Focus on the Father

Fathers matter. The more involved fathers are in the lives of their children, beginning in pregnancy, the better their children fare physically, cognitively, socially and emotionally. The same is true of mothers, but research on father involvement and attachment lags far behind research on mothers. “We need to learn more about fathers, especially fathers who are struggling with stressors like unemployment,” said MPSI’s newest faculty member Dr. Carolyn Dayton.

To help even the score, Dr. Dayton’s new research, Beyond Father Involvement: Understanding the complex psychosocial processes associated with early fathering in a sample of low-income, urban men, focuses on fathers. Poverty-related factors are known to be associated with decreased father involvement; Dr. Dayton wants to know why. What underlying social and emotional processes prevent some fathers from developing and maintaining healthy relationships with their children? “We are searching for barriers to father involvement, as well as the elements that motivate them to stay engaged,” Dr. Dayton said. “It’s not appropriate to simply take interventions that work with moms and apply them to dads. We could be missing the boat.”

Until now, much of Dr. Dayton’s work focused on finding effective interventions for mothers in high-risk families that would increase the level of attachment between mother and child. Her most recent early intervention project used magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to test the effectiveness of a “Mom Power” intervention in helping mothers to better identify their children’s attachment cues. In the MRI scans, an area in the brain often associated with empathy showed increased activity.

“That was a cool finding,” Dr. Dayton said. “It confirmed that our intervention helped mothers learn how to take the perspective of their young children, to understand what was developmentally appropriate for their child.”

Despite the success of her research, Dr. Dayton knew a huge piece of the parenting puzzle was missing – fathers. Decades earlier, when she conducted home visits as an infant mental health specialist, the whole thrust of the intervention was mom and baby. “We didn’t know what to do with dads,” she said. “Our intervention protocols were targeted for one mom and one baby. Dad was not part of the equation.”

Today, many men still have a difficult transition to parenthood because they aren’t socialized the same way women are. They don’t play with dolls. They rarely babysit. They don’t learn how to change a diaper. “There are other things we can and...
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should do to help dads feel empowered and be available in their children’s lives,” Dr. Dayton said. “We can compensate for the lack of socialization.”

**The Crying Baby Test**

*Beyond Father Involvement* is studying pregnant mothers and biologic fathers who struggle with life stressors like unemployment or underemployment. The parents complete questionnaires assessing factors such as resilience, coping, anxiety, attachment, depression, self-esteem, and exposure to trauma. Next come real-life simulations, which Dr. Dayton’s new lab space at MPSI is customized to record. In one protocol, the parents pretend to play with a lifelike baby doll as if it is their newborn infant. In another, the father (connected to a heart monitor) is alone in a room with the doll and told to respond as he would with his real infant. The doll is quiet for one minute then, regardless of how the father interacts, it cries for 10 continuous minutes. The interaction is recorded and the father’s saliva is tested for stress-related hormones.

“You might expect the father to react with elevated respiration, heart rate and hormone levels,” said Dr. Dayton. “But if the father had a childhood history of trauma, his reaction might be flat. We don’t know. That’s why we need this research.”

Four months after the real baby is born, both parents revisit the lab to assess parent-child interactions and bonding. The data is then analyzed to identify the mechanisms that support (or undermine) a healthy father-child relationship.

Dr. Dayton’s joint appointment at Wayne State between MPSI and the School of Social Work completes her career walk through Michigan’s University Research Corridor. She received her MSW from the University of Michigan and her doctorate from Michigan State. “Twenty years ago, I was working in infant mental health,” she said, “and attending meetings here at the Freer House. This is like coming home.” She has since worked with high risk infants, traumatized mothers, urban and low-income fathers, and military families where the father is deployed multiple times. Her current work with fathers is particularly
Child Advocate Ann Nicholson Honored by Wayne State

Ann Nicholson received a special tribute from Wayne State University recently for more than a decade of service to helping children and their families in Detroit. Ann is a member of the MPSI board of visitors and served as its chairperson for several years. Though MPSI went through a difficult reorganization in the 80s, and a succession of leaders through the 90s, Ann’s commitment to the work of the Institute never wavered.

Fellow board member Debra Partrich hosted the event at the Detroit Athletic Club. Guests included many women who volunteer with Ann at the Young Woman’s Home Association and the Women’s Caring Program. In the audience were also several members of Ann’s immediate family, including her husband James and son David, recently elected to the Wayne State Board of Governors.

The tribute included remarks from friend and fellow board member Phebe Goldstein, and an appreciation speech by Institute Director Dr. Peter Lichtenberg. Dr. Lichtenberg said Ann’s advice in 2005 to improve the integration of the Institute into the university was critical to its successful revitalization. “I don’t remember being that important to the process,” Ann said humbly. “But I’m very pleased at the growth and successes of Merrill Palmer Skillman.”

Since Dr. Lichtenberg became director in 2008, MPSI’s faculty has grown from four to 11, community outreach has quadrupled, and the Institute co-led the formation of a consortium of early childhood centers in Detroit to improve quality and compliance.

