

INSAR STUDENT & TRAINEE NEWSLETTER

Ninth Edition

Winter 2018

Always wanted a mentor in the field of autism research? INSAR can connect you!

In 2018, the International Society for Autism Research (INSAR) Early Career Committee (ECC) launched a **Mentoring Initiative** with the objective of building a tiered mentorship infrastructure within INSAR. Their goal is to identify mentors, established senior autism researchers, for early career members who wish to have more mentorship in the field. Early career members will in turn mentor a student or trainee. Ten early career mentees were selected from around the world to work with Drs. Cathy Lord, Connie Kasari, Geri Dawson, David Mandell, Aubyn Stahmer, Lauren Brookman-Frazee, David Amaral, Sally Ozonoff, Tony Charman, and Helen Tager-Flusberg. Sixteen student/trainees were selected (10 work with the early career mentees and 6 receive mentorship from the ECC officers). Mentors and mentees are paired for one year and meet at least once per quarter to work on a permanent product (e.g., manuscript, grant, job application, etc.).



Mentor-mentee meeting at the 2018 INSAR meeting in Rotterdam

The Mentoring Initiative is strongly aligned with the Strategic Initiatives of INSAR:

- **Setting the Bar:** Increase the quality of research promoted through its annual meeting, journal, and other activities.
- **Interdisciplinary and Translational:** Cultivate interdisciplinary and translational research, public-private partnerships, and relationships with industry.
- **Diverse and Global:** Increasingly represent and serve a diverse and global community.
- **Next Generation:** Foster opportunities for leadership and career development for the next generation of ASD researchers.
- **Building Identity:** Promote INSAR as the premier society for autism researchers.
- **Research to Practice:** Disseminate science-based knowledge to inform research priorities, public policy, professional practice, and public understanding.

- Jill Locke

INSAR Early Career Committee Member, University of Washington, USA

How to disseminate to an audience of people on the spectrum and their loved ones?

As researchers, we usually feel comfortable with explaining our work to other researchers. We have to adjust our language, presentation style, and means of disseminating (orally and written) and communicating our findings when communicating with a lay audience. To help us do that, we asked some experts in the field about their advice for student and trainee researchers and clinicians, and here's what they said:

- **Think about your words:** Consider using identity-first language (i.e. "an autistic adult") or neutral phrases (i.e., "person on the autism spectrum"), rather than person-first language (i.e. "person with autism"). Use strength-based language and concepts (i.e. condition rather than disorder or characteristics rather than symptoms). For further suggestions, see: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1362361315588200>.
- **Shorten your content:** What does your audience want to know? Spend time thinking about your main message: two or three brief sentences that capture your findings and their importance (immediate and practical implications). If possible, use an infographic or diagram to represent your findings or the nature of the problem. These sentences or this infographic become(s) the core of your dissemination. Only include other information that directly relates to this core.
- **Practical tips:** Avoid blocks of text and busy backgrounds. Instead, use a clear structure (i.e., informative headings, Q&A format), be specific and concrete, use active tense and simple vocabulary (or if a simpler term reduces precision, offer the precise term followed by a clear definition) and offer multiple formats (low contrast, if possible).
- **Test your content:** If possible, collaborate with adults on the spectrum to ensure that your materials are respectful, accessible, and relevant. Offer autistic adults opportunities to co-author or co-present the information. If they are not available to you, check with your partner, kids, family members to make sure your message is understandable, clear and compelling.
- **Show your personality on social media:** If you like social media, allow others to see the human behind the science. Twitter is a great way to engage people on the spectrum, and people with an opinion and personality are more likeable than a link to a piece of content (i.e., share a video of yourself talking about your work, comment on and share others' content). Think collaboration instead of personal gain.
- **Learn on the job:** Don't worry if you don't get it right. Be humble and responsive to feedback (so ask for feedback!) from the community. Be upfront about your mistakes and what you are doing to rectify them.

Tip: Have you heard about the journal Autism in Adulthood? This innovative journal integrates the contributions of adults on the spectrum - as Editorial Board members, authors, peer-reviewers, and readers - into the peer-reviewed literature.

Special thanks to: Christina Nicolaidis (MD, MPH), Dora Raymaker (PhD), James Cusack (MA, PhD) and Rebecca Sterry from Autistica, and David Mandell (ScD) for their valuable input.

