initiate medication use each week at school or at home, and used lower doses when medicated at school.

Behavioral interventions included a Daily Report Card— a tool that helps manage the behavior and academic performance of students. Other classroom interventions included school-based rewards, response-cost systems, point systems, escalating-deescalating time out procedures, and additional individualized behavioral interventions.

"These results add to a growing literature of research suggesting that the use of low-

intensity behavioral intervention as a first-line treatment for children with ADHD reduces or eliminates the need for medication," said Gregory Fabiano, professor of psychology at FIU.

Researchers also found that treatment costs did not significantly differ, regardless of whether the child was receiving behavioral therapy or medication.

In the study, parents of children who received low or high behavioral intervention met with a clinician at the beginning of the school year to establish a Daily Report Card. Parents also had the option of receiving additional support through monthly parenting group sessions and one-on-one consultations if they faced difficult parenting situations at home.

The teachers of the children receiving intervention also had support to implement the Daily Report Card and received additional consultations to establish classroom interventions.

"Parents and teachers play a key role in how well a child responds to the behavioral intervention," Fabiano said. "It's crucial for them to learn effective strategies that will benefit the child long-term because medication alone does not provide any long-term benefits."

The study was published in the **Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology**.





#### **GREGORY FABIANO, PH.D.**

Dr. Fabiano is a professor of psychology at FIU. He is a core faculty member in the Clinical Science in Child in Adolescent Psychology Doctoral Program and the CCF.

His program of research has focused on the development, validation and implementation of effective assessments and interventions for children with ADHD and their families. He has expertise in assessment and intervention development and implementation for youth with ADHD. This has included the development a rating scale teachers and parents can use to indicate impairment in daily life functioning, a parenting intervention for fathers of children with ADHD, a school-based behavioral intervention for children with ADHD in special education placements and an intensive psychosocial intervention for novice teen drivers with ADHD. He has served as principal investigator or co-investigator on multiple clinical trials that investigated psychosocial and/or pharmacological treatments for ADHD, and these studies have included multiple designs (single-subject, cross-over, between group, adaptive treatment).

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***“Low-intensity behavioral intervention as a first-line treatment for children with ADHD reduces or eliminates the need for medication.”***

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# FINANCIAL GAP BETWEEN ADULTS WITH CHILDHOOD ADHD AND THOSE WITHOUT, **WIDENS OVER TIME**

*Story By: Rosanna Castro*



## **WILLIAM E. PELHAM, JR., PH.D., ABPP**

Dr. Pelham is a Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry and Director of the Center for Children and Families. He remains an Emeritus SUNY Distinguished Professor of Psychology at SUNY Buffalo and an Adjunct Professor of Psychiatry at WPIC.

Dr. Pelham has focused his research on ADHD in children and adolescents. His interests include treatment, development and evaluation, including behavioral treatments, pharmacotherapy, and the combination of the two. Most recently, the treatment research has concentrated more on dosing and sequencing in behavioral, pharmacological and combined interventions. In addition, Dr. Pelham studies the outcomes in adolescence and adulthood of ADHD children, focusing on multiple domains including substance use.

Adults with childhood Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are expected to earn \$1.25 million less than adults without a history of ADHD, over their lifetime, potentially reaching retirement with up to 75 percent lower net worth.

Researchers at FIU's Center for Children and Families reviewed 364 participants with ADHD and 240 without as part of the Pittsburgh ADHD Longitudinal Study (PALS) - one of the largest long-term studies in the country on children with ADHD.

Financial outcomes of participants were compared at age 25 and then again at age 30, and researchers found that at age 30, adults with a history of childhood ADHD continue to have worsening deficits across almost all financial indicators, including income, savings, employment status, and dependence on parents and other adults. Nearly half of the adults with childhood ADHD were regularly receiving money from parents, other adults, and/or the government.

Moreover, the magnitude of several key ADHD-related deficits had increased from age 25 to age 30. While adults without an ADHD history increased income and savings, moved out from parents' homes, and transitioned to supporting themselves independently, the ADHD group achieved only small increases in earnings and savings and sustained their financial dependence on parents, family and other adults.



“These results show there is great need for interventions that can improve financial functioning as children with ADHD reach young adulthood,” said William E. Pelham Jr., senior author and director of the Center for Children and Families. “Paradigms such as vocational training, supported employment and counseling on personal finances may be of use in developing clinical approaches that can help young adults with ADHD increase income and savings, improve personal finance habits, and reduce dependence on parents, other adults and public assistance.”

