MPSI’s Newest Faculty Member Studies Wars’ Effects

Military families face tough challenges. A service member’s deployment means parenting from halfway around the world, leaving the remaining parent to field family decisions — and face parenting challenges alone. Service members miss school concerts, teacher conferences, and even the births of their children. Since the beginning of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, 2 million American children have had a parent deployed in military service. What toll does this take on the mental health of children and their parents?

Until recently, research into military life concentrated on children with diagnosed psychological problems. While important, “this is a narrow view,” said associate professor Julie Wargo Aikins, Ph.D., the newest member of MPSI’s faculty and jointly appointed in Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences. “We should look at whether children are meeting normal developmental milestones. Are preschoolers regulating their emotions? Are older students achieving in school and making friends?” Children who do not meet these milestones have long-term risks for developing psychopathology, she said. “The right interventions could help these children the most by preventing problems in the future.”

Combining Forces

Dr. Wargo Aikins comes to MPSI from the University of Connecticut where she first studied the children of deployed Army members. Her husband, Deane Aikins, Ph.D., was a member of the National Center for PTSD Clinical Neuroscience Division at Yale University studying adult service members suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. They began working together about three years ago when they got funding to conduct an online survey asking army mothers about the well-being of their 3- to 7-year-olds during fathers’ deployment.

“This was just a snapshot, a one-time assessment,” said Dr. Wargo Aikins. “But the military was quite interested in this study because we looked at developmental milestones. We translated what we knew from civilian science in child development to benefit this special population.” It also inspired Dr. Wargo Aikins and her husband to seek two academic positions under the same university roof. “These are not easy to find,” she said, grateful for the opportunity Wayne State offered. Her husband is also on the faculty in Psychiatry and Behavioral

The right interventions could help these children the most by preventing problems in the future.

– Dr. Wargo Aikins
perception of danger versus the father not being in the home."

Their studies have shown that preschool children fare the worst when the father is deployed. Three distinct groups emerge: children who likely have current psychopathology; children at significant risk of developing psychopathology in the next 3 to 5 years, and; a group that remains healthy and resilient for reasons yet unknown.

"We’re also finding that the mothers are very depressed and there are few services..."
MPSI faculty member Dr. Steven Ondersma was named a fellow in the American Psychological Association’s Division 37, The Society for Child and Family Policy and Practice. Fewer than 100 professionals nationwide hold this honor. The Society applies psychological knowledge to advocacy, service delivery, and public policies affecting children, youth and families. Recent high-focus topics include divorce and custody, child abuse prevention, pediatric AIDS, drug-exposed infants, latchkey children and homelessness. Prof. Ondersma’s research tackles maternal substance abuse through brief, low-cost interventions to decrease substance use and improve child well-being.

One of MPSI’s first trainees to be named a fellow, Casey Dexter, will join Berry College, a private university in Georgia, this fall as an assistant professor of psychology. The soon to be Dr. Dexter was mentored at MPSI by a proud Dr. Ann Stacks.

MPSI graduate student fellow Amy Loree won 2nd place in Wayne State University’s Graduate Exhibition Day for her research poster, Child trauma and alcohol-related consequences: the mediating effects of peer drinking. The work surveyed WSU undergrads at freshman orientation, mid-year and at the start of sophomore year about alcohol use and factors that might be protective or increase risk. Results suggest that experiencing childhood physical abuse or general traumatic events may lead individuals to seek out alcohol-using peers which may, in turn, increase the risk of personal alcohol use and consequences. The Graduate Exhibition celebrates graduate student research, scholarship and creative work through poster exhibits, oral presentations, and visual arts displays. Amy is a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology.

Amy Loree received additional honors when she and MPSI fellow Travis Goldwire won the Graduate School’s highly competitive Thomas C. Rumble Fellowship award for 2013-14. The fellowship provides a generous tuition stipend for doctoral students and helps them achieve expected outcomes as they complete their degree.

An alum of the MPSI undergraduate training program won 1st place in the Wayne State psychology department’s research poster competition. Erin Mason trained at MPSI for two years and is mentored by MPSI faculty member Dr. Valerie Simon. Erin, who is now a second year clinical psychology graduate student, won for her poster titled, Youth’s Perceptions of Change Subsequent to Child Sexual Abuse and Associations with Psychosocial Functioning.

available to support them,” she said. “This could be a potent contributor to how children adjust to their father’s deployment.” The Army’s reaction? Dr. Wargo Aikins sees clear progress in their response. “The Army knows that a healthy family is one factor that allows soldiers to continue to perform their jobs well,” she said. “Thirty percent of future service members are children of current service members. It’s a legacy.”

Other Tough Teen Transitions

Dr. Wargo Aikins also studies civilian adolescents, especially during transitions to middle school, high school and college. “How does teen attachment to parents affect maturity? What role does peer rejection play in social problems, drop-out rates and criminal conduct? What triggers or protects against depression?” she asked. “I’m interested in all of this.” Her research points to the role of social supports in healthy adjustments to teen changes. “Positive social relationships make life full,” she said.

