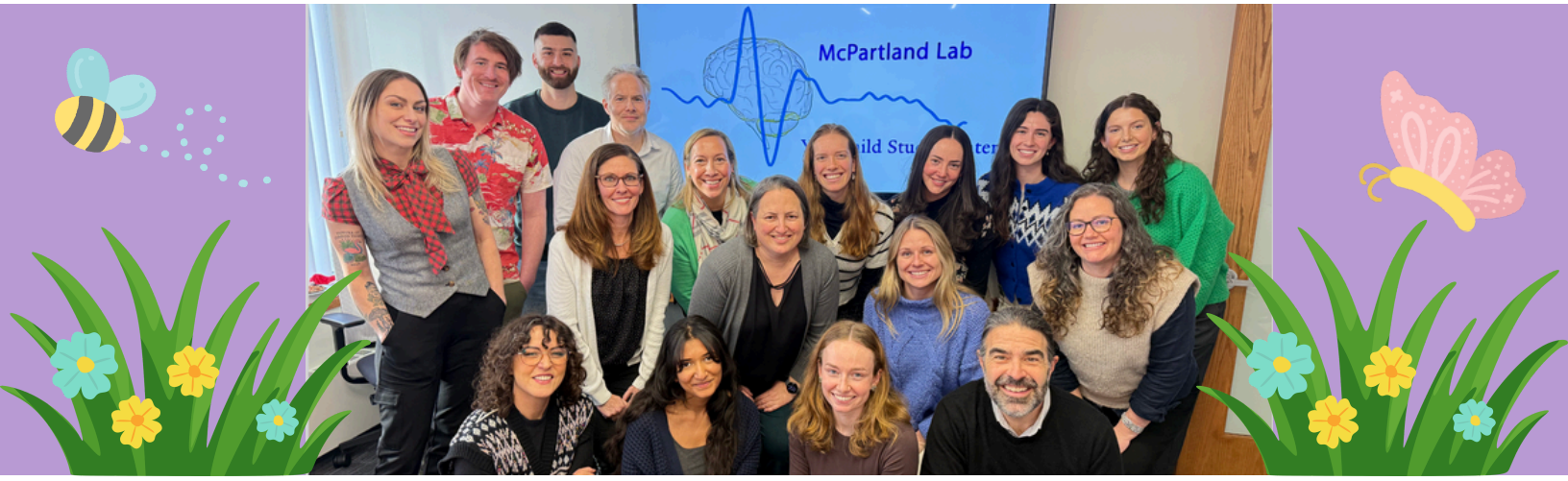
McPartland Lab

SPRING NEWSLETTER



DIRECTOR'S WELCOME

Dear McPartland Lab community,

Spring is one of my favorite times in New England. After a harsh winter, I love seeing the landscape green, and I enjoy that it is easier to be outside in the warmer weather. Keep an eye out, you might see me on New Haven roads biking to the lab! In this issue of our newsletter, you will meet some of our team members and learn about some research we have recently published in a scientific journal. You will also read about one of the personal highlights of my 20 years of doing autism research at Yale - two autism-friendly basketball games we co-sponsored with Yale Athletics. It was fun to see many of you there, and we'll hope to see even more of you at future sensory-friendly events we are planning. We also highlight the Social Chase in this issue. The group is one of our most valued community partners, and we have learned so much over the years from its leadership. We are grateful to have attended their first gala! Our resident psychologist and BCBA offers some tips for managing sensory sensitivities, and we describe an ongoing study that we hope you will spread the word about. There are many opportunities for individuals with autism and intellectual disability to participate in research now, so we hope to meet many new members of the autism and intellectual disability communities. Please keep in touch! Let us know how we can support you and what you would like to see in this newsletter!