“Ann possesses the traits of a great faculty member,” Dr. Lichtenberg said. “She is passionate about her subject, wants to know the details of how and why things work, wants to know the impact of the work, and has piercing, penetrating questions that improve the project. We celebrate all she has done for us and look forward to even greater achievements in the future.”

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rewarding. “It’s lovely the way dads react when they realize the study is about them,” Dr. Dayton said. “They are flattered to be considered. They light up and are engaged. Dads say they’ve felt left out of the pregnancy process, so now they really want to contribute.”

MPSI is the perfect place to conduct this research and provides a rich, intellectually fertile environment, according to Dr. Dayton. “There is so much going on here,” she said. “It’s the model of how you want an institute to function. All this cross fertilization, researchers talking to each other and generating ideas. I absolutely love Merrill Palmer Skillman.”

Early Childhood Centers Rank Tops in Detroit

Excellent Schools Detroit rated the Early Childhood Centers (ECCs) at Wayne State among the top 10 preschool programs in Detroit. The ECC at Merrill Palmer Skillman ranked #2 earning 48 out of 50 points in overall quality. The center received a perfect scores in curriculum and instruction, staff qualifications and professional development, administration and management, and family and community partnerships. Excellent Schools Detroit is a non-profit group that “relentlessly champions a quality education for every child in Detroit.”

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Interest in Freer House Expands and Deepens

More than 1,000 people have visited the Freer House either for a tour or a special event in the past year. Dozens of arts, cultural and historic preservation organizations have also met here, and the home continues to be actively used by MPSI faculty and staff and other Wayne State groups.

The Society of Architectural Historians, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the Association of Professional Landscape Designers, as well as the Wayne State University Foundation Board, are among the diverse groups that have graced Freer House. Reporters and broadcasters are also taking notice as Freer House events have been spotlighted in the Detroit Free Press, the Detroit News, The Craig Fahle Show on WDET Radio, and even the Japan National Broadcasting Company (NHK-TV) which filmed the Freer House as part of a major documentary about collectors of Japanese art.

Southeast Asia, China and Japan Inspire Recent Cultural Gatherings

Charles Lang Freer’s philosophy of collecting included searching for ‘points of contact’ between the art of East and West, Asia and America. In building support for our public programs and preservation goals, the Freer House reflects its namesake’s cultural interests by reaching out to diverse communities in metro Detroit through our public lecture series, exhibits and tours. In the past six months, the Freer House
has created and hosted three successful programs focusing on Indian, Chinese and Japanese art and culture.

Debra Diamond, curator of South and Southeast Asian Art, Freer and Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian, lectured in June to over 200 persons at the DIA about her major exhibition on yoga in Indian art at the Freer and Sackler Gallery. *Heels over Head: Mr. Freer, Swami Vivekananda and the Art of Yoga*, included Freer’s interest in Indian art and his hosting of the famous Swami Vivekananda at his home in 1894. The reception that followed at the Freer House featured a special exhibit on Freer, Swami Vivekananda and India.

Thank you to event sponsors Yoga Shelter, miindia.com, WISDOM, the Detroit Creative Corridor Center, the Americana Foundation, the Asian & Islamic Art Forum/DIA, Blossoms of Birmingham and to our program hosts Dr. Madhu and Mrs. Anshu Prasad.

In early fall, the focus shifted to China with a lecture by David Hogge, head archivist of the Freer and Sackler Gallery, and Daisy Yiyou Wang, PhD, curator of Chinese and Asian Art at the Peabody Essex Museum. *A Thousand Graces: Freer’s Pilgrimage to the Buddhist Cave Temples at Longmen and his Collection of Chinese Art* drew an audience of more than 190 people to the DIA and more than 100 to the Freer House reception where traditional Chinese music was performed and guests viewed a new exhibit on Freer and China. Freer House members, Ed and Jeanette Sui were the event program hosts. Sponsors included the Center for Chinese Studies at U-M, the Detroit Creative Corridor Center, the Americana Foundation, the Confucius Institutes of both U-M and WSU, the Asian & Islamic Art Forum/DIA, Blossoms of Birmingham, and UBS Financial Services.

On Japan Culture Day (Nov. 3), the Freer House held a special event to welcome the new Consul General of Japan, Dr. Kazuyuki Katayama, and his wife to Detroit. Over 50 invited guests from the Japan Business Society of Detroit and various academic and cultural organizations feted Dr. Katayama with a reception and program highlighting the historical and cultural links between the Freer House, Detroit and Japan. The event, co-sponsored by the Japan America Society, included a special exhibit on Freer and Japan.

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**Save the Date**

**May 4, 2014, 2:00pm**

*In Attendance to the Realm: the Kano School of Painters in 17 & 18th Century Japan*

Presentation by Yukio Lippit, PhD, Harris K. Weston Associate Professor of the Humanities Dept. of History of Art & Architecture, Harvard University

For more information visit: mpsi.wayne.edu
Encouraging Therapy for Children after Trauma

What if your organization offered free therapy to children who have been sexually abused, but only about 20% of the 1,600 cases you saw each year took advantage of it? That conundrum faces Kids-TALK Children’s Advocacy Center, a beautiful, child-friendly building in Midtown Detroit where professionals conduct forensic interviews into child abuse, neglect and trauma. About 56,000 instances of child sexual abuse are reported in the U.S. each year. Detroit cases are nearly double the national average.

