



Dr. Judy Miles (right) poses with Thompson Center Research Core staff members at the 2023 Thompson Center Spring Research Symposium

DISCOVERY

Spring 2023 Research Newsletter

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Autism & Neurodevelopment
University of Missouri

RAYS: Examining the Experiences of Autistic Adolescents & Young Adults

Individuals often begin to drink alcohol during adolescence and early adulthood. But how does this phase of life unfold for autistic teens and young adults compared with their neurotypical peers?

One study at the Thompson Center for Autism & Neurodevelopment at the University of Missouri is focused on investigating the coming of age of autistic teens, particularly in terms of substance use, mental health, and socialization.

This study is an outgrowth of the Rhode Island Consortium for Autism Research and Treatment (RI-CART), which was funded by the Simons Foundation Autism Research Initiative (SFARI) and led by Dr. Stephen Sheinkopf, prior to his role as executive director of the Thompson Center. The RI-CART Adolescent-Young Adult Study (RAYS) is now a collaborative effort between the Thompson Center and Brown University and is funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). RAYS launched in 2021 and is jointly directed by Dr. Sheinkopf, Dr. Christina Jackson from Brown University's Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies, and Dr. Anthony Spirito, an expert in adolescent mental health at Brown University's Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior.

RAYS is following individuals ages 12-24 years using an accelerated longitudinal design. To do so, each participant is studied for a three-year period. Then, advanced research methods are used to compile the data and derive a pattern of what development trends look like across the full age range. RAYS is conducted 100% online using annual surveys that ask questions about the participant's social environment, mental health, and alcohol and drug use.

The information collected in this study will help researchers begin to understand ways that alcohol use and experiences in autistic young adulthood are similar to or different from that of their typically developing peers, an area that has been the subject of very

few studies in the past. Further analysis and data collection could identify additional variables that may be indicators of risk for drug or alcohol abuse or mental health problems, specifically for young adults with autism.

More than 120 autistic teens and young adults have participated in the RAYS project so far, with more than 30% enrolling through the Thompson Center. RAYS will be accepting new study participants through 2024. Eligible adolescents and young adults with a professional autism diagnosis can earn up to \$395 for completing the study and their parent or caregiver can earn up to \$225. Learn more about getting involved in this study and others at thompsoncenter.missouri.edu/autism-research/join-a-study/.

Spring Research Symposium

The Thompson Center hosted its Spring Research Symposium at the NextGen Precision Health Building in March. Speakers were Drs. Sofia Lizarraga (Brown University) and Evdokia Anagnostou (University of Toronto). A special presentation honored Dr. Judy Miles for her many years of dedication to autism research and programming in Missouri.



A graduate student asks Dr. Anagnostou (right) a question after her presentation

Thompson Center Researchers On The Go

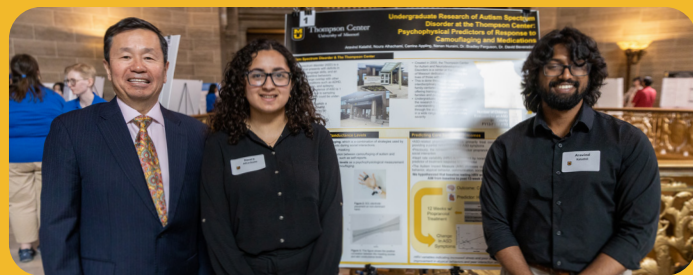
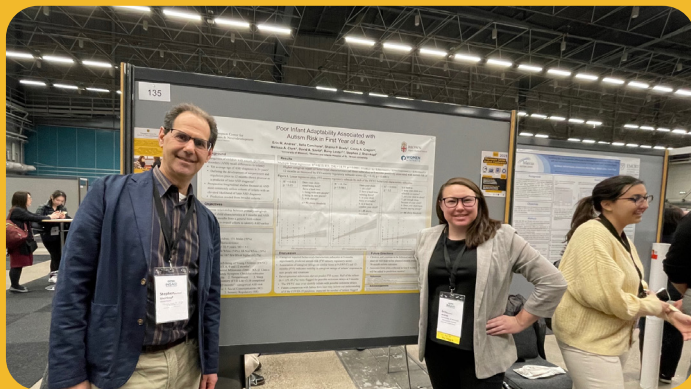


Top Left: Several Thompson Center researchers attended the International Society for Autism Research (INSAR) Annual Meeting in Stockholm, Sweden in May, including Research Core staff members Julie Muckerman (left) and Samantha Hunter (right).

Top Right: Research Core Manager Nicole Takahashi (left) and Dr. Kerri Nowell (right) explored Stockholm between sessions.

Bottom Left: Dr. Sheinkopf (left) and postdoctoral researcher Erin Andres (right) were among the Thompson Center representatives to present at the INSAR meeting.

Bottom Right: Undergraduate researchers Noura Alhachami (center) Avarind Kalathil (right) posed with MU President Mun Choi (left) at the University of Missouri's annual Undergraduate Research Day at the Missouri State Capitol.



Join A Study

Biomarker Study

In this study we will gather additional information on subpopulations of autism spectrum disorder as identified by the sponsor. We want to learn more about autism spectrum disorder by identifying subgroups of patients with autism based on biomarkers. Biomarkers are also known as “biological signs” that can be linked to a condition and how it progresses.

- Eligibility: Adolescents and adults ages 12-65 with an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis may be eligible. A care/study partner, such as a parent or spouse, will also be required.
- Time required: One visit lasting approximately three hours
- Location: Thompson Center
- Monetary compensation: \$100 per completed visit, meal voucher, and travel compensation



Thompson Center Research Publications

Scan for a full list of recent publications with DOI links

Early Years

The goal of this research study is to learn about how behaviors observed in newborns relate to meeting developmental milestones during the first years of life.

- Eligibility: Expectant parents age 18+
- Time required: Participants will submit newborn cry recordings and complete online surveys about baby's development through age 3
- Location: Online surveys, some families will be invited to the Thompson Center
- Monetary Compensation: up to \$265

Learn about all of our current recruitment opportunities by visiting <https://thompsoncenter.missouri.edu/autism-research/join-a-study/>.



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