In gratitude,
Jamie McPartland

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MEET THE LAB!: EMMA ROBERTSON



Introduce yourself! What is your role at Yale?
Hi everyone! My name is Emma, and I am a first-year Sparrow Fellow from West River, Maryland. I graduated from Smith College in May 2025 with a B.A. in Neuroscience, alongside a minor in Education and Child Study and a concentration in Community Engagement and Social Change. My favorite part of this job is welcoming participants of all ages into the lab and seeing them make connections while engaging in meaningful research. It reminds me of when I was a little kid and dreamed of becoming a scientist! When I am not in the lab, I love going on outdoor adventures, trying local sweet treats, and having game nights with friends.

What did you do before you joined the McPartland Lab?
Throughout college, I was involved in a variety of research opportunities exploring the role of early life environments and experiences on behavioral and cognitive development. I worked for a trauma research lab at McLean Hospital, where I learned about therapeutic interventions for adults with trauma-related disorders. I also became a research assistant and recruitment coordinator for the CANDLab at Yale, helping with a study in 6-17 year olds about the impact of controllable stress exposure on the brain and behavior. At Smith, I spent a semester researching the role of interventions for early life adversity and self-harm in youth. Outside of research, I was also part of a team that facilitated science-forward activities with learners of all ages to increase access and entry, particularly for historically marginalized groups.

What made you interested in working in this field?
I've always been drawn to working with people, particularly children and teens. This especially took root in 7th grade when I choreographed and performed a dance routine with Mark, a boy who had down syndrome and autism, for our middle school talent show. Seeing his face light up at our rehearsals and on stage for the final performance helped me see the importance of cultivating connections across individuals with different capabilities. This inspired me to play unified sports in high school and work as a camp counselor at an adaptive summer camp for 6-21 year-olds in college. Now, I'm interested in channeling my affinity for people into a career in child and adolescent psychology so I can help more youth feel emboldened to dream big, just like Mark did.

AUTISM AWARENESS BASKETBALL GAME IN COLLABORATION WITH YALE ATHLETICS



This winter, the McPartland Lab collaborated with Yale Athletics to plan two sensory-friendly, inclusive basketball games! Oftentimes, the noise and crowds of sports games can be overstimulating, which can cause a lot of stress for autistic sports fans. To make sure everyone had fun at these games, we set up a sensory-friendly room with fidgets, comfortable seating, low noise levels, and a muted livestream of the basketball game, creating a safe and relaxing space for our autistic attendees to enjoy if they pleased. We also made sure to hand out noise-canceling headphones for our autistic crowd members!





Our first sensory-friendly game was January 24, when Yale's women's basketball team faced off against the University of Pennsylvania. Although UPenn won, Yale's men's basketball had a comeback during the second sensory-friendly game on February 21st, when we beat UPenn!

We want to extend a huge thank you to Yale Athletics and everyone who was able to attend! Stay tuned for future collaborations!

MEET THE LAB!
LIZ BAKER



Introduce yourself! What is your role at Yale?
Hello! My name is Liz Baker, and I am a clinical psychologist and an Assistant Professor of Child Psychology at Yale Child Study Center. As part of the McPartland Lab, I work with autistic individuals and their families to conduct autism assessments for research studies. I also complete multidisciplinary diagnostic evaluations through the Developmental Disabilities Clinic and conduct comprehensive psychoeducational evaluations in the Psychological Assessment Service. I am deeply committed to making the assessment process as clear, respectful, and supportive as possible. My goal is to help children, teens, and adults better understand their strengths and needs, answer their questions, and leave with practical, accessible recommendations.

What did you do before you joined the McPartland Lab?
My interest in autism and neurodevelopment began in college at UCLA, where I worked in a neuroscience lab using scientific tools to better understand brain development and support positive outcomes. I continued this work in graduate school at the University of California, Riverside, where I earned my Ph.D. in Education with a specialization in School Psychology. My research and clinical work have focused on understanding social development, everyday skills, and how to adapt assessment and intervention approaches in different cultural contexts. My knowledge of special education helps me guide families as they navigate school services, advocate for their children, and access meaningful supports and accommodations.

