



Olga Tennison

AUTISM RESEARCH CENTRE

A U S T R A L I A

**WHO'S
WHO
@ OTARC
in 2011**



**LA TROBE
UNIVERSITY**

Our mission

The Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) was established to advance knowledge of the nature and causes of Autism Spectrum Disorders, as well as to develop and study evidence-based strategies for supporting children and families affected by Autism Spectrum Disorders.

Objectives

The objectives of OTARC are to

- facilitate large and/or ongoing research projects,
- facilitate collaboration with other research centres both nationally and internationally,
- foster and support a National Research Network,
- conduct campaigns to improve the public profile of autism research, thereby attracting additional research funds via grants and donations,
- provide opportunities for student based research and mentoring programs, and foster knowledge transfer to practitioners within the field.

Our Director of Research



Assoc. Prof Cheryl Dissanayake is Founder and Director of the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, and a Reader in developmental psychology in the School of Psychological Science. She has been an autism researcher since 1984, and has established and led an active research program in the School since she joined it in 1996. Her specific research interests lie in the very early development of ASDs, as well as in the social-cognitive and social-emotional development of affected children. She is currently involved in evaluating the Early Start Denver Model at the Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centre: The Margot Prior Wing at La Trobe University. Cheryl served on the

Professional Panel of Autism Victoria, and is co-founder and convenor of the Autism Spectrum Disorder Research Group. She is a Registered Psychologist in Australia, as well as a member of the: International Society for Autism Research; Society for Research in Child Development; Australasian Human Development Association; American Association for Psychological Science

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The Chair of the Advisory Committee



Professor Margot Prior is the Chair of the OTARC Advisory Committee, and the Patron of Autism Victoria. She is also an Adjunct Professor in the School of Psychological Science at La Trobe University and a Honorary Professorial Fellow in the School of Behavioural Science at The University of Melbourne.

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OTARC Academic Staff



Assoc. Prof. Amanda Richdale is Principal Research Fellow at the OTARC. She joined OTARC as an Honorary Research Fellow in mid-2008 and took up her current role early in 2009. Amanda was formerly Associate Professor in the Division of Psychology, School of Health Sciences, RMIT University and is now an Adjunct Professor there. Her research interests include children's sleep development and the management of children's sleep disorders, particularly in relation to ASDs; interventions and supports for children and young people with ASDs; and social skills development in ASDs. She has published widely, particularly concerning sleep problems and their management in children with ASD and other developmental disorders. Amanda is currently leading a DHS funded project on supporting students with ASD at university and TAFE.

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Dr Elfriede Ihssen is a Research Fellow at the OTARC. Prior to joining La Trobe University, Dr Ihssen was a senior lecturer and researcher in the School of Studies in Disability at Deakin University and in Psychology at Swinburne University of Technology. Her research interests are in the development of young children, especially those with Autism Spectrum Disorders, congenital blindness or other disabilities. At OTARC she is assisting the Director of OTARC in various activities, including fund raising, writing for publication, liaising with Government, ASD-specific services and the larger community. She is also involved in various research projects at OTARC, specifically the evaluation of the Early Start Denver Model that is being implemented at the Early Learning and Care Centre for children with an ASD that is associated with OTARC.

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OTARC Academic Staff



Dr Kristelle Hudry joined the School of Psychological Science in 2010 as Lecturer in Developmental Psychology and member of the OTARC. She completed her studies at the University of Queensland, including a PhD in Educational Psychology and then spent five years abroad, in London. She undertook post-doctoral research at a number of institutions, including at Goldsmith's University of London, the UCL Institute of Child Health, the Centre for Research in Autism and Education (Institute of Education), and the Centre for Brain and Cognitive Development (i.e., the Birkbeck Babylab). Her work included involvement with the Preschool Autism Communication Trial (PACT) and the British Autism Study of Infant Siblings network (BASIS). She also recently attained WPS accreditation as a trainer on the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS).

Her research interests are in the area of human social-communication development, with particular focus on young children with autism spectrum disorders.

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Dr Josephine Barbaro, is a Post Doctoral Research Fellow at the OTARC. Her PhD was on the prospective identification of autism in infancy completed in 2010. Josie was a recipient of a Sir Robert Menzies Scholarship in the Allied Health Sciences in 2007. She has three papers published on the early detection on ASDs in infants and toddlers, with two more to follow this year.

She is currently focussing on the education of primary health care professionals on the early signs of autism and the detection of ASDs in very young children.