For now, though, military research is at the forefront for Dr. Wargo Aikins, a career focus she would not have predicted 10 years ago – before the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. “We are able to meet with policy groups in Washington, and with folks who make decisions about intervention support. There is enthusiastic support for promoting services for military families”

She reflects for a moment on the essence of her work. “These families have sacrificed a tremendous amount in the service of our country,” she said softly. “We owe it to them as a country to support them.”
Research

**FRÆER HOUSE** is home to MPSI faculty, administrative offices and meeting rooms

### Bringing Freer’s Garden Back to Life

Charles Lang Freer (1854-1919) made his fortune manufacturing railroad freight cars in Detroit, but he made his mark in the art world as a revered collector of Asian and Middle Eastern art who also generously supported American masters like Whistler, Dewing and Tryon. He built his remarkable shingle-style home on East Ferry Avenue in 1892 to house his large collection and designed the exterior landscape as the perfect frame to his home.

After construction of his house was completed in 1892, Freer designed the gardens with careful attention to detail. He consulted his architect, Wilson Eyre, and several artist friends from New York, including Thomas W. Dewing, to help him attain a garden of quiet beauty and harmonious character. On a deeper level, the gardens mirrored the attention to detail and blend of Asian and Western cultures so evident on the interior of his home. He used Asian and Western plant varieties. An Asian stone lantern, a 1906 gift from S. Yamanaka of Yamanaka and Co., a leading Asian antiquities dealer, became a focal point of the garden.

Today the Freer House contains the offices of Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute’s faculty and staff. In the decades since Freer occupied the home, the courtyard garden underwent many changes. After Merrill Palmer School purchased the home in 1920, the garden became a playground complete with sandbox, swings and sliding board. In 1958, the playground moved to its current Knapp building location. A new minimalist green garden design by Eleanor Roche was installed in 1966. This has since deteriorated with only a few hardy plants surviving.

The Freer Garden Campaign will restore this secluded spot in Detroit’s midtown to an outdoor space that reflects Charles Freer’s original aesthetic vision while providing an inviting courtyard equally suited to small gatherings or solitary reflection. In addition, the project goal is to create a revitalized garden landscape this is low maintenance and environmentally sustainable.

### Planting the Seeds of Success

Progress is already being made on the garden project. The recently formed Garden Restoration Committee has identified historically appropriate plantings through the advice and research of members David Michener, Ph.D., U-M Matthaei Botanical Gardens curator, and historian Thomas W. Brunk, Ph.D, author of *The Charles Lang Freer Residence: the Original Freer Gallery of Art*, The Americana Foundation funded a detailed garden plan created by K.C. Runciman Landscapes (see watercolor). Plans include replicating the missing railings on the steps to the Peacock Room and appropriate new perimeter fencing. Before the garden plan can be undertaken, drainage system repairs and grading of the site are required. Efforts are underway to address these immediate concerns, with Wayne State University and the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute continuing to provide generous staffing and administrative support.

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“Mr. Freer’s garden and grounds are those of a man who has traveled far and seen much.”

Detroit Sunday News Tribune, Sept. 5, 1897

**Freer’s garden 1904** Freer Gallery of Art Archives

Learn about future Freer House events at: www.mpsi.edu/about/friends-freer.php

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But we need your help, too

For Freer’s garden to truly thrive, we need donations from people like you, people who appreciate Detroit’s turn-of-the-century architecture and wish to support the restoration of the Freer House and its garden landscape. This is an exciting next step in revitalizing historic East Ferry Street and midtown Detroit.

To learn how you can help please contact William Colburn, Director of the Freer House, at williamcolburn@wayne.edu or 313-664-2500.

Replication of the Peacock Room wrought iron railing and original Asian stone lantern, located today outside the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., are priority goals in the Freer Garden Campaign.
Dear Editor of Imprints,

From 1942 to 1944, I was a preschooler at Merrill Palmer. I am blessed with vivid recall of many details of the days I spent there – very happy days.

I was one of a tight-knit group of four children who played together constantly, much to the consternation of the grownups who tried for months to get us to “play with the other children, dear.” Our group was Dickie, David, Carole and me, also called Carol. We girls were eventually known as the Terrible Carols, a distinction we rather enjoyed!

As I understood it from my mother, my class was the second – normative – group of children “studied” by Dr. Arnold Gesell (a psychologist and pediatrician who helped to form the field of child development), theoretically proving that his documented definition of the normal preschooler was valid and reliable. I don’t know how he defined and documented the first study. I do know how things were “documented” about our group.

We carried notes back and forth from home to MP and from MP to home. The notes from home originally contained true facts about what I ate for breakfast, lunch and dinner and how much I pooped, etc. After my mother learned I might be expelled, because I did not eat a “normal” diet or poop a “normal” amount, she panicked and asked another mother what she should do. The woman stared at her for a minute, and then said, “You lie!”

Who Is Hiding in the Wall?

Not only did the four of us stick together, we usually occupied half of the Problem Eaters Table – by choice. We’d figured out that by being sent to the Problem Eaters Table (until we cleaned our plates or the grownups gave up), we could avoid taking naps and have unstructured play time instead. One day while we sat at the table, I heard noises in the wall. It sounded like people. They whispered and rattled papers. Sometimes they laughed a lot.