What made you interested in working in this field?
Working alongside neurodiverse individuals and families has always been very personal to me. I have a sister with an intellectual disability, and growing up with her has shaped how I understand disability, advocacy, and support. This perspective strongly informs my work. I strive to approach every family with empathy, respect, and the belief that individual differences should be celebrated and supported.

RECENT DISCOVERY

Longitudinal relationships between social anhedonia and internalizing symptoms in autistic children: results from the Autism Biomarkers Consortium for Clinical Trials

Click here to read the full article!

Social anhedonia is the reduced enjoyment of social interaction, which can lead to increased internalizing symptoms, such as depression and anxiety. Because many autistic youths experience social anhedonia and other co-occurring psychiatric symptoms at higher rates than non-autistic children, this study measured the relationship between social anhedonia and internalizing over the course of 6 months. Researchers analyzed parent report surveys completed 3 times throughout the duration of the study that assessed their autistic child's levels of social anhedonia, depression, and social anxiety. The findings confirmed that many autistic children consistently experienced increased social anhedonia and that there was a relationship between social anhedonia and internalizing symptoms. Specifically, greater social anhedonia was associated with greater social anxiety and depression, whereas lower social anhedonia was associated with increased ADHD symptoms. Notably, depression was the only internalizing symptom that was continuously associated with social anhedonia throughout the full 6 months. This relationship shows the importance of further researching social anhedonia in autistic children and the extent to which it may be used to help identify children who are at greater risk of developing co-occurring depression. Overall, we may understand social anhedonia and the nuances of social motivation in autistic children better if future research avenues are dedicated to assessing these symptoms in this population.

Read more summaries of recent discoveries on our website under Publications, Article Summaries!

IN THE COMMUNITY:
THE SOCIAL CHASE FOUNDATION

About the Social Chase

Across the U.S., families of students with special needs face a daunting challenge known as the "special education cliff," a term that describes the abrupt termination of educational and social services when these students age out of the public school system. This transition often leaves young adults without meaningful support and parents scrambling to secure services that are fragmented, underfunded, or altogether unavailable. In addition, there are not many social activities for teenagers after school or on the weekend unless it is a sport or playing video games.

The Social Chase Mission

The Social Chase creates an inclusive support network for neurodivergent late teens to adults–especially those who are underserved or uninformed– through sponsored social activities, advocacy, resource access, and collaboration with like-minded organizations. Every event celebrates the uniqueness of our members and fosters lasting connections.

Ongoing Events and Activities:

- Bi-weekly Virtual Bingo Nights with Prizes
- Cooking Classes
- Self-Defense Workshops
- Movie Outings & Board Game Nights
- Pottery & Art Classes
- Overnight Independent Living Retreats
- Brass City Raceway Visits
- Bowling Adventures
- Trampoline Park Rentals
- Bus Trips to Broadway and Dinner

Save the Dates

5th Annual FREE Autism Education and Awareness Forum
Saturday, April 18, 2026
Waterbury Arts Magnet School

2nd Annual Gala Fundraiser
Thursday, October 22, 2026
La Bella Vista, Waterbury
Sponsors Welcomed!






- Learn more about our 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization at thesocialchase.org
- Subscribe to our newsletter: https://thesocialchase.org/newsletter/
- Become a Social Chaser! Join our private Facebook Group to stay up to date on upcoming events: https://www.facebook.com/groups/socialchase

THE SOCIAL CHASE GALA

In November, our 'In The Community' partner, the Social Chase Foundation, hosted their very first Gala Concert Fundraiser for their organization! This event highlighted the foundation, raised money towards their goals, lifted up various community members and 'Social Chasers', and brought individuals, families, and supporters in the autism community together.



At the gala, guests enjoyed a wonderful dinner, the opportunity to bid on auctioned goods, and a chance to socialize and dance with other attendees. Additionally, the foundation's founder and president, Helen Taylor, delivered special remarks and presented awards to the Social Chase Award Winners.



