

# PROMISING FUTURES

## Building Promising Futures for Every Child

S p r i n g 2 0 1 1



### How are they Faring?

A Finnish-Canadian Consortium checks as tiniest babies reach adulthood

Roughly thirty years ago, medical advances made it possible for extremely low birth weight (ELBW) babies to survive.

As the first of these surviving babies reach into adulthood, a Canadian-Finnish Consortium will study the mental health and other challenges they face as adults. The Offord Centre's Louis Schmidt who is a developmental psychologist, will lead the Canadian portion of the CIHR-funded study.



set of stressors – romantic relationships, career attainment goals and financial responsibilities,” explains Dr. Schmidt.

The Canadian team will examine them now to see if their incidence of mental health problems or signs of future mental health problems and illness is indeed increasing versus a control group. At the same time, the Finnish team will be

examining common themes in a group of 493 Finnish young adults born at very low birth weights (less than 1,500 grams).

“It is presumed that the developing brains of extremely low birth weight babies are affected in such a way that it sets in motion a cascade of events that may affect these babies for life,” explains Dr. Schmidt. The Offord Centre's Michael Boyle, and Peter Szatmari are involved in the study along with McMaster University's Saroj Saigal and Katherine Morrison.

This project continues the extensive study of 166 ELBW babies who were born between 1977 and 1982 at weights less than 1,000 grams started and followed longitudinally by Dr. Saigal. When examined eight years ago by Dr. Schmidt, these then young adults were starting to show risk factors for depression and anxiety.

“These babies are now in their late 20's and early 30's and experiencing a new

### Benefits of International Collaboration

The joint Canadian-Finnish study not only makes it possible to study a larger sample group, but it allows researchers to study cross-cultural similarities and differences.

“An international collaboration helps researchers get a feel of what is happening as it is generalized across nations,” suggests Dr. Schmidt. “It helps us answer questions such as, are we seeing the same things? How ingrained are the biological factors? Are differences culturally specific? These are the rich questions that can be asked as a result of international collaborations.”

The Offord Centre  
is Canada's only  
research centre  
focused exclusively  
on healthy child  
development and  
mental health.



## New Offord Centre Members



### **Khrista Boylan** **Exploring links between defiance and depression**

Khrista Boylan is a Child Psychiatrist in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences at McMaster University who is working to understand the link between

oppositional behaviours and mental health problems in children and teens, especially depression and anxiety.

Children go through stages when defiance, stubbornness, temper tantrums, provocative or argumentative behaviour become more common, usually around ages three or four and again in the early teen years. For some children the problem is so severe it becomes oppositional defiant disorder.

When help is sought, conventional treatment is delivered via behavioural therapy for the parents. It's an approach that emphasizes the importance of structure, consistency, making positive time together and other strategies for parenting these kids.

"What if the root of the problem is depression?" asks Dr. Boylan. "Then shouldn't the child be treated for that? Depression or anxiety is common in these children. The issue is that we don't know whether it is a reaction to or a cause of their oppositional behaviour." These questions help illustrate why Dr. Boylan is looking closely to see if these children can be grouped in ways that would ultimately impact their care.

By grouping children with oppositional behaviour Dr. Boylan is learning whether certain subgroups of these oppositional kids are at greater risk for mood disorders in adolescence, what risk factors might help predict which ones, and currently, whether some of these struggling and impaired children might benefit from different treatment options.



### **Christine Wekerle** **Examining Teen Dating Violence**

Teen dating violence isn't something parents or teens really talk about, but it exists. In the US, population studies show that about 10% of high school students report being physically

hurt "on purpose" by their boyfriend or girlfriend. Canadian research suggests that dating violence is higher among adolescents receiving services from Ontario Children's Aid Societies than would be expected from such population studies. Christine Wekerle, Associate Professor, Pediatrics at McMaster University (PhD in clinical psychology) is working to understand why.

"Part of the issue may be novelty and inexperience in romantic and close relationships," notes Dr. Wekerle.

"Inexperience does not always work in a youth's favour. This is particularly true if the youth experienced maltreatment while growing up, setting up an unhealthy idea and skill set for how intimacy works."

"If children's experience of violence is in the past, why do these kids continue to have issues today?" asks Dr. Wekerle. Her findings suggest that post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) are a factor that links past violence to teen dating violence and other health-compromising behaviours, such as substance abuse and risky sexual practices. "If past experiences are getting in the way of learning alternate, new ways of relating, how can we better help youth and prevent violence?"

Dr. Wekerle's current work is an extension of her Maltreatment and Adolescent Pathways (MAP)\* Longitudinal Study, which tracked teens aged 14-17 who were receiving services from the child protection system (Ontario Children's Aid Societies) over two to three years to determine their health and wellbeing.

"Very little research exists on child-welfare children in the world, and it doesn't typically look at teenagers," explains Dr. Wekerle. "These transitional years seem particularly important as these kids are being moved away from protective services, but there is virtually no research on kids exiting the system in Canada. For some of these adolescents, the government is their parent, and we don't know how they are doing." That is a situation Christine Wekerle is working to change.

\* The Offord Centre's Michael Boyle and Harriet MacMillan were also part of the MAP research team.