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OTARC Academic Staff



Dr Giacomo Vivanti, PhD, is currently a Research Fellow at the OTARC and the ASELCC: Margot Prior Wing. After completing a visiting fellowship at the Yale Child Study Center, Yale University, and a clinical internship at the University Hospital of Siena, he completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the M.I.N.D. Institute, University of California, Davis. His current research is focused on the cognitive processes underlying action understanding, imitation, and learning in young children with Autism, and the impact of early intensive treatment on the outcomes of children with Autism. Dr Vivanti is a member of the Editorial Board of the Encyclopedia of Autism and Related Disorders and a member of the Italian Department of Health Committee to establish evidence-based guidelines for Autism treatment in Italy. He is also a consultant for University programs, scientific journals, and service providers and has also collaborated with non-profit international associations for the rights of children with disability, including Autism-Europe and Save the Children.

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Dr David Trembath, Post Doctoral Fellow, comes to the OTARC from the University of Sydney where he lectured in Communication and Lifelong Disability; Augmentative and Alternative Communication; and Professional Development. His interests include ASDs; cross-cultural and interdisciplinary practice in speech pathology; assistive technology; inclusive education; and participation across the lifespan. He joined the OTARC in February 2010. He is a speech pathologist, having worked in clinical, clinical education, and research assistant roles aimed at supporting individuals with autism and other lifelong disabilities and their families. The focus of his current research is on developing and evaluating communication interventions for individuals with ASDs and evidence based practice.

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Adjunct Academic Staff



Professor Edith Bavin (FAPS) is an Adjunct in the School of Psychological Science at La Trobe University. Her research interests are in studying early language development in children who are developing normally, as well as those with specific language impairments and other disabilities, including ASDs. Following the completion of her PhD in Buffalo, New York, she taught at the University of Oregon before she moved to Australia and joined La Trobe University in 1982. She is a chief investigator on the Early Language in Victoria Study (ELVS), based at the Royal Children's Hospital. One of her current projects is on language processing of children with autism, using eye tracking technology.

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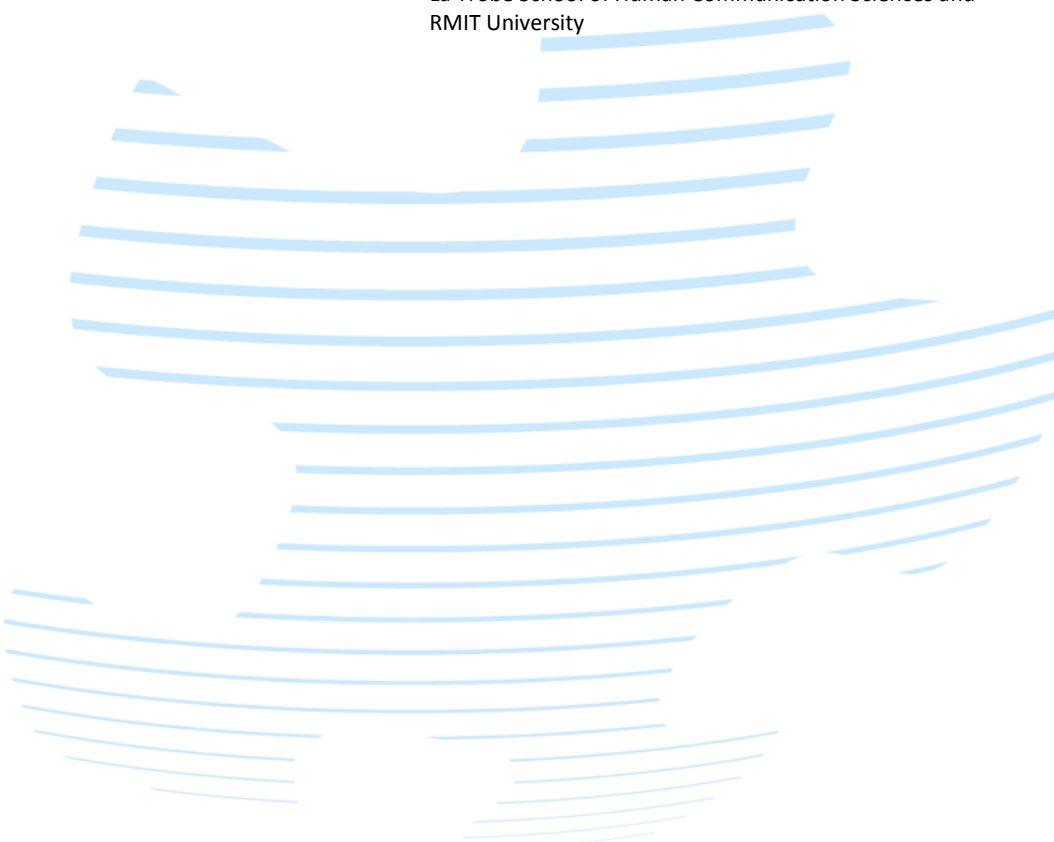