The McPartland Lab sponsored a table at the gala, showing support for the foundation and its mission. Three of our first-year fellows represented the McPartland Lab by attending as guests! It was a special night full of celebration, community, and advocacy. Our lab looks forward to supporting and attending future Social Chase Galas!



Check out these pictures from the event!

PROJECT SPOTLIGHT: SPOKEN LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES IN AUTISM

by Dr. Brianna Cairney

In our Fall 2025 newsletter, Dr. Julie Wolf wrote about the importance of recognizing that the autism experience is different from person to person. This is true for the different ways autistic people communicate, including speech, sign language, AAC devices, and nonverbal signals. Today's Study Spotlight focuses on autistic adults who communicate with spoken language.

Some autistic speakers can sound very detailed during conversations. This might be because the autistic person is talking about something they are very knowledgeable about or because they use rare words that occur less frequently in day-to-day conversations. Dr. Bri Cairney was interested in this, which sparked a new project using audio recordings from autistic and non-autistic adults telling a story from a wordless picture book. She is measuring different features of speech, including the number of words produced, the use of common versus rare words, and lexical diversity. Lexical diversity is a proportion of the number of unique words a person says divided by their total number of words. A higher score indicates a wider range of vocabulary and greater complexity.

Even though non-autistic speakers produced more words overall, the groups did not differ in terms of their vocabulary range or complexity. In fact, autistic speakers produced a greater number of rare words than non-autistic speakers, but this difference was not statistically significant. She also found that autistic speakers were more precise in their storybook descriptions than non-autistic speakers. One interpretation is that autistic speakers were detail-oriented and usually did not add information to the story that was not explicitly pictured while non-autistic speakers shared additional things they inferred from the illustrations. Notably, there was a greater difference in how much autistic speakers varied from one another in their storytelling than there was among non-autistic speakers.

This study demonstrates some cool features of autism while affirming that autistic people vary from one another in their experiences, interests, and ways of communicating.

STUDY SPOTLIGHT: PROFOUND AUTISM STUDY

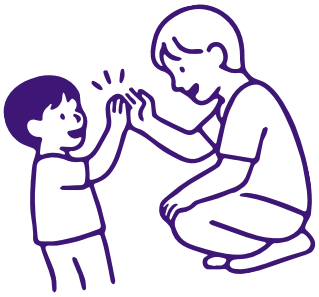
BY JENNA MCCLELLAND

What is the Profound Autism Study?

As highlighted in previous editions of our newsletter, researchers have recognized that autistic individuals who also have intellectual disability (ID) are rarely studied in autism neuroscience research. Because experimental procedures can be physically and cognitively demanding, it can sometimes be challenging for this population to participate in research studies. Historically, many labs have not been equipped with the proper resources, protocols, or training to ease these obstacles. To address this, the field has emphasized inclusion of this population in autism research by reframing understanding of this subgroup of autistic people and introducing the term 'profound autism'. This term describes individuals with autism and co-occurring ID that have very low IQ scores and generally require higher support needs. A goal of the McPartland Lab is to create experimental procedures that are accessible to people with profound autism.

What is the goal of this study?

We are conducting a study in our lab that focuses on the development of specialized study procedures to address some of the challenges that commonly arise for individuals with profound autism. These specialized procedures include a customized room with the option for individualized accommodations, more extensive training and clinical resources, and an emphasis on cooperation and communication with participants and their families. Thus far, these changes have made it easier for participants and their families to understand our research goals and acclimate to our lab environment. Our efforts have made it possible for more participants to successfully participate in research visits. We look forward to building on this inclusive research in the future!



Interested in participating?
Contact us at 203-737-3439
or autism@yale.edu

Who is eligible to participate in this study?

