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.

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

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.

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

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