Dr Naomi Bishop is the Head of the Cell Biology and Molecular Pathogenesis Laboratory in the Department of Microbiology at La Trobe University. Her Honours work at Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital was aimed at developing new therapies for chronic hepatitis B virus infection, while her PhD at the [Burnet Institute](#), examined how cellular functions are affected during hepatitis A virus infections. Dr Bishop then obtained a Research Fellow position at the University of Cambridge. There, she carried out research in the field of gene therapy, developing viral vectors aimed at treating genetic disorders, as well as

being involved in teaching undergraduate medical students. This was followed by a ten year period at the University of Manchester, where Naomi carried out research into fundamental aspects of human cell biology, identifying the role of many previously uncharacterized human genes implicated in neurological diseases and/or cancer. Dr Bishop now has a full-time faculty position and, in addition to supervising higher degree research students, she lectures undergraduate students reading medical science, biology, biotechnology and nutrition science. The research in her laboratory focuses on understanding the cellular basis of various infectious and genetic diseases, including ASD, and she was a co-organizer of the inaugural BioAutism 2011 symposium.

Adjunct Academic Staff

Dr Diane Jacobs (PhD, completed 2009) is a lecturer with Speech Pathology at La Trobe University. She is working with Associate Professor Amanda Richdale on 'Language, literacy, and behaviour of children with high-functioning ASD, specific language impairment, or specific reading disorder, compared to typically developing peers' at the La Trobe School of Human Communication Sciences and RMIT University



OTARC Administration



Ms Lisbeth Wilks is the Administrative Officer of the OTARC. She has an adult son with ASD and an adult stepson with Down syndrome. She was one of the original members of the Autism Family Support Association and is a Past President of that organisation. She has also been involved with Autism Victoria and has served on its committee. She is a member of a number of disability-oriented organisations. In 2006 Lisbeth published a novel for junior teens about a sibling growing up in a family with two siblings with intellectual disabilities. Lisbeth has a wide network of contacts in the field of intellectual disability.

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OTARC Lab Manager



Ms Carmela Germano is the Laboratory Manager of the OTARC. She worked previously as a Research Assistant for Associate Professor Cheryl Dissanayake on the Social and Communication Study (SACS). She has completed a Bachelor of Behavioural Science with Honours (First Class, 1999) and a Master of Behavioural Science (2008). She has several publications in various fields of psychological and occupational therapy research. She is part of OTARC's Mobiles for Autism project and is also providing research support to Dr Amanda Richdale on a DHS funded research project, which involves undertaking a systematic review on supporting transition to and participation in tertiary education for students with an ASD.

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OTARC research staff



Ms Irene Giaprakis BA, LLB (Hons), BBSoc (Hons), Assoc. MAPS is a Research Assistant at the OTARC. She has conducted cognitive assessments on children as part of the Social Attention Communication Study and its Follow Up, and undertake intervention-based research with young children. Irene also works in the new Early Diagnostic Clinic for ASDs at La Trobe University.

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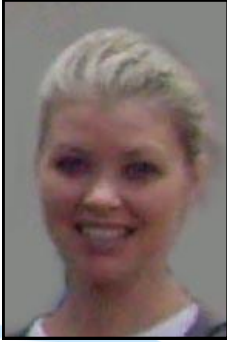


Ms Ru Ying Cai has an Honours degree in Psychology and is a Senior Research Assistant at the OTARC. She is working on a DHS funded project examining and building the supports and develop recommendations for transition to, and participation in tertiary education by students with an ASD. She previously worked as an integration aid at a primary school utilizing Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) therapy to teach a boy with Autism.

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OTARC research staff



Ms Lindsay Pamment, Research Assistant, has an Honours degree in Psychological Science. She is working on Ms Cherie Green on a Growth Study and the DHS study supporting tertiary students.