As we continue this study, we ask for your help. If you have a child between the ages of 3 to 17 with an IQ below 60 (with or without autism), we encourage you to consider partnering with us in this important research! Our team of scientists and clinicians work hard to prioritize the comfort of participants in this study and will work together with you and your child to understand how to support them best, in addition to providing a clinical evaluation and financial compensation up to $300 for participation in this study. We hope that our efforts encourage a new era of autism research in individuals with autism and intellectual disability.

SENSORY SENSITIVITIES IN AUTISM & RESOURCES TO SUPPORT THEM

BY CHRISTINE CUKAR-CAPIZZI

Autistic individuals commonly experience sensory sensitivities, which may include heightened or reduced responses to sensory inputs from their environment. Some autistic people may react too strongly or not strongly enough to things they see, hear, touch, smell, or taste. For example, they might not seem to notice pain or temperature changes, get upset by certain sounds or textures, smell or touch things frequently, or be very interested in lights or moving objects.

Autistic individuals may benefit from modifications to their environment to help better deal with sensory issues, including:

1. **Earplugs or Noise-Canceling Headphones:** These can help block out loud or annoying noises.

2. **Soft, Comfortable Clothing:** Wearing clothes made from soft materials and removing tags can make a big difference in how comfortable clothing feels.

3. **Sunglasses or Hats:** These can help if bright lights are bothersome.

4. **Weighted Blankets or Vests:** These can provide a calming effect and help with feeling more secure.

5. **Fidget Tools:** Having small objects to touch or squeeze can help with the need to feel different textures.

6. **Quiet Spaces:** Having a calm, quiet place to go can help when things feel too overwhelming.

7. **Communication:** Let others know about sensory sensitivities in case they are able to make changes, such as adjusting lights or sounds.

In the next section, we'll introduce some ways to improve sensory sensitivity challenges.



Some autistic individuals may want to improve their ability to tolerate different sensations. Here are some strategies that may be helpful:

1. **Gradual Exposure:** Start with tolerating the sensory sensitivity for a brief amount of time and slowly increase the time you spend with it. This can help you get used to it bit by bit.

2. **Deep Breathing:** Practice taking deep, slow breaths to help calm down when something sensory-related is overwhelming.

3. **Sensory Breaks:** Take short breaks when things feel too overwhelming. This can help you reset and feel better.

4. **Mindfulness:** Focus on what you are feeling and try to stay calm. Notice the sensations without getting upset.

5. **Therapy:** Work with a therapist who can create a plan to help you handle sensory issues. They can teach you special techniques and activities to make the sensory sensations more tolerable.

6. **Positive Reinforcement:** Reward yourself for handling a sensory challenge well. This can encourage you to keep trying.

7. **Protective Gear:** Use items like earplugs or sunglasses when you need them and gradually use them less as you get more comfortable.

Conclusion

Sensory sensitivities can have a big impact on the daily experiences of autistic people; understanding and dealing with sensory sensitivities can make many situations more enjoyable. With ongoing support and tailored interventions, sensory sensitivities can become more manageable, leading to a more accommodating world for those with autism. By making changes to their surroundings and using strategies to manage sensory issues, autistic individuals can feel more comfortable, engage more fully in daily activities, and navigate their surroundings in ways that work for them.



AUTISM INSIGHTS: A Q&A SERIES WITH DR. JAMES MCPARTLAND

scan the QR codes or click the labels to access each of the three interviews!

Part 1
Historical Context, Treatment, Prevalence, and Limitations

Part 2
The Promise & Future Direction of Research at Yale

Part 3
Honoring Differences and Centering Autistic Perspectives

Dr. McPartland spoke with Crista Marchesseault, director of communications at Yale Child Study Center, in a three-part Q&A series covering what we know about autism–from the earliest classification of it in 1943, to how the diagnostic label has changed throughout editions of the DSM. Dr. McPartland explained scientists and clinicians' evolving understanding of autism and how it has been shaped by promising findings at Yale and other research universities, as well as advocacy from the growing neurodiversity community. He shared more about the promise of the biomarker research he is leading–in other words, his efforts to identify objective, biological measures of autism to help inform clinicians in diagnosis and intervention. Through the effort and care put forth by clinicians, researchers, family members and autistic self-advocates, Dr. McPartland spoke on how the autism community is making strides towards understanding autism and improving the quality of life for autistic people and their loved ones.

