



# WISCONSIN TWIN RESEARCH

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

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Waisman Center  
Arizona State University  
Medical College of Wisconsin

**Feature Articles:**

- ◆ Research with Twins and the Autism Spectrum
- ◆ Twins and Cultural Diversity
- ◆ The Social World of Twins
- ◆ Interesting Twin Facts
- ◆ Meet Dr. Carol Van Hulle, Assistant Scientist
- ◆ Congratulations to recent graduates!

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## Research with Twins and the Autism Spectrum

*Shaun Schweigert, Professional Research Staff*

How common is it for one twin to be autistic? How common is it for *both* twins to be autistic? Is autism heritable? Does it often co-occur with other diagnoses? Such questions are prevalent throughout the autism community, and we hope to address them in our five-year project studying autism in twins, which is funded by the National Institute of Health.

### ***What is the UW Twin Autism Research Project?***

Our project is a division of the Wisconsin Twin Project that focuses on studying autism in twins. The principal investigators of the project are Dr. Hill Goldsmith and Dr. Morton Gernsbacher, both of whom have a professional and personal interest in autism, including understanding the wide range of autistic abilities. We estimate that in Wisconsin as many as 140 pairs of twins under the age of 21 have one or both twins with a diagnosis on the autism spectrum (autism, PDD-NOS, Asperger's). Since our study is population-based, our goal is to identify and enroll all such twin pairs in Wisconsin, both identical and fraternal. Thus far, we have identified 117 families and have enrolled over 70 families in our project.

### ***What does participation involve?***

The first phase involves a phone interview concerning the twins' developmental and medical history and usually takes about 45-60 minutes. We enroll families in a telephone interview when one twin has a community diagnosis or a suspected diagnosis. We have enrolled twins as young as 14 months and as old as 21 years. Families are compensated \$25 for participation in the telephone interview. Over 70 families have enrolled!

The second phase involves a home visit with an experienced team of graduate students who lead the twins in 2-3 hours of activities on two different days, on weekdays or weekends. The activities are tailored to the twins' ability and speech level and are not intended to be stressful. They are simply ways for us to learn more about the twins. Families are compensated \$300 for participation in the home visit. Over 46 families have participated in the home visit!

### ***What types of children have been visited?***

We highly value all of the twins who participate and enjoy interacting with every single one. We have visited twins who vary across many domains, such as speech, language, motor skills, and other related areas. We appreciate the uniqueness of all twins, and we strive to incorporate their strengths and interests to make the visits enjoyable.

### ***Can I find out more information before deciding to participate?***

Please call or send us an email, and we will send you a packet of information about the project with no pressure to participate. After reading the information, you can decide whether it is something that you and your family might be interested in doing. Agreeing to do the telephone interview does not oblige you to participate in the home visit. Each phase has a separate consent form, so you can choose to discontinue participation at any point.

For more information about our autism research for yourself, a friend, or family member, please contact us or pass on our information to anyone who might be interested. Thank you!

**For more information,  
call (608) 262-5574 or email  
saschweigert@wisc.edu**

## Twins and Cultural Diversity



We are encouraged by your enthusiastic response to the last newsletter's call for families with twins who have ethnic-minority heritage. More families can still become involved! We are committed to having a culturally representative group of families participating in all of our research. We are hoping to increase participation among families of ethnic-minority descent including African American, American Indian, Asian, Hispanic and other families of twins with diverse backgrounds. Families may be paid for their participation, depending on the project. Spanish speaking staff is available if needed. If you or a family you know may be interested in learning more about this research opportunity, please call us toll-free at (866) 230-2560 or email [kpmarceau@wisc.edu](mailto:kpmarceau@wisc.edu)



## The Social Worlds of Twins<sup>1</sup>

For twins, typical development and simply growing up is altered in very specific ways when compared with "single-born" children. Twins must compete for resources and attention, both within the home and in their larger social worlds. Typically, twins have a slightly different relationship with their parents when compared with single-born children. The amount of social attention can influence differences in children, depending on the situation and the temperament of the twin and his or her co-twin.

What is special about the social worlds of twins? Do twins experience differences in social development? According to a recent study, young twins form social relationships in different ways when compared to single-born children (Thorpe and Danby 2006). For example, twenty percent of twins report their co-

twin being their only friend (most often with identical twins). Interestingly, the number of friends shared was closely related to zygosity. More specifically, the study concluded that identical twins were more likely than other twins to share most or all of their friends; fraternal twins of the same gender shared many of the same friends, and opposite-sex fraternal twins had the fewest friends in common.

Because children's early friendships are often predictive of later achievements in life, many twin researchers are interested in social development. According to one study, twins are more likely to have higher levels of social competence than single-born children of the same age (Pulkkinen et al, 2003). According to Thorpe and Danby (2006), this increased social competence makes sense; after all, from day one, twins must learn to compromise and consider another person's perspective.



To further inform parents, schools and other organizations, researchers who study twins encourage more large-scale studies that employ multiple research techniques and follow the same children over many years. This is exactly what the Wisconsin Twin Project is doing, and we are hopeful that our work and the generosity of the families of Wisconsin twins will provide a rich understanding of twin social worlds. Thanks to all of our participating families!

