

As a doctoral student in clinical psychology at Queen's University I have many interests in research related to autism spectrum disorders (ASD), both in how it relates to my own research and my clinical work. I was very excited to attend the International Meeting for Autism Research in San Diego this year and was honoured to have received support from Autism Ontario which made it much more feasible for me to attend the conference. I was pleased to have the opportunity to hear about some of the newest findings in many disciplines.

At IMFAR this year I was able to learn about some new research in areas that I don't know much about. In particular, I attended a series of lectures in the area of epidemiology, during which I learned about several studies investigating risk of ASD based on maternal exposure to chemicals in the workplace during pregnancy, and living close to a highway (i.e., an area with more air pollution) during pregnancy and the first year of life. I also learned that maternal diabetes, hypertension, and obesity were associated with a higher risk of developmental problems, including ASD, in children born to these women.

There was also a group of presentations focusing on early markers of ASD as found in infants at-risk for ASD (i.e., siblings of children with ASD). These studies found that some behaviours or reactions to different scenarios are able to differentiate children who are later diagnosed with ASD from those who are not, as early as at 6 months of age. Although the predictive value of the behaviours tended to be more reliable and stable at about 12 months.

I learned about some innovative and interesting treatment programs at a series of talks describing findings from intervention studies, which will be very informative for my future clinical work with people with ASD. Several social skills programs, including PEERS, Social Cognition and Interaction Training in Autism (SCIT-A), a peer-mediated social skills program and a Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy approach to teaching social skills provided promising results. The children in these studies not only had more social skills, but many also had more friends, which was identified as a more important measure of the effect of a social skills training program. In addition, a few studies examined the effectiveness of parent-led interventions and parent training and found that parents can be very effective teachers to their children, particularly when they are well-trained.

My own research focuses on the experiences of parents of children with ASD and particularly on the differences between parents who use parent support groups and those who do not. I have finished collecting information for my study and analyzing my data, and I was pleased to be able to present my findings in a poster at IMFAR. I was able to speak to a number of researchers, parents and professionals about my findings.

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