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Michigan's URC wins \$2.5 million to improve interactions between parents, teachers, toddlers

WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY - OFFICE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH

DETROIT - Researchers from Wayne State University, Michigan State University and the University of Michigan will receive \$2.5 million over five years in a cooperative agreement with the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), a division of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. They have designed a program of professional development for teachers and an intervention for parents and will evaluate its effects on parent and teacher mindfulness and reflective functioning. The team hopes that strengthening those skills will support more responsive interactions between teachers, parents and children in Early Head Start programs. Ann Stacks, Ph.D., director of the Infant Mental Health program at WSU's Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute, is the principal investigator.

This URC is one of four sites funded by ACF across the country, designed to work cooperatively and share information about the implementation and scalability of each approach. Unlike a grant, a cooperative agreement assumes substantial programmatic involvement between the funder and recipient after the award. "This is a great opportunity to meet other researchers and learn from them," Stacks said. "All the projects are different. Ours is the only mindfulness group intervention." The URC research team is part of a larger group of faculty from five universities, known as the Michigan Infant-Toddler Research Exchange, which aims to foster cross-university research that has implications for best-practices in early intervention and early childhood education.

Funder ACF promotes the economic and social well-being of families, children, individuals and communities with partnerships, funding, guidance, training and technical assistance. "It's exciting to be part of ACF's drive to infuse research into practice, using research to determine best practices for students and teachers," Stacks said. "The impact our work could have on Early Head Start programs and children's futures is gratifying."

The project, titled "Recognizing, Reflecting, and Responding to Infant/Toddler Cues: An Integrated Parent-Teacher Intervention to Support Social Emotional Development through Caregiver Mindfulness and Sensitivity," will first pilot the professional development curriculum with teachers, an adaptation of the Mom Power curriculum. Phase II will include parents and teachers together as caregiving partners to support each child's social-emotional development. Parents will participate in the parent curriculum, Mom Power, developed by U-M colleagues Maria Muzik, M.D., MSc., co-PI and assistant professor of psychiatry and Katherine Rosenblum, co-Investigator and associate professor of psychiatry.

The professional development curriculum is modeled after the Mom Power program and both aim to improve parent and teacher interactions with children by focusing on mindfulness, reflective functioning and responsiveness to children's cues. The goal is to help caregivers better understand children's attachment needs through video-based feedback and hands-on activities that reduce stress and promote sensitivity and responsiveness. Current parent and teacher trainings often focus on information about child development

and age-appropriate strategies, without addressing the changes in attitudes and skills needed to support caregiver-child interactions.

"Our project is different," Stacks said. "We want to induce and sustain lasting change. Sensitivity in parenting and teaching young children is a key component of later social and emotional competence and school readiness. This skill is especially important when infants and young children are at-risk for delays. We will test whether our approach can promote that sensitivity."

The project team also consists of Claire Vallotton, Ph.D., associate professor (co-PI) and Holly Brophy-Herb, Ph.D., professor (co-investigator) of child development in MSU's Department of Human Development and Family Studies. "The partnership is so equally divided that any one of us could have been the PI," Stacks said. "We already have excellent working relationships and the project taps into each of our respective strengths."

The ACF cooperative agreement number is 904R0092-01-00.

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The Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child & Family Development promotes and improves the well-being of children and families across the lifespan through research, education and outreach. The institute is part of Wayne State University, a premier urban research institution offering more than 360 academic programs to nearly 26,000 students.

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