IMPACT STUDY SPOTLIGHT

The IMPACT study is a research project that looks at how mental health changes over time in people with and without psychiatric conditions. It collects different types of information, including health records, interviews, self-reported symptoms, and simple tasks on an iPad that measure thinking and behavior.

Participants take part in both in-person and remote activities, like phone interviews and smartphone tasks, over about two years. By combining all this information, researchers hope to better understand how mood and symptoms change over time.

The goal is to improve mental health care, reduce stigma, and create more personalized treatments.

Interested in participating?
Contact us at 203-737-3439 or autism@yale.edu

FUN SPRING ACTIVITIES IN CONNECTICUT!

Family Friendly Outdoor Activities!

Adventure Park Experience

Spring Hours: Fri, Sat, Sun!
4450 Park Ave, Bridgeport CT
More information

Wicked Tulips Flower Farm

382 Route 64, Preston CT
More Information

Events at Flamig Farm

7 days/week from 9:00-5:00
6 Progress Dr., Cromwell, CT
More Information

While waiting for weather to warm up, visit an indoor attraction with your family!

CT Museum List:

- ***Peabody Museum***
  - New Haven, CT
- ***The Maritime Aquarium***
  - Norwalk, CT
- ***KidCity Children's Museum***
  - Middletown, CT
- ***Yale Art Gallery***
  - New Haven, CT

Sensory Friendly Events:

- **Sensory Friendly Playtime**
  - Kidsplay Museum
  - 61 Main St., Torrington, CT
  - May 22nd
  - More info here!
- **Sensory Friendly Day**
  - Connecticut Science Center
  - 250 Columbus Blvd., Hartford, CT
  - June 7th
  - More info here!

Connecticut Beardsley Zoo

Check out the only zoo in Connecticut for some family fun!

Open 9:00am-4:00pm Daily

1875 Noble Avenue
Bridgeport, CT 06610-1646

Ticket Info - Here!

Farmer's Markets

- **Wooster Square Farmer's Market**
  - opens early April - Sundays 9am-1pm
- **Connecticut Regional Market, Hartford**
  - Saturdays & Sundays 6-9am
- **Wallingford Garden Market**
  - opens in May - Saturdays 10am-1pm
- **Guilford Fairgrounds**
  - opens in May - Thursdays 4-7pm

Click here or scan the QR code for more CT events!!

THE MCPARTLAND LAB

2ND ANNUAL

AUTISM COMMUNITY DAY

– SAVE THE DATE –

August 29, 2026 | 11 - 2 p.m.

Edward S. Harkness Memorial Hall
367 Cedar St, New Haven, CT 06510

FREE & FUN!

FOOD Provided

WE CAN'T WAIT TO SEE YOU!



OUTDOOR AND INDOOR ACTIVITIES FOR KIDS, TEENS, AND ADULTS

McPartland Lab
Yale Child Study Center

CONTACT US WITH ANY QUESTIONS!

AUTISM@YALE.EDU 203-737-3439

LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR LAB!

- Click or scan each QR code below -



CHECK OUT OUR WEBSITE!

INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING? FILL OUT THIS FORM!



READ ABOUT OUR LAB'S COLLABORATIVE EXCELLENCE EFFORTS!

KEEP IN TOUCH!

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@J_McPartland

Instagram
@mcpartland.lab

Facebook
Yale Autism Program

Bluesky
@j-mcpartland.bsky.social

203-737-3439 • autism@yale.edu • mcp-lab.org

DISCLAIMER

In this newsletter, we use the terms autism, autistic, and on the spectrum to respect different preferences for how people like to talk about autism (Taboas & Zimmerman, 2023). It is our hope that all readers feel included and welcomed in our community through this writing.