This is one of a handful of studies of the adverse life-long financial outcomes of childhood ADHD.

“It is the first study to use early financial trajectories to project net worth of adults with an ADHD history at retirement,” added co-author Timothy F. Page, associate professor in the Department of Health Policy and Management at FIU’s Robert Stempel College of Public Health & Social Work.

Results suggest that the adult after-effects of childhood ADHD translate into close to \$30 billion in lost income in the U.S. annually.

“Our results suggest that ADHD should be conceptualized as a chronic condition often requiring considerable, potentially lifelong support from others, even into adulthood,” said lead author William Pelham III, of Arizona State University. “Just as children with ADHD have more difficulty than peers in school, adults with a history of ADHD continue to have difficulty in work settings, resulting in lower levels of financial independence in adulthood.”

Researchers note that not all children with ADHD have poor financial outcomes as adults. They found that approximately

15 percent of them were employed full-time and were not financially reliant on family members or welfare programs at age 30, compared to 45 percent of those without an ADHD history.

Researchers also analyzed adults who were diagnosed with ADHD as children, but no longer had any ADHD symptoms at age 30. They too, exhibited substantial and pervasive financial deficits relative to adults who were never diagnosed with ADHD as children, suggesting that the widely accepted diagnostic symptoms of childhood ADHD are unrelated to adult functioning in this key domain of life success.

“Interventions for teens and young adults should focus on the development of functional life skills rather than reduction of symptoms, since substantial deficits in financial independence were present even for those adults whose symptoms had completely remitted,” Pelham Jr. said.

In addition, results suggested that lower educational attainment may be a key mechanism driving ADHD-related deficits in long-term financial functioning. Adults with ADHD were more likely to have dropped out of high school (9 percent vs. 1 percent) and less likely to have completed a bachelor’s degree (14 percent vs. 53 percent)—two educational milestones that are associated with significant increases in earnings. Educational supports and interventions that can help those with ADHD attain these milestones may also be an important means of improving long-term financial outcomes and reducing dependence on parents and families.

The study was published in the **Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology** and was funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) and National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA).





# RESEARCHERS UNRAVEL HOW THE BRAIN REMEMBERS

Story By: Rosanna Castro

FIU doctoral student Maanasa Jayachandran is working to unravel the mystery of how the brain recalls memories in the correct order.

If she's successful, it might lead to a better understanding of how diseases like Alzheimer's affect memory and how to treat them.

Recalling a memory in the correct order is a crucial skill when it comes to completing tasks or even reminiscing with family. Yet, it's still among the many enduring mysteries of how the brain works.

Jayachandran has been studying the role of different parts of the brain and how they retrieve memory in a sequence. For her study, Jayachandran trained rats to remember sequences of odors. She would then put the odors out of sequence and ask the rats to tell her if they were in the correct order or not. Rats were rewarded with water when they were right.

"These rats are very good at this task and are able to tell if an odor is in the correct sequence or not" Jayachandran said.

The Center for Children and Families researchers, Jayachandran and psychology assistant professor Timothy A. Allen, blocked rats' ability to transmit messages between different parts of their brain to simulate the effects of a brain disorder.

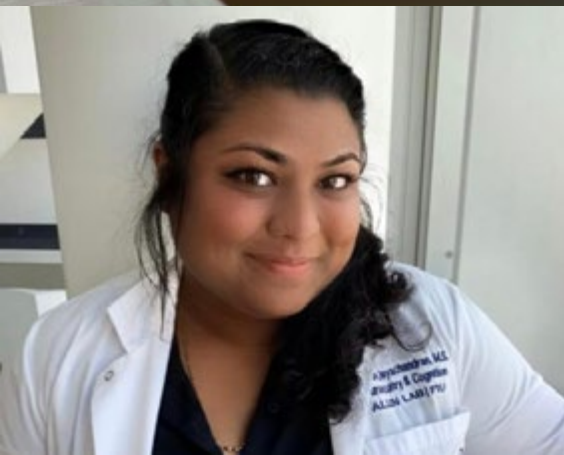
With the connection interrupted, Jayachandran discovered rats could not determine if memories were out of sequence. Then they repeated the experiment by interrupting another connection to a different part of the brain. Again, they failed the task.

"We were expecting there to be a difference between the two," Allen said. "What's nice about this task is we could ask how the animals were retrieving the information. It turned out they had almost opposite patterns of wrong answers."

Depending on what the researchers turned off in the rats' brain, one structure was able to remember the sequence better and the other structure remembered worse the more out of sequence the odors were out of order, Jayachandran said.