Student & Trainee Spotlight



Elena Serena Piccardi is a 3rd year PhD student and graduate teaching assistant at Birbeck, University of London

Q: Briefly, tell us about your research

A: The overarching goal of my research is to characterize how early sensory information sampling mechanisms

unfold over time. I want to understand which factors determine contextual and individual differences in reactivity to and seeking of sensory stimulation in typically developing infants and infants at familial risk for Autism Spectrum Disorders and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Further, I am interested in understanding the impact of early sensory atypicality on children's social development. To this goal, I am assessing the longitudinal relationships between early neural markers of sensory processing (in the visual, auditory and tactile modalities), parent questionnaires and clinical tools. I hope this investigation will yield insight into the developmental origins of the disorders, contemporarily informing optimal time frames and target areas for intervention.

Q: If you had to describe yourself in three words, it would be...

A: Persistent, conscientiousness, generous

Q: What are your future career goals/plans?

A: My future career goal is to become an independent investigator, educator and mentor. Upon completion of my doctoral studies, I want to continue investigating early trajectories of development in typical and atypical populations. I want to integrate into my research as many experimental and observational tools as possible, in order to achieve the necessary level of complexity to study developmental processes. Further, I want to continue teaching and mentoring students, with the hope of nurturing curious and inquisitive minds. In so doing, I want to provide them with a research environment that is as mentally stimulating and enriched as the Centre for Brain and Cognitive Development has been for me.

Q: What is a challenge you've faced in your research, and how have you overcome that?

A: The main challenge I have faced in my research is coping with change. From the planning to the executive phase (and even more so the - not yet reached for me - conclusive phase) of doctoral research, several changes happen and adapting to those can be emotionally taxing. The path undertaken during doctoral research is rarely linear and can involve multiple "twists and turns", leaving a sense of confusion. Sharing these feelings with other doctoral and early career researchers helps. Further, learning to slow pace when necessary is a critical skill.

Want to see your work here?

The Student & Trainee Committee strives to highlight the innovative and significant contributions of students and trainees involved in autism research. The selection of our Student & Trainee spotlight is determined based on blinded submissions to the INSAR website and judged by the committee on clarity, significance, and diversity.

Are you conducting research right now that you would like to share with the INSAR community? **Check your email for the submission opportunity for our next newsletter!** This is your chance to let us know about the exciting work you are contributing to the autism research community.

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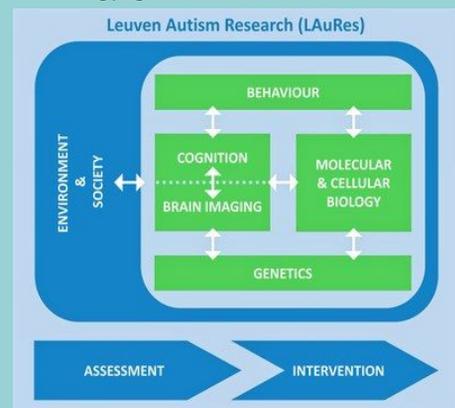
Research Corner

All over the world, autism research is being conducted, and we believe it is important to know who is doing what, where, and how. That is why, in each new newsletter edition, we would like to put a research group, lab or consortium in the spotlight. We hope that this information will lead to (inter)national collaborations, research stays, sharing of methods and data, and more internationalization of PhD and postdoc positions, all in light of INSAR's strategic initiative to make the research field more diverse and global.

This edition's pick:

LAuRes, University of Leuven (KU Leuven), Belgium

The Leuven Autism Research Consortium (LAuRes) unites a diverse set of research groups from the University of Leuven (KU Leuven). The main goal of LAuRes is to promote and engage in contemporary research on the fundamental and clinical underpinnings of autism spectrum disorder. It thereby incorporates research with topics related to the behavioral phenotype, cognition, brain imaging, molecular and cellular biology, genetics and environment.



Research at LAuRes is characterized by an interdisciplinary approach. LAuRes encompasses both fundamental and applied research in ASD. The former is focused on unravelling the complex interplay between our different research domains from behavior to genetics and vice versa in interaction with the environment. The latter generally aims at developing and evaluating assessment instruments and intervention strategies.

On their website (www.laures.be) they provide you with a general overview of (1) their ongoing and finished projects, (2) the LAuRes members, and (3) their collaborations.

Sparked your interest? Sure, it did! There might be a future PhD opening, postdoc position, or collaboration in it for you, so be sure to check their website!

RENEW YOUR INSAR STUDENT MEMBERSHIP

In order to continue receiving all membership benefits, including this newsletter, renew your membership before the end of the year! Find full membership information online at www.AUTISM-INSAR.org

Please send any questions to: studentcommittee@autism-insar.org

Want to be a part of the Student & Trainee Committee?

The Student & Trainee Committee is dedicated to providing our students and trainees with opportunities for professional development. Are you committed to serving our research community and have ideas for how to do this? We need dedicated members to help fulfill our mission. **Check your email for an upcoming call for new members!**