

DR. MEGHAN SWANSON

Dr. Swanson is a first-generation college student and a developmental and cognitive neuroscientist. She received her PhD in Behavioral Neuroscience from the Graduate Center at the City University of New York, and completed postdoctoral training in neuroimaging and neurodevelopmental disorders at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research is supported by a NIH Pathway to Independence Award (NIH K99/R00) and a NIH R01.

In her research she investigates the neurobiology of early communication. Dr. Swanson's research focuses on developing infant models of language neurobiology. She also uses day-long home language recordings to study how infants and their parents communicate and how this early communication shapes brain development and later language skills. Using a multi-method approach - including neuroimaging, eye-tracking, cognitive assessments, and home language recordings- her work takes an integrated approach at fully characterizing the developing child. Dr. Swanson applies these approaches to studying infants who develop typically, as well as those with neurodevelopmental disorders, including autism spectrum disorder and fragile x syndrome. These findings serve as a platform to provide key insight into communication interventions for infants at increased likelihood for neurodevelopmental disorders.



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DR. CATHERINE LORD

Dr. Catherine Lord is the George Tarjan Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry in the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. She is a practicing clinical psychologist whose primary focus is autism and related disorders across the lifespan from toddlers through adulthood. Her research and clinical work are aimed at improving methods of identifying strengths and difficulties in individuals with possible ASD and working with families and individuals to maximize independence and well-being for all concerned.

This has involved the development of diagnostic instruments (the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule - ADOS, the Autism Diagnostic Interview-Revised - ADI-R, and the Social Communication Questionnaire-SCQ) that describe individual profiles of skills and weaknesses and carrying out longitudinal studies from age 15 months up to

30 years with the goal of identifying protective and risk factors that influence milestones of progress over the years. A current priority is to develop better ways of measuring changes in social behavior and communication over short periods of time that can be used to monitor progress without bias. Another priority has been to participate in large-scale studies where researchers share data about both behavior and neurobiology; this has included the Simons Simplex Collection (a genetics consortium led by geneticists and researchers through the Simons Foundation), ABIDE (an imaging open science group originated out of NYU), and the Healthy Brain Network through the Child Mind Institute as well as numerous clinical trials of different interventions.

She is also very interested in graduate training for psychologists and other clinical researchers in ASD and related fields. She is a member of the National Academy of Medicine and a fellow of the American Association of Arts and Sciences, as well as a former chair of a National Academy of Sciences committee on the effectiveness of early intervention in ASD, a co-chair of the New York Board of Health committee on

ASD and a member of the DSM 5 American Psychiatry Association's neurodevelopmental disorders committee. She is the recipient of numerous awards including the Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Society for Autism Research. She has over 300 referred journal publications and has been funded by NIH, Autism Speaks, and the Simons Foundation for numerous research grants.

Meet-the-Experts (MTE)

DR. SANDRA MAGANA

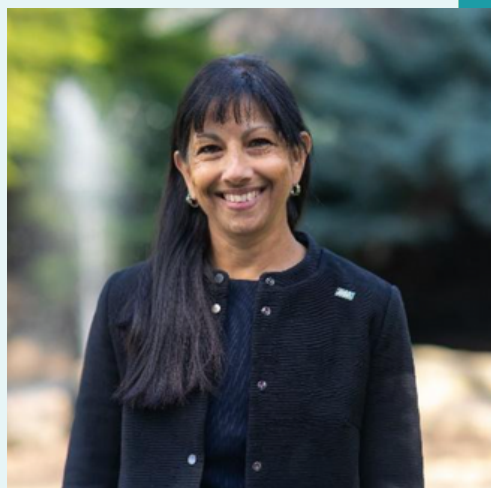
Dr. Sandra Magaña, PhD, MSW, holds the Professorship in Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disabilities at the Steve Hicks School of Social Work, University of Texas at Austin. She received a Master of Social Work from California State University, San Bernardino and her Ph.D. from the Heller Graduate School of Social Policy at Brandeis University. Magaña completed post-doctoral training from the NICHD funded Post-Doctoral Program in Developmental Disabilities Research at the Waisman Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison. She was a faculty member in the UW-Madison School of Social Work for 12 years and later served as a Professor at the Department of Disability and Human Development at the University of Illinois at Chicago. At SHSSW, Magaña is the Executive Director of the Texas Center for Disability Studies (TCDS) and Director of the Autism Consortium of Texas Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and other Related Disabilities (ACT LEND). Magaña's research focus is on the cultural context of families who care for persons with disabilities across the life course. Her current research includes investigating racial and ethnic disparities among children with autism and developmental disabilities and developing culturally relevant interventions to address these disparities. She has received funding for her research from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), National Institute on Aging (NIA), National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR). She is also involved in developing a program to train social work students how to work with people with developmental disabilities and their families, and in developing interdisciplinary student training programs.