Kids-TALK’s primary goal is to ensure that forensic interviews with alleged victims are thorough, fair and non-traumatizing. The program has expanded to offer therapy services to help children and non-offending family members heal. Victims of child sexual abuse are vulnerable to substance abuse, mood disorders, domestic violence, re-victimization and other mental health and behavioral problems that often persist into adulthood. Early intervention can prevent these problems, but barriers like transportation, shame, stigma and stress may keep families from seeking help.

A Partner at MPSI

Research is not typically a part of Child Advocacy Centers (CACs), but Detroit’s Kids-TALK is committed to being a national leader. They sought a university partner to design and promote best practices for the research and didn’t need to look far. MPSI faculty member Dr. Valerie Simon, is an expert on the psychological and social effects of child sexual abuse – and her office is literally across the street.

Today, the project “Strengthening Mental Health Utilization to Reduce the Negative Consequences of Child Sexual Abuse” is well underway, with Dr. Simon’s team collecting data on about 100 families to determine whether and why they seek therapy. The goal is to identify barriers that can be modified to allow effective therapeutic interventions. Dr. Simon also hopes that giving families information about potential child mental health concerns will itself encourage them to seek treatment. After the forensic interview at Kids-TALK, families are offered an assessment of the child’s mental health and abuse reactions. Parents who agree visit MPSI for a 2-hour appointment, followed by two more assessments throughout the year and four brief phone check-ins.

Challenges abound.

Dr. Simon and her team work hard to make the visits convenient by offering cab service, gas cards, and a variety of appointment times. Still many families need to schedule and re-schedule several times before making it to an appointment. “This is a particularly stressful time for these families,” Dr. Simon said. “Those that do make it in are not unaffected by the abuse, but they are resourceful. About half are already in or seeking treatment. That statistic alone tells me they are not representative of all the families who come to Kids-TALK, which means we are missing a large portion who may be at equal or greater risk. And that is concerning.”

Profiling the Child’s Mental Health

The assessments compare the victimized child’s score of measures of sexual concerns, depression, self-esteem, and post-traumatic stress to those of other children of the same age and gender. Families can use where their child stands relative to others, express potential concerns, and consider options.

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About 56,000 instances of child sexual abuse are reported in the U.S. each year. Detroit cases are nearly double the national average.

If we can protect these children from serious problems... we have changed their lives for the better.”
– Dr. Simon
“Can I come back next year?”

That question was heard dozens of times as ninth and tenth graders exited Giant Step this year. Michigan’s longest-running teen conference celebrated 30 years of building teen harmony on Oct. 29, when a record 315 high school students set aside their differences to learn how to get along. Nearly 6,000 area teens have attended the free program from urban, suburban, public, private, charter, parochial, magnet and even home schools since it began.

Students check-in with their school then join a table with students they have never met. “They think they’re going to hang out with their friends,” said Trey Cassidy, head of the Upper School at University Liggett and a member of the Giant Step steering committee. “Instead they have to talk to strangers. That’s when it gets interesting.” Trained facilitators guide discussions on topics like bullying, friendship, disabilities, parents, and self-image. Student surveys consistently report that about 90% plan to stay in touch with the friends they meet there.

One ninth grade girl wrote, “At our table we noticed some differences. But most of us have more in common than we expected. We got to meet new people, state our opinions, and not feel judged. This was wonderful.”

For more about the Giant Step Teen Conference, contact Trudy Shiemke at 313-664-2527 or tshiemke@wayne.edu
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“We make no judgments,” said Dr. Simon. “We simply provide the assessments and feedback, allowing families to ask questions and come to their own conclusions about the next best step for them.” The team will then align the assessment data with the information on treatment to identify factors that predict who uses therapy services within a year of the Kids-TALK interview.

The response from families who agree to the assessments has been positive. Parents have been receptive and grateful for the information, telling team members they are thankful “for this beautiful program and opportunity,” and it made them feel “validated” and like “people care.”

National Impact

Are the families who choose to be assessed more likely to seek therapy? Data is still being collected and analyzed but one result is clear: Efforts to promote early intervention, including assessments, to a wide range of affected families must be quick, convenient, and not resource intensive. Ideally, Dr. Simon would like to create a very brief, trauma focused assessment that could be administered as part of the Kids-TALK interview process. “Kids-TALK staff are already very busy. So creating an assessment that reaches more families and doesn’t compete with their existing responsibilities is tricky,” Dr. Simon said.

These research results have large-scale potential, since rates of therapy use after abuse are low across the country. “Early intervention is critical, and effective therapies are available,” said Dr. Simon. “But few families make use of it. If we can protect these children from serious problems like post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and even suicide, we have changed their lives for the better.”

Merrill Palmer Alumni

If you’re in town and would like to revisit your old stomping grounds give us a call to schedule a tour.

Contact Kelly Cronin at: 313-664-2608 or kellycronin@wayne.edu.