## Where are they now? Offord Centre Postdoctoral Graduates



### Jessie Miller

Today Jessie Miller uses the skills developed as a postdoctoral student at the Offord Centre in her role as Research Director at Pearson Clinical Assessment, Canada. It's a company that educators and clinicians turn to for tests used to

assess ability, behaviour, achievement, personality, speech and language, and physical, cognitive and emotional development.

"So much of my background is useful in my job," says Dr. Miller. She did her postdoctoral work in the measurement and assessment of eating disorders in children and youth. Now she works to develop increasingly effective assessment tools for Canadian children, adults and seniors.

"My postdoctoral work was the most valuable thing I did," notes Dr. Miller. "Primarily it was because of the close work with my advisor, Michael Boyle, who spent hours helping me through the grant proposal process." Devoting the time needed to co-write and teach a student to build a strong research grant proposal is an extremely generous thing for an advisor to do. The result: successful first-round funding of Dr. Miller's initial research submission by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the most prestigious funding source for scientists in Canada.

"Overall the Offord Centre offered great professional development," says Dr. Miller. Now, thanks to her "second mentor," Dr. Peter Szatmari, Dr. Miller was recently offered the opportunity to return to academia. In addition to her role at Pearson, Dr. Miller has accepted a part-time faculty appointment at McMaster University in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences.



### Melanie Dirks

Melanie Dirks was the Offord Centre's first Lawson Postdoctoral Student and she believes that experience positioned her for her new role, as Assistant Professor of Psychology at McGill University.

Dr. Dirks reiterates Jessie Miller's praise for Michael Boyle. "He is a great scientist and a wonderful person," says Dr. Dirks. "He taught me a lot about measurement and how to write a grant. Writing a proposal that is compelling to a funding agency is a very separate skill and graduate school doesn't prepare you for that. Without funding, the science simply doesn't get done. It is essential."

Even more remarkable to Dr. Dirks was that Michael Boyle worked on her proposal, for her project rather than the other way around. They continue to work together on the study that resulted from that proposal, which is assessing how children's emotional problems are related to how they react when other kids are mean to them, and why they react this way.

---

**"Without funding, the science simply doesn't get done. It is essential."**

---

In addition to her faculty duties, Dr. Dirks is now studying children's friendships in grades 4 – 6, and how children manage key situations in friendships and how that contributes to the quality of their friendships over time.



### Caroline Parkin

Caroline Parkin is now with the Ministry of Education in the Special Education Policy and Programs Branch, where she is working on a range of initiatives that support special education programs and services for students with special education

needs. Currently her work relates to the implementation of full-day kindergarten and inter-ministerial work that supports students with mental health and addiction issues.

Dr. Parkin can't say enough about the year she spent at the Offord Centre as the third Lawson Fellow. What stands out was the breadth of opportunity that came with her Offord Centre experience, and how it provided her with a foundation for the work that she is doing today.

Not only did Caroline Parkin benefit from working with her advisor, Offord Centre member Scott Davies who holds the Ontario Research Chair in Educational Achievement and At Risk Children, but also from the multiple interactions she had with other Offord Centre Members. "That was essential," says Dr. Parkin. "It allows you to take the specific work you are doing, broaden it and see it from a range of perspectives. In the end you learn so much and it really enriches your work on many levels."

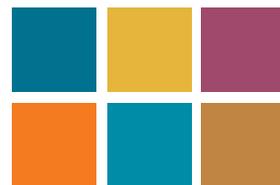
*Continued on back*

## Where are they now?

### Offord Centre Postdoctoral Graduates *(continued from pg 3)*

"They encouraged me to take advantage of every opportunity to learn that came along. I was exposed to so many great experiences," notes Dr. Parkin. While at the Offord Centre she worked on a systematic review of depression prevention programs in schools and a school-based mental health study with Offord Center Members Jean Clinton and Kathy Georgiades, and

other partners in the research community. These experiences set the stage for her secondment to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, followed by her current position with the Ministry of Education. Now Dr. Parkin is helping to put research knowledge into practice at the government level for the benefit of Ontario school children.



**Offord** CENTRE FOR CHILD STUDIES

Chedoke Site  
Patterson Building  
1280 Main Street West  
Hamilton, Ontario  
Canada L8S 4K1

T 905-521-2100  
ext. 77358  
F 905-574-6665

1-888-541-KIDS  
[www.offordcentre.com](http://www.offordcentre.com)



McMaster  
Children's Hospital



## PROMISING FUTURES

Promising Futures is moving toward an electronic format.

To receive your copy please sign up at: [www.offordcentre.com](http://www.offordcentre.com)

## 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 and do things that aren't generally covered by research grants such as fund student training opportunities and present the annual Fraser Mustard/Dan Offord Lecture on Early Child Development. Your gifts also enable us to update websites and transfer evidence-based knowledge for use where it will benefit children most.

Please visit [www.offordcentre.com](http://www.offordcentre.com) to support our work.



We asked...

## What is the value of the Offord Centre?

"The Centre offers tremendous value. We're like-minded people interested in children's mental health working under one umbrella, but we are different enough to push each other to answer very tough questions. Given the complex nature of childhood behavioural disorders, such a Centre is necessary. That interaction between basic and clinical scientists, researchers and scholars sheds light on complex problems and that helps us establish and translate new knowledge affecting children."

Louis Schmidt