

# PROMISING FUTURES

## Building Promising Futures for Every Child

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### Peter Szatmari to continue “Strong Leadership”

Dr. Szatmari has been re-appointed Director of the Offord Centre for a second 5-Year term.

That’s great news for the Offord Centre and for children around the world according to John Kelton, Dean and Vice-President of the Faculty of Health Sciences. “As a researcher of international renown and as an active clinician, Peter Szatmari has been providing leadership to McMaster’s Offord Centre through exemplary example,” he says, crediting Dr. Szatmari with leading a “strong team” and making a “significant contribution to improving children’s lives.”

Dr. Szatmari, a clinical psychiatrist, is acclaimed for his leadership in the study of autism including the Autism Genome Project (see related article page 3). He stepped in formally as Director of the Offord Centre in 2004 to continue the work of Dr. Dan Offord. Since then, Dr. Szatmari has enhanced both the size and stature of the Centre. It is a trusted source for evidence-based information where policy makers and program developers can turn. It is the only one of its kind in Canada and one of only a few in the world.

Dr. Szatmari’s dedication to helping children through true evidence-based knowledge and his clear skill at fostering collaborations around this common cause are at the root of the Offord Centre’s growing impact. “Too little is known about the factors that promote healthy child development and, moreover, what is known is not put into practice in family doctors’ offices, in schools or in communities,” says Dr. Szatmari. “Rigorous scientific knowledge, translated into practical solutions is crucial. Kids deserve more than someone’s opinions. They deserve facts that are meaningful and useful.”

When asked what skills he himself brings to the Offord Centre he is taciturn, but a very brief look at what has been accomplished during the last five years at the Offord Centre speaks volumes (see sidebar on page 2).

Dr. Szatmari is quick to credit Dr. Dan Offord’s vision for the Centre and the collegial effort that has built it to its present day profile. However, he fails to include his own exceptional leadership in that mix. That’s likely part of what makes him a highly successful leader and facilitator – beyond all else, it’s the children and the research carried out by Offord collaborators that matter.

Peter Szatmari’s commitment to optimizing the developmental health of children is unwavering and he plans on increasing the impact of the Offord Centre in the next five years. “Our potential is only beginning to be realized,” says Dr. Szatmari.



*Dr. Peter Szatmari reappointed Director of the Offord Centre*

The Offord Centre  
is Canada’s only  
Canadian research  
centre focused  
on healthy child  
development.



### 5 Years of Research, Growth, Impact

Under Peter Szatmari's leadership the Offord Centre has:

**Broadened its Focus:** Instead of looking only at children's emotional and behavioural *problems*, the Offord Centre expanded its mission to *enhancing the developmental health of children*. The Centre exists to optimize the emotional, social and cognitive development of children – everywhere.

**Recruited Many Talented Researchers:** Ten new Core Members and 14 new Associate Members from different faculties and disciplines have been recruited to the Centre. They work together as colleagues or co-investigators. This diverse expertise, united in common purpose is producing significant results. Offord Centre researchers are conducting international level research on these important themes:

- The early years and promoting school readiness
- Ensuring success of students in schools
- The role of neighbourhoods, schools and communities in promoting healthy development
- Prevention of domestic violence, childhood injury and maltreatment
- Promoting the mental health of children and youth
- Improving the healthy development of children and youth with developmental disabilities

**Increased Research Funding:** Greater collaboration and growing success has enhanced our ability to attract new research funding. Funding for Centre research projects has grown in the past five years, from approximately \$3.2 million annually to \$25.2 million. Funding has been obtained for a training program, two new endowed chairs and a professorship.

**Established/Increased Training for the Next Generation:** Under Dr. Szatmari the Centre is realizing the goal of training researchers who will embrace the Centre's mission and continue its work. The Offord Centre has increased the number of students enrolled in training from six to 25 and now has a training program for post-doctoral students.