Learning how this process works helps researchers to better understand what might be happening in the brains of people who are affected by memory disorders. It suggests that in the future we can manipulate these circuits in people to improve their ability to retrieve memories in the correct order, Allen said.

The study was published in the journal **Cell Reports**.



## MAANASA JAYACHANDRAN, M.S.

Ms. Jayachandran is interested in the neurobiological mechanisms of disease processes related to cognition and behavior. She is currently using confocal microscopy to map specific projection pathways of the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex using viral DREADDs and test their behavioral relevance. Importantly, Ms. Jayachandran explores the computational contributions of these pathways using high-density drivable arrays of tetrodes to record neural activity while manipulating neurotransmission in specific pathways. Prior to joining the lab, Ms. Jayachandran explored the role of the active zone protein Bruchpilot (BRP) in *Drosophila*, and miRNA-218 in motor neuron development in zebrafish.

# IN THE NEWS

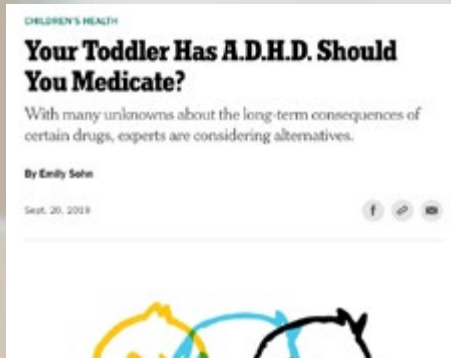




## SOUTH FLORIDA SunSentinel

### BACK TO SCHOOL: SOUTH FLORIDA RESEARCHER WANTS TO PROVE BEHAVIOR ADJUSTMENTS CAN TREAT ADHD

For some children, learning how to focus on following a command, helping a peer, or showing good sportsmanship can be a challenge. Now one nationally recognized researcher is out to prove how those basic lessons in changing behaviors can be a more effective treatment than medicine for ADHD.



The New York Times

## Parenting

### YOUR TODDLER HAS A.D.H.D. SHOULD YOU MEDICATE?

[With] concerns over — and a lack of data about — how [...] medications might affect young brains in the long term, some researchers are trying to spread the word about other, nonmedication options, such as behavior therapies and training programs for parents of preschoolers with the condition. Getting that message out has been slow going, said Katie Hart, Ph.D., a psychologist at FIU, in part because doctors don't always recommend alternate treatments, and partly because access to them can be spotty.



REUTERS

### APPS MAY HELP KIDS LEARN ABC'S AND 123'S

Interactive educational apps may be able to help young children master early academic skills like math and reading, a research review suggests. "There is somewhat consistent evidence across studies that game-based educational apps targeting early academic skills, like early math skills, have the potential to support learning in young children," said study leader Shayl Griffith of FIU in Miami. "These findings [...] suggest that interactive apps, when chosen well and used appropriately, may be a useful and accessible tool to support early academic development."



Miami Herald

### A VISIT WITH YOUR DOCTOR IS NOT WHAT IT USED TO BE: WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT TELEMEDICINE

Five-year-old Toyam Marathe FaceTimes his grandmother once a week. He touches his school photo every day, a sign his mom says means he's missing school, even though his class is on Zoom now. He also has 2 weekly virtual therapy sessions with Julie Cristello, a doctoral student from FIU's Center for Children and Families. He's adapted fairly well to the situation, a relief for his mother, Nicole Jackson, who was worried about his routine being disrupted. Toyam was diagnosed with selective mutism, or SM, an anxiety disorder. Children who are diagnosed with SM are usually talkative at home but are unable to speak in other social settings such as school.



healthline

### WANT TO HELP COVID-19 RESEARCHERS? YOU DON'T HAVE TO LEAVE YOUR LIVING ROOM

Internet usage has spiked since the first U.S. COVID-19 death in early February. As social distancing measures confine us to our homes, we're spending more time scrolling through Facebook, binge-watching Netflix, and reading the news than ever before. [R]ather than just doing your regular online activities, why not devote some time to help scientists study COVID-19?

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STUDENTS

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POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWS











# 2020 MICAMH CONFERENCE

The Miami International Child & Adolescent Mental Health (MICAMH) Conference is the leading interdisciplinary conference presenting state-of-the-art, evidence-based prevention and treatment interventions for mental health and educational challenges in children and adolescents. The conference offers keynote presentations, hands-on breakout workshops, student poster sessions and Continuing Education credits.