I asked my mother about it and she said they were students learning how to be teachers, like my Daddy. To be good teachers, they had to understand how children acted. They watched us through small windows in a special room upstairs, writing it all down in a report. They were not supposed to make any noise, because we should never know they are there. If we heard them, that was a bad mistake on their part.

The next day, I told Carole, Dickie and David all of that. We found the small “gun-port” windows. We talked about strategy. Mind you, we were four-year olds! We equickly realized that if we looked up and acted like we knew they were there, the jig was up. But we couldn’t resist a captive audience. I’m (not really) ashamed to admit it, but we “acted out” as much as we dared. It had the desired result, too. Audible laughter increased, Pencils dropped and papers rattled. Eventually our audience settled down, and then so did we.

I hope you got a good chuckle from my little anecdotes. Those were among the milder ones. We gave the folks a good ride, but it was a lovely time! It does my heart good to know that Merrill Palmer (Skillman) Institute is still there and doing well.

Carolyn Cybele Sieradzki
(Carol Lou Siera at Merrill Palmer)

Thank you, Carolyn, for this beautiful, honest and funny recollection. It is sure to strike a chord with many readers. - The Editor
MPSI Welcomes Expert on High-Risk Families

Infants, children and families are the target of Dr. Carolyn Dayton’s extensive research and clinical experience. As a new faculty member in WSU’s School of Social Work, Dr. Dayton works to identify biological and psychosocial interventions to prevent or treat early signs of psychopathology, with special attention to children exposed to violence and poverty from birth to age five. She has clinical experience working with high-risk families at various settings such as home, centers and hospitals.

Dr. Dayton completed a postdoctoral fellowship in the University of Michigan’s department of psychiatry. She was attracted to the School of Social Work because of the close partnership she could also have with MPSI. Her research laboratory is located in the MPSI complex, next to the Infant Mental Health labs of close colleague Dr. Ann Stacks. Dr. Dayton’s extensive training in the interdisciplinary field of infant mental health further strengthens her connection to the work of MPSI.

Research Interests:
• Infant Mental Health
• Domestic violence in pregnancy and early childhood
• Influence of fathering on early child development

Giant Step Teen Conference Celebrates BIG 3-0

Ice the cake and light the candles cause Michigan’s longest running teen conference on inclusion is about to turn 30 years old. From humble beginnings as the inspiration of Detroit social worker Mary Agnes Miller Davis, the former Metro Detroit Teen Conference has changed its name and updated its focus throughout the years to stay current.

But one thing hasn’t changed:. Local teenagers still need opportunities to meet teens from different backgrounds, neighborhoods, ethnicities and cultures. Today Giant Step hosts 275-325 students a year at the free conference organized through MPSI. Trained facilitators lead small groups of students, who have never met each other before, in discussions to uncover what they have in common. They enter as strangers and leave as friends.

This year’s conference moves to a new venue – The Greater Grace Conference Center on 7 Mile Road in Detroit. We start at 8:30 am on Tuesday, October 29 and include a free lunch and a special, separate workshop for the counselors and chaperones who accompany the students. Former State House Representative Maureen Stapleton, who attended the very first teen conference in 1983, will give our keynote address.

Would you like to be part of Giant Step’s continued success? Please consider donating $30 dollars to honor our 30 years. Make your check payable to MPSI Giant Step Conference and mail it to Wayne State University, Becher House Fund Office, 5475 Woodward Avenue, Detroit, MI 48202. We thank you and our teens thank you. Questions? Contact Trudy Shiemke at tshiemke@wayne.edu.

For more about the Giant Step Teen Conference, contact Trudy Shiemke at 313-664-2527 or tshiemke@wayne.edu.
REGISTRATION

**Early Bird Registration**
(Until August 1)
$60 per day  
$110 both days  
Students: $25 per day

**Regular Registration**
$75 per day  
$140 both days  
Students: $35 per day

**ALL walk-in registrations**
$100 per day  
Registration includes continental breakfast, CEs and incredible speakers!

For more info:  
Beverly Weathington at 313-664-2526 or ac8787@wayne.edu  
OR  
Trudy Shiemke 313-664-2527 or tshiemke@wayne.edu

SAVE THE DATE Sept. 19 & 20

**2013 Explorations in Development**

Reducing Infant Mortality: Emerging Trends in Prevention & Developmentally Informed Care

**LOCATION:** Michigan First Credit Union, 27000 Evergreen, Lathrup Village, MI 48076

**Thursday, Sept 19, 9:30 am - 4:30 pm**
Renee Canady, PhD, MPA  
Michelle (Mickey) Sperlich, MA, CPM  
Janine Bieda, Ph.D., MS, CNM, WSU School of Medicine

**Friday, Sept 20, 9:30 am - 4:30 pm**
Jean Powlesland, MS, RN  
Jennifer Hofherr, OTR/L, C/NDT, University of Illinois Medical Center at Chicago

HOSTED BY: The Healthier Urban Families Outreach Program and the Infant Mental Health Program of the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child & Family Development at Wayne State University