<sup>1</sup> Article adapted from Thorpe, K., & Danby, S. (2006). Compromised or Competent: Analyzing Twin Children's Social Worlds. *Twin Research and Human Genetics*, 9(1), 90-174.

<sup>2</sup> Pulkkinen, L., Vaalamo, I., Hietala, R., Kaprio, J., & Rose, R. J. (2003). Peer reports of adaptive behaviour in twins and singletons: Is twinship a risk or an advantage? *Twin Research*, 6, 106-118.

## Interesting Twin Facts

- **8.6 ounces at birth:** Smallest twin born in Chicago in 2004, Rumaisa Rahman (CBS News. 8 February, 2005)
- **Twins Born Farthest Apart:** Peggy Lynn of Pennsylvania delivered her twins 84 days apart in 1996 (Segal, 1999)
- **60 years:** The age of the oldest mother of twins, Frieda Birnbaum of New Jersey in 2007 (CBS News. 24 May, 2007)
- **Nigeria holds the World Record in Multiple Births.**

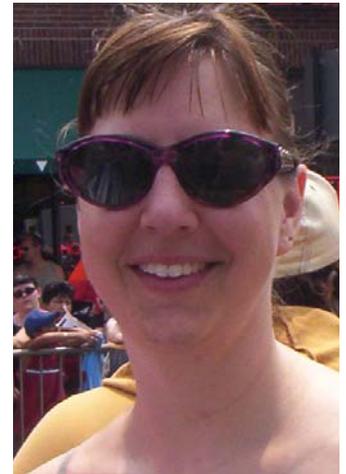
## Introducing Dr. Carol Van Hulle, Assistant Scientist

WTP would like to extend a warm welcome to our newest research team member **CAROL VAN HULLE**, Ph.D., Assistant Scientist. Carol joined us in September 2007. Carol worked with the Wisconsin Twin Center as a post-doctorate fellow 2001-2005. After working at University of Chicago, she has returned to our team because she missed Wisconsin!

Carol's degrees include a BA in Psychology and a BA in Math, both from Augsburg College in Minnesota, and an MA and a Ph.D. in Behavioral Genetics from the University of Colorado.

Carol has published more than twenty-five articles and presented at eleven professional conferences on issues related to temperament, emotion regulation, genetics, and child development in general. We're happy to have her expertise at such an exciting time on the project.

Carol is originally from Minneapolis. During her free time, she hangs out with her husband Kevin and their two cats Mimsi and GoGo. She also enjoys reading, cooking, and eating!



## Congratulations to the recent graduates on our project!

Each year, approximately 50 talented undergraduate students work on our research projects. Most of these students work with us for two or three years, so working in our lab is often a large part of their UW experience and contributes to their plans for graduate school and long-term career goals. The project recently celebrated another cohort of graduating seniors who have begun other exciting work.



◆ **DEBRA BOELDT** worked with us for three semesters coding medical information concerning twin pregnancies. After graduating in 2004, Deb worked for three years as a research assistant at the University of Chicago Preschool Project. This fall she began graduate school for clinical psychology at the University of Colorado- Boulder.



◆ **JILLIAN DEGROOT** (*pictured*) worked on the project for five semesters and coded the win/lose games during the two-year visits. After graduating in 2005, Jillian was accepted into the clinical Ph.D. program at the University of Connecticut.



◆ **CHRISTINE HANSON** (*pictured*) worked with us for nearly three years on our home visit team and coded videotaped behaviors for a senior honors thesis concerning child empathy. She began her graduate studies at Ohio State University this fall. She is pursuing a Ph.D. in Child Clinical Psychology.



◆ **KATHLEEN LACCI** worked for over a year on the project coding videos from the 6- and 12-month visits, and was a child tester for the 36-month visits. After graduating in 2006, she began the Physician's Assistant Masters program at Yale.



◆ **JULIA RAO** (*pictured*) worked with us for nearly three years coding storytelling behavior from videotapes. Julia has accepted a full-time professional research position examining language development at the University of Chicago.



◆ **LESLIE STRUM** (*pictured*) worked for two years coding videos from two-year visits and child testing for the 36-month visits. This fall Leslie began the Masters of Social Work program at the University of Minnesota- Twin Cities.



◆ **PAM WITMER** worked with us for one and a half years on our home visit and telephone interview team. She was accepted in the highly competitive *Teach for America* program. Pam is working in Atlanta's public schools with elementary students.



◆ **MITCH ZIEMKE** (*pictured*) worked with us for three and a half years on our home visit team and wrote a senior honors thesis concerning bullying behavior. He began graduate studies at the University of Alabama this fall, pursuing a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology with an emphasis on forensic psychology.



Thank you for participating in our telephone interviews, questionnaires, and home visits! Your rich parental perspective is invaluable to our work and we have enjoyed meeting so many wonderful families. Your participation contributes to advances in child development research and improves our understanding of individual differences and the complexities of personality and behavior.

Enjoy your twins and have a wonderful fall season!

Moving? Want to know more about how to get involved? Contact us now!

 Toll free phone: (866) 230-2560

 Email: [wisconsintwins@waisman.wisc.edu](mailto:wisconsintwins@waisman.wisc.edu)  
<http://psych.wisc.edu/wtp>

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