**Spread Knowledge:** In 2006, the Offord Centre launched The Centre of Knowledge on Healthy Child Development, a plain-language website providing information based on the best scientific knowledge with emphasis on how it can be turned into practice by parents, teachers, physicians and other professionals. The website, and the information pamphlets offered by the Knowledge Centre have been exceptionally well received and widely distributed not only in Ontario but in Canada and indeed around the world.

### Michael Boyle recognized for Contribution to Psychiatric Epidemiology

Michael Boyle received the Alec Leighton Award from his peers from the Canadian Academy of Psychiatric Epidemiology and the Canadian Psychiatric Association this past September. The award recognizes an individual who has contributed significantly to advancing and diffusing Canadian psychiatric epidemiology through innovative studies, methods, teaching or transfer of knowledge. All of us at the Offord Centre will attest, Dr. Boyle excels at all of those things! Dr. Boyle is a long-term Core Member and is one of our most influential researchers and mentors. Congratulations from all of us at the Offord Centre.



EARLY DEVELOPMENT INSTRUMENT

### First International EDI Conference A Success

The Equity from the Start: 10 Years of EDI and Beyond International Conference held June 16-17, 2010 was a great success drawing 225 scholars and practitioners in the field of early child development from around the world. Sir Michael Marmot's thought provoking keynote address along with sessions by Fraser Mustard, Magdalena Janus and Clyde Hertzman are available for download at [www.offordcentre.com/conference/edi\\_video.html](http://www.offordcentre.com/conference/edi_video.html)

## “Corner Piece” of Autism Puzzle Found Autism Genome Project – Phase 2

Following on the breakthrough discovery of a single genetic variant in Phase 1 of the Autism Genome project, Phase 2 has revealed dozens more genetic variants linked to the disorder.

“It’s the corner piece of the autism puzzle” according to Peter Szatmari, Director of the Offord Centre and co-lead investigator along with Stephen Scherer at the Hospital for Sick Children. These remarkable findings, published in the journal *Nature*, will shift autism researchers’ understanding of the disease and likely speed up the pace of new discoveries.

Researchers previously believed that people with autism had the same variations in a few genes, but with the discovery of a large number of different genetic variants, patterns are emerging. Although the variants are different in each individual, they affect “common pathways” – that is these genes, although different, have a similar function. This opens up the possibility of developing therapies that target these pathways.

Another important finding of the Phase 2 research is that many of the genetic variants are not inherited but arise spontaneously. Although rare, these genetic variants account for up to 10% of autism cases. This means that for up to 10% of families we can now provide a possible reason why their child has autism. This has important genetic and family

counselling implications: families are likely to find out they have a *decreased risk* of having a second child with autism due to the spontaneous nature of the variant.

The Autism Genome Project is the largest of its kind involving 120 scientists and clinicians from more than 50 institutions in 12 countries and 1,500 families. Dr. Szatmari spent several years assembling the team of international researchers and negotiating the “playbook” that established the project. That alone was a noteworthy accomplishment. As a practicing child psychiatrist, his motivation was clear.

“When I meet families, they want answers to three questions,” says Dr. Szatmari. “What diagnosis does my child have, what caused it and what can be done about it?” He had no answers when he started in the field 30 years ago.

“Now I have the answer to the first one, the beginnings of an answer to number 2 and the start of an answer to number 3. We’ve found the corner piece of a puzzle with 1,000 pieces,” he says smiling. “The predicament for families is brighter as a result.”

Phase 3 of the Autism Genome project, when funded, will continue the work of identifying the gene variants that lead to autism.

## PreVAiL – Preventing Violence Across the Lifespan Research Network



*Dr. Harriet MacMillan, an Offord Centre Core Member, is a professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences, and Pediatrics at McMaster University. She is the inaugural holder of the David R. (Dan) Offord Chair in Child Studies.*

Dr. Harriet MacMillan and colleagues from around the world have launched PreVAiL, an international research

centre focused on interpersonal violence including child maltreatment and intimate partner violence. PreVAiL, which stands for Preventing Violence Across the Lifespan, will bring unprecedented collaboration to preventing these traumatic events and helping children, women and men who’ve experienced them. More than 50 researchers and partners from Canada, the US, the UK, Asia, Europe and Australia are involved.