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DR. CHERYL DISSANAYAKE

Professor Dissanayake AM, is the Founding Director and inaugural Chair of Australia's first research centre dedicated to autism: the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre established in 2008. She has been an autism researcher since 1984, when she began her PhD at Monash University. On completion she undertook a postdoctoral fellowship in the Sigman lab at UCLA, and has established and led an active research program since joining La Trobe University in 1996. In addition to her scholarly activities, Prof. Dissanayake was instrumental in bringing together Victorian and Australian autism researchers, and in 2011 co-founded the Australasian Society for Autism Research (2011), a member based society of which she was vice-President until 2020, when she was honored with a Lifetime Membership. She was on the bid team and was a Project Leader in the Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (2013-2021). Professor Dissanayake has been recognized as a Research Field Leader for four consecutive years by The Australian (2018-2021) and as one of nine Global Research Leaders in 2020. She was awarded an Order of Australia in 2022 and elected a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences, Australia. She was amongst the first ten scholars to be inaugurated as a Fellow of the International Society for Autism Research (INSAR) in 2018, and was elected vice-President of INSAR in 2019. She serves on the Senior Global Leaders Committee of INSAR, representing the Western Pacific region, and chairs its Fellows Committee.



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DR. BRIAN BOYD

Brian Boyd is the William C. Friday Distinguished Professor in Education in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH). Dr. Boyd is also a fellow at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute and investigator at the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities at UNC-CH. He was previously the Director of the Juniper Gardens Children's Project at the University of Kansas as well as an associate professor of occupational science and associate chair for research in the Department of Health Sciences at UNC-CH. His research has focused on the development and evaluation of outcome measures and evidence-based interventions for autistic children. Dr. Boyd is also quite engaged in research that involves the most vulnerable, and often marginalized, populations. As a special educator by training, much of his research has focused on intervention implementation within community-based settings, such as children's schools and homes. His more recent work has focused on how issues of implicit bias and race affect the outcomes of children with and without disabilities. Dr. Boyd's research has been continuously funded by federal agencies such as the Institute of Education Sciences and National Institutes of Health. Currently, he serves as Vice President of the International Society for Autism Research and Co-Editor of the Journal of Early Intervention. He also serves on multiple national boards that are dedicated to improving the outcomes of autistic persons and those from historically underserved communities.



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DR. SUE FLETCHER-WATSON

Dr. Fletcher-Watson first became interested in developmental disabilities, and autism in particular, through her work with the Oundle School Mencap Holiday, an organization she has been volunteering with since 1997 and of which she became a trustee from 2006-2016. She now continues this work as founder of SuperTroop, a charity providing residential holidays for children and young people with learning disabilities. As an undergraduate she studied Psychology at the University of St Andrews, and then went on to a Masters and PhD at Durham University, where she was supervised by Professor Sue Leekam. Her PhD research explored the spontaneous social attention preferences of autistic and non-autistic adults and adolescents, using a range of methods, including verbal descriptions, change blindness and eye-tracking. Since then Dr. Fletcher-Watson have worked under the mentorship of Professor Helen McConachie including a Nuffield Fellowship which funded the Click-East project. She was a Chancellor's Fellow at the University of Edinburgh based in the Patrick Wild Centre and in 2019 she moved into the role of Director of the Salvesen Mindroom Research Centre. She is a former trustee of Scottish Autism and working closely with this organization, and autistic-led organizations such as ARGH and AMASE, to inspire and contribute to high-quality, respectful, evidence-based practice in Scotland. Public engagement is very important to her and she tries to provide useful insights into research and accessible summaries of knotty academic issues in the DART blog.



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DR. TEAL BENEVIDES

Teal Benevides, PhD, MS, OTR/L, FAOTA is an occupational therapist, researcher, wife, and mother. Currently, she serves as an Associate Professor in the Institute of Public and Preventive Health, with a joint appointment in the Department of Occupational Therapy at Augusta University (AU). Dr. Benevides is committed to fostering access to services and supports for individuals on the autism spectrum, and working to achieve better health outcomes and participation in meaningful life activities in alignment with priorities identified by autistic people. Dr. Benevides has been continuously funded since 2017 from agencies including the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI). In her current work, Dr. Benevides aims to address the most pressing medical and mental health priorities faced by the autism community in collaboration with autistic partners. An extension of this work aims to understand and reduce disparities caused by social drivers of health.



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DR. NOAH SASSON

Dr. Noah Sasson studies intrinsic and extrinsic mechanisms of social disability in autism. Historically, his work focused on one intrinsic mechanism in particular, social cognition, which refers to the perception, processing, and interpretation of social information. More recently, his work is highlighting extrinsic mechanisms of social disability in autism, including the perceptions, biases, and behavior of non-autistic people that contribute to poor social and functional outcomes for autistic adults. Dr. Sasson earned his bachelor's degree in English Literature at Franklin and Marshall College and his PhD in Developmental Psychology at the University of North Carolina.



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