



## OAR Announces Winners of the 2004 Graduate Grants Program

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Arlington, VA – The Organization for Autism Research (OAR) announced the results of its first annual Graduate Research Grants Program last Wednesday, awarding six grants to Master’s and doctoral students conducting research related to autism and autism spectrum disorders. The Graduate Grants program was introduced in the spring of 2004 in order to encourage applied autism research at the graduate level.

In response to the program announcement, OAR received 14 proposals from Master’s and doctoral students from across the country. Each proposal was reviewed and scored by a member of OAR’s Scientific Council. Reviewers were seeking out those studies that best matched OAR’s research priorities and whose potential outcomes held the most practical relevance for families. From this field of 14 proposals, five doctoral studies and one Master’s-level study were selected for full funding by OAR.

**Brian Freedman**, doctoral student at the Center for Psychological Studies at Nova Southeastern University, was awarded a \$2,000 grant to conduct his research related to the experiences of fathers of children with autism. Previous research on this topic has yielded inconsistent results. In his study, Mr. Freedman seeks to improve upon prior studies in the field and will examine the role of the father’s personality traits and the severity of the child’s autism as they relate to the father’s stress levels, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction. Of this study, Michael Fabrizio, MA, BCBA of the Scientific Council commented “Research such as that which [Mr. Freedman] proposes has the very real potential of advancing our system of clinical service delivery to one that is based on fine-grained analysis of family needs.”

The second \$2,000 doctoral grant was awarded to **Gillian Hayes**, who is pursuing her Ph.D. at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta. Her study, entitled Supporting Communication through Data among Groups of Caregivers and Educators of Children with Autism, seeks to make use of emerging technology to help better coordinate the care of children with autism. Through the use of handheld personal computing devices, Ms. Hayes is developing a communication system in which observations of the child’s behavior, details of the treatment plan, and other information can be easily stored in a centralized location, allowing access to the information by all caregivers, treatment providers, and even parents.

**Kara Hume**, doctoral student in the School of Education at Indiana University, received a \$2,000 grant in support of her research study entitled Effects of an Individualized Work System on the Independent Academic Work Skills in Children with Autism. Prior research has shown that students with autism often have difficulty independently initiating tasks and that independent work behavior often does not persist in the absence of a supervising adult. Ms. Hume’s study will further extend

the research examining the use of structured teaching methods such as the TEACCH program, which utilize physical structure, schedules, work systems, and task organization to teach independence to children with autism. Calling her research “a rare demonstration of the TEACCH classroom management package,” Dr. James Mulick, Ph.D., of OAR’s Scientific Council enthusiastically supported Ms. Hume’s proposal for funding in this year’s competition, citing the study’s excellent design and relevant outcomes.

Also pursuing her doctorate in the School of Education at Indiana University is **Rachel Loftin**, who was awarded a \$2,000 grant to conduct her study titled A Self-Monitoring Treatment Package for Increasing Social Initiation and Collateral Reduction of Stereotypic Behavior. Social interaction with peers has been shown in prior research to decrease the display of stereotypic behavior such as body rocking and hand flapping in some children with autism. Ms. Loftin’s research focuses on whether teaching social initiation skills to children with autism, and then subsequently maintaining those skills through a self-monitoring device, will lead to a decrease in stereotypic behavior. The implications of this study are wide-reaching, as self-monitoring techniques such as those used in Ms. Loftin’s research could be implemented in regular education classrooms with significant results.

The final \$2,000 doctoral grant was awarded to **Maria Santangelo**, Director of Occupational Therapy at Melmark Homes, Inc. in Berwyn, PA. Ms. Santangelo is pursuing her doctoral degree at the University of Phoenix. In her study titled Effectiveness of an Everyday-Based Protocol for Managing Challenging and Disruptive Behaviors, the author will determine if engaging adolescents and young adults with autism in everyday activities results in a decreased display of problem behavior. Previous research on this topic has shown that individuals with developmental disabilities who participated in similar programs showed improvement in the management of disruptive behaviors. If successful, this study will “improve residential program participation,” according to Dr. Mulick, and has implications for use by other residential staff in managing the behavior of those in their facilities.

**Andrea Witwer** was awarded the sole Master’s-level grant award for her study entitled Autism Screening Tools: A Comparison of the Social Communication Questionnaire and the Developmental Behavior Checklist-Autism Screening Algorithm, being carried out at The Ohio State University. Both of these tools have been recently developed for use as rating scales, which can be administered with relative ease and efficiency as opposed to observational measures and interviews that require administration by highly trained professionals. Ms. Witwer will compare these two scales within a single population of elementary school children, children with autism/PDD-NOS, and children with adaptive behavior impairments or mental retardation in order to test the reliability and validity of the two measures. This study will provide researchers and clinicians with essential information on the effectiveness of these two diagnostic tools.

Speaking of the Graduate Grants program as a whole, OAR Scientific Council Chairman Peter Gerhardt, Ed.D., commented on the significance of a program such as this. “Any program that encourages further research into the applied aspects of living with autism is beneficial to the community. Graduate students represent the future of the field, so to see such a strong response to this program makes me optimistic that this type of important research will continue and will make a difference for families.”

For more information on any of the six funded studies, or to learn more about OAR's Graduate Research Grants Program, please contact Allison Chance at (703) 351-5031 or [achance@researchautism.org](mailto:achance@researchautism.org).