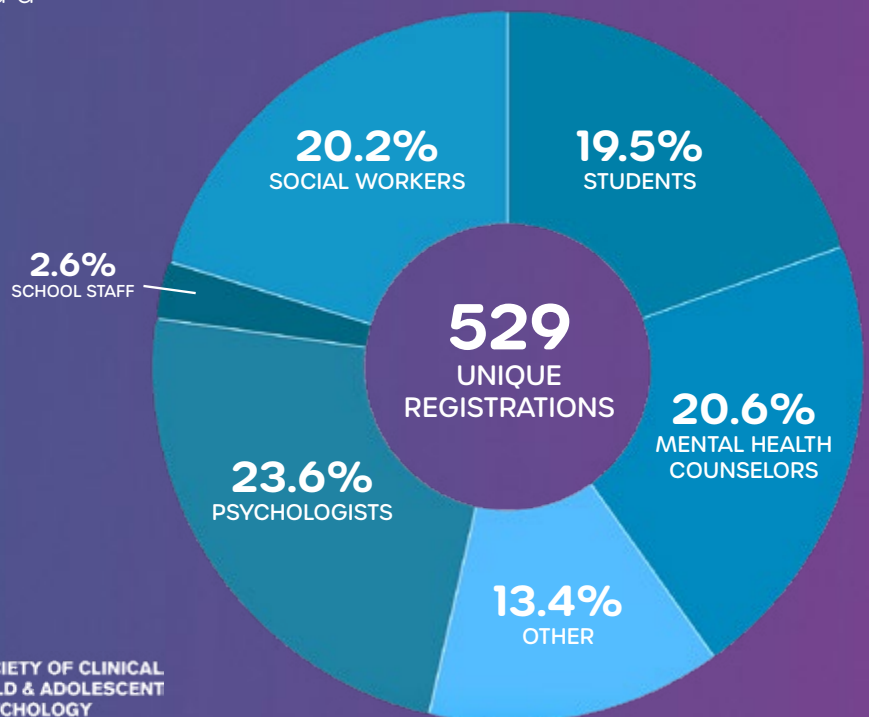
The 2020 MICAMH Conference addressed a variety of mental health topics, including:

- Trauma,
- Improving services for families,
- Refugee/immigrant psychology,
- Suicide risk in youth,
- School readiness,
- Autism,
- Substance use,
- ADHD,
- Community violence,
- Free mental health tools, and
- Anxiety

Our conference was sponsored by:



SOCIETY OF CLINICAL  
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## JONATHAN S. COMER, PH.D.

Dr. Comer is Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry, and is Director of the Mental Health Interventions and Technology (MINT) Program, an interdisciplinary clinical research laboratory devoted to expanding the quality, scope and accessibility of mental health care for youth. He is also the chairman of the MICAMH Conference.

His program of research examines four areas of overlapping inquiry: (1) The assessment, phenomenology, and course of child anxiety disorders; (2) the development and evaluation of evidence-based treatments for childhood psychopathology, with particular focus on the development of innovative methods to reduce systematic barriers to effective mental health care in the community; (3) national patterns and trends in the utilization of mental health services and quality of care; and (4) the psychological impact of disasters and terrorism on youth.

# EDUCATIONAL APPS CAN BENEFIT YOUNG CHILDREN, STUDY FINDS

*Story By: Rosanna Castro*

Educational apps can be helpful in supporting early learning in young children, according to a new study led by researchers at FIU's Center for Children and Families.

The researchers reviewed 35 studies from all over the world that included nearly 5,000 children under the age of six playing with interactive apps, and measured their academic, cognitive, or social-emotional skill outcomes.

The review found the strongest evidence for a learning benefit for apps targeting early math skills, followed by early language and literacy skills, which includes letter knowledge, phonological awareness, letter writing and vocabulary.

"This is the first study to review research findings examining young children's learning from interactive educational apps," said Shayl Griffith, lead author and postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Children and Families. "These findings are important because they suggest that interactive apps may be a useful and accessible tool to support early academic development."

The review did not find evidence of any benefit of apps aiming to improve social communication skills in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), an important finding given that touchscreen technology is popular in ASD treatment.

Results also suggest touchscreen app games have the potential to support learning in other skill areas, including science knowledge and executive functioning. However, the authors point out that there were only a small number of studies targeting these skill areas, and further research is needed to establish whether use of interactive apps can effectively promote these skills.