In addition to prevention, PreVAiL will focus on:

- increasing the knowledge about the links between mental health issues and exposure to child maltreatment and intimate partner violence,
- examining the factors that promote resilience to this type of traumatic exposure, and

- ensuring that research findings reach those who make decisions in this area.

“Interpersonal violence including child maltreatment and intimate partner violence is a huge problem and not the focus of a lot of research,” notes Dr. MacMillan who is the nominated principal investigator of the centre funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research’s Institute for Gender and Health. “Even if you look at the research being done, it doesn’t tend to be on intervention” she adds.

“As a practicing psychiatrist and pediatrician, I see children and families where violence has occurred and we don’t know a lot about how to prevent that,” acknowledges Dr. MacMillan. “Interpersonal problems, like other health issues, should have responses based on evidence. We need to make this a priority,” asserts Dr. MacMillan. With the launch of PreVAiL, and the collaboration of such a large international team, Dr. MacMillan and her co-investigators are making that a reality.

*To learn more please visit: [www.prevailresearch.ca](http://www.prevailresearch.ca)*





Dr. Kathy Georgiades

## “Rising Star” Researcher Examines Challenges of Immigrant Children

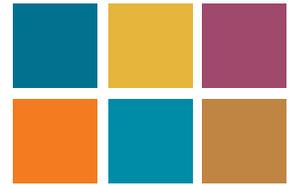
When we last wrote about Kathy Georgiades in January 2008, she was in the midst of a feasibility project studying school children in heavily concentrated immigrant neighbourhoods. Now, with a full scale research project funded by the Canadian Institute of Health Research, this new investigator is delving deeper into the developmental health of immigrant children.

“Canada prides itself on its cultural diversity, yet very little is known about the challenges immigrant children face,” said Dr. Peter Szatmari, Director of the Offord Centre, explaining the importance of Dr. Georgiades’ work. “Kathy is tackling that challenge with a sophistication and rigour unparalleled anywhere in the world.”

The project will include 1,300 Hamilton students attending 36 schools in grades 5 – 8 and compare the academic, interpersonal and emotional/behavioural functioning of first, second or third+ generation immigrant children. “We really want to study children in their own neighbourhood, school and family,” explains Dr. Georgiades. These “contextual factors” may help to explain why some children fare better or worse than others. That knowledge is key to developing programs that will help these children meet their full potential.

Dr. Georgiades came to the Offord Centre as a post-doctoral fellow in 2004, working under the supervision of Michael Boyle. She is now a Core Member of the Offord Centre as well as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neuroscience at McMaster University. What makes her a “rising star of international calibre” according to Dr. Szatmari, is “her ability to see the big picture, her sensitivity to the details and her ability to communicate complex ideas precisely.” Some of those skills were innate and some were developed as a result of Offord Centre mentoring.

“That mentoring was invaluable,” says Dr. Georgiades. “It expanded my research skills and broadened my view of the factors that impact mental health.” As the recipient of an Early Researcher Award from the Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation, Dr. Georgiades has begun to build her own research team of graduate students, post-doctoral fellows and research associates. This “rising star” in children’s developmental health research is now a mentor to the next generation of researchers, and that’s good news for children everywhere.



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## Making A Difference New Educators Guide to Child and Youth Mental Health

Are you a teacher or educator?  
If so, Making a Difference has been developed to help you identify and support the 1 in 5 students with mental health needs in the school setting. This free guide, based on research from the Offord Centre, is available for download at [www.cymhin.ca](http://www.cymhin.ca)

## We’re Leading The Search...

...for solutions that enhance the emotional, social and cognitive development of children,  
**BUT WE NEED YOUR HELP.**

Your investment allows us to engage in promising new research, transfer evidence-based knowledge to communities and support the work of emerging scientists, things not generally covered by research grants.

To learn more or make a donation please visit [www.offordcentre.com](http://www.offordcentre.com)