

Pitt Parents & Children Laboratory inspires student toward career in policy, psychology

Part of a series profiling undergraduate researchers provided by University of Pittsburgh Office of the Provost.

By Niki Kapsambelis

In Daniel Shaw's Parents and Children Laboratory, there are so many undergraduate psychology students, it's rare that he is able to find the time to mentor an honors thesis project. But for Leighann Starkey, he made an exception.

Starkey, a senior specializing in developmental psychology, has assumed responsibility for a job normally reserved for graduate students.

As part of Shaw's team, she has played an instrumental role in co-leading assessments of subjects in the Pitt Early Steps project, which studies how well home-based therapeutic interventions help young children who are at risk for early behavior problems. Shaw has been so impressed with her abilities in the lab that Starkey will be trained to lead assessments of a related study beginning this fall.

"She's not afraid; she's intellectually very strong," says Shaw, a professor in the Department of Psychology. "She is very free to think outside the box; she's intellectually very curious ... a very quick study."

Starkey, who began working on the team during her sophomore year, has gone into the families' homes around Pittsburgh and filmed the children as they participate in a series of structured tasks with their parents and members of the assessment team. She also records what happens when the parents take part in less structured tasks, such as preparing a meal or playing a game. When therapists go to the house to hold sessions with the parents, the sessions are likewise recorded. Similar information is being gathered at the projects' other sites in Oregon and Virginia.

Back in the lab, Starkey and other members of her team review the films and track the interaction through a coding system Starkey and Shaw developed. They look to see whether the parents pay attention to the children and vice versa, as measured by factors such as eye contact, posture, and verbal exchanges. The study looks at child and parent factors at age 2 that predict whether children pay more attention to their parents at age 3, and whether the level of attention predicts the children's adjustment at age 4.

Shaw believes Starkey will be able to publish her findings.

"It's unusual, but not unheard of" for an undergraduate to publish, he adds. "We're

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— Dr. Daniel Shaw, a professor in the Department of Psychology, on Pitt student Leighann Starkey

giving her all kinds of responsibility. Very few undergraduate students lead coding teams, and even fewer lead assessments."

For Starkey, the thesis is part of a greater plan to pursue a doctorate in developmental psychology and apply it toward policy issues affecting the very types of families with whom she is now working.

"I really love the job," she says. "I'm so glad I got involved in it. Sometimes it's really hard to see how some of these kids live. They have tough parent situations, they've been taken away from their parents or abused by other people. Some have very extreme behavior problems ... It really makes you very aware of what a lot of people have to go through in their lives."

Starkey, a native of York, Pennsylvania, was undeclared when she arrived at Pitt, attracted by the in-state tuition and the urban setting.

"I never thought grad school would be an option for me," she says. "I did not have any role models growing up who went to college, and certainly none who got a PhD."

The opportunity to work in Shaw's lab came up on the Psychology Department's Web site. Starkey, who was supporting herself with a job at the Eye and Ear Institute, liked the idea of getting a job that was more in line with her career objectives.

In addition to her coding work, Starkey is busy preparing for her GREs and narrowing down her list for grad school applications. She also continues to work with the families in the study. While some are in difficult situations, she finds others who are inspiring.

"We've got some really great parents," she says, and at the other end of the spectrum, she hopes the study will offer families some much-needed intervention. "We try to help. They might never be up to the standards of more privileged children, but hopefully we could make that a little better."



Dr. Daniel Shaw and undergraduate researcher Leighann Starkey investigate therapeutic interventions to help behaviorally at-risk children in the psychology department's Parent & Child Project in the School of Arts & Sciences.

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