Researchers state that more research on educational apps is needed, with focus on clarifying what app features and content may best support learning. "The integration of learning apps into children's lives at home and school has outpaced the research needed to provide comprehensive recommendations for their use," said co-author Daniel Bagner, FIU professor of psychology and director of the Early Childhood Behavior Lab at the Center for Children and Families. "Understanding how interactive app features support learning in different content areas will allow clearer standards for educational app makers."

Research shows that children learn best when co-viewing TV with parents and parent behaviors while co-using apps have been linked to positive engagement and affect in children. Researchers recommend parents be involved as much as possible while their child engages in screen time and to replace typical screen time, like watching cartoons, with interactive educational apps that may help promote early skills in their child.

"Screen time recommendations often focus only on preventing overuse of screens rather than opportunities for maximizing learning," said Griffith. "Parents and providers working with young children should pay attention not only to how much screen time children are getting, but what kinds of activities they are engaging in to maximize potential benefits."

Bagner added, "Continued research in this area will be critical to inform the debate around young children's screen time, as clinicians and researchers try to strike a balance between taking advantage of the potential benefits of new technology while encouraging limits on screen time."

The study was published in **Pediatrics**.





### **SHAYL GRIFFITH, PH.D.**

Shayl Griffith's research interests center on the behavioral and academic functioning of at-risk young children, with special interests in early identification and intervention in problems of development, parent-child interactions, child media use and the use of mobile technology to support interventions. Her work is currently supported by a postdoctoral fellowship from the National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation, and she has authored papers in journals such as *Pediatrics*, *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, and the *Journal of Children and Media*. She is also collaborating with the Miami-Dade Family Learning Partnership to develop and evaluate caregiver guides including tips for positive educational media use for families participating in a county-wide book distribution program, with funding from The Children's Trust.



# WEIGHTED VESTS, STABILITY BALLS DO NOT HELP CHILDREN WITH ADHD

*Written By: Rosanna Castro*

Weighted vests and stability balls do not help elementary schoolers with ADHD focus in class, according to a new study by researchers at FIU's Center for Children and Families.

This is the first study to evaluate the effect of occupational therapy (OT) techniques, specifically weighted vests and stability balls, on classroom behavior and academic productivity in elementary-aged children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

The study also looked at the effect of stimulant medication and its combination with each of the OT interventions. Results revealed that low doses of medication in addition to behavioral classroom management techniques, such as rewards for positive behavior, led to improvements in classroom behavior and academic productivity for children with ADHD while the OT interventions did not.

ADHD is among the most common childhood

mental health disorders and affects at least one child in every elementary school classroom in the U.S., but approximately one third of these children do not receive school support.

"Schools should allocate funds toward implementing behavioral approaches rather than giving children devices such as weighted vests or stability balls," said Fiona Macphee, lead author of the study and a doctoral student in the FIU Department of Psychology.

Researchers assessed 64 children with ADHD ages 5 to 12 in a controlled classroom setting during the Summer Treatment Program. The use of stability balls and weighted vests was randomized daily by classroom for 60 minutes a day over a six-week period. Medication or a placebo was also given to children for three weeks.

Macphee explained the theories guiding the use of both weighted vests and stability balls are scientifically unsupported. Yet, in a survey of general education teachers, 47 percent



**FIONA MACPHEE**

Ms. Macphee is interested in ADHD during childhood and adolescence. Currently, her research focuses on factors that contribute to treatment response in this population. She is also interested in the impact of parent-child relationships on child functioning.



reported that they were either currently using or had used stability balls in the past.

New York City public schools spent an estimated \$58 million in 2014 on occupational therapy interventions — a \$20 million increase from just five years prior. Similarly, Chicago experienced a 30 percent increase in OT referrals over five years. For Los Angeles, the increase was 20 percent over three years. Approximately 10.8 percent of children with ADHD in special education settings receive OT interventions in school. Macphee says it is important to systematically evaluate whether those therapies provide the best support for children with ADHD.

“Behavioral therapy is the best first-step treatment for children with ADHD because they learn skills and strategies that will help them succeed at school, at home and in relationships long-term,” said William E. Pelham, Jr., director of the Center for Children and Families and co-author of the study. “School staff and parents should be working together to set goals for the child to target areas of need and set up a home reward system to provide and/or restrict privileges at home based on school behavior.”

The findings were published in the **School Psychology Review**.



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**CONTENT BY** Sarah Bisono-Gonzalez, Rosanna Castro, and Enrique Torres

**FEATURED ARTICLES BY** Rosanna Castro and JoAnn Adkins

**GRAPHIC DESIGN & LAYOUT BY** Enrique Torres

**SPECIAL THANKS TO** Stephanie Aristide and Gabriela Morales