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Ms Emma Baker, Research Assistant, has an Honours degree in Psychological Science. She is working on the ARC funded project, 'Language processing in children with high-functioning autism: Evidence from eye tracking' with Professor Edith Bavin, Associate Professor Cheryl Dissanayake, Dr Evan Kidd and Professor Margot Prior. Emma Baker is also assisting Associate Professor Amanda Richdale with a study on adolescent sleep being conducted in conjunction with Flinders University

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OTARC PhD Candidates



Ms Sarah Chan, PhD candidate, is undertaking a study on the relationships between self-awareness, episodic and autobiographical memory and narrative ability in children with high functioning autism aged between 9 and 14 years. She is interested in the interaction of self concept on memory which involves a sense of self participation and/or observation and narrative capacity. Sarah is being supervised by Associate Professor Cheryl Dissanayake and Professor Edith Bavin.



Ms Cherie Green is a PhD candidate in her 3rd year of study, under the supervision of Associate Professor Cheryl Dissanayake and Dr Danuta Loesch. They are currently investigating the growth patterns of boys with an ASD mixed model between 4-16 years of age as part of a longitudinal study, in order to answer the following:

1. Do boys with autism grow at a faster rate than typically developing boys?
2. Are hormones be responsible for the increased rate of growth?
3. Are joints and ligaments responsible for an increased rate of growth?
4. Are growth hormones, rate of growth, and autistic symptoms related?
5. Are there groups of children on the autism spectrum with different patterns of growth and hormone levels?

OTARC PhD Candidates



Ms Rucha Joshi is a PhD student working with Associate Professor Cheryl Dissanayake on a project investigating gender differences in young children with an ASD to understand the development of girls on the spectrum. Rucha's PhD is a longitudinal study of the gender differences in the early development of girls and boys with ASD from infancy to their early childhood years. In addition to looking at developmental profiles of girls with ASD from a young age, Rucha is also studying gender differences in the development of social cognition in these children. .



Ms Heather Joy Nuske is a PhD candidate is working under the supervision of Associate Professor Cheryl Dissanayake and Dr Giacomo Vivanti. She completed a Bachelor of Psychological Science with Honours in 2008 with Professor Edith L. Bavin, during which she conducted a study on narrative comprehension in autism. Her current research interests include social interaction/cognitive processing differences in autism within a developmental framework. More specifically, her current research will focus on emotional reactivity (facial, pupillary), emotional expressivity and learning from emotions in young children with autism (aged 3-5) using eye tracking technology. Heather is a trained ABA therapist and is currently working with a four-year-old with Autistic Disorder. She is a tutor in Cognition and Development this year in the School of Psychological Science and is also currently working as a research assistant on an ARC funded project on language processing in autism. Heather's younger brother, Joseph, has Autistic Disorder.

OTARC Doctorate of Clinical Psychology Candidates



Ms Katherine (Kat) Crea is a Doctor of Clinical Psychology student working with Dr Kristelle Hudry and Associate Professor Cheryl Dissanayake. Previously Kat has been involved in research projects at the Australian Psychological Society before returning to study. Previous research projects include the early childhood promotion, prevention and early intervention initiative, KidsMatter Early Childhood; the Australian Psychology Workforce survey; and the Access to Allied Psychological Services Telephone-CBT and Suicide Prevention Service trial projects. Kat's current research interests include the early development of ASDs through the study of infant siblings of children with autism, of which approximately 20% go on to be diagnosed with an ASD; and early intervention approaches for ASDs.



Ms Germaine Gergis is a doctoral candidate in Clinical Psychology investigating language processing in children with high-functioning-autism (HFA) using eye-tracking. Her supervisors are Professor Edith Bavin and Dr Kristelle Hudry. Her first study will investigate two aspects of language processing in children with HFA using eye-tracking technology: semantic knowledge and syntactic structures. Memory and attention tasks also are included to investigate their influence on the children's performance. The studies will compare young children with HFA and children with typical development (TD) on the effect of priming of semantic categories on language processing ; the effect of priming of syntactic structures on language processing ; and the effect of memory and sustained attention on the children's looking patterns in two eye-tracking tasks. Her second study will compare developmental trajectories for the HFA and TD groups a year later.

OTARC Doctorate of Clinical Psychology Candidates



Ms Rebecca McStay is a Doctoral candidate in Clinical Psychology at the OTARC. Her research interests include early intervention for children with autism, raising public awareness about ASDs, and the impact on the family of raising a child with autism.

She is supervised of Associate Professor Cheryl Dissanayake and Dr David Trembath.

In particular, Rebecca hopes to determine

1. At what stages of development do families of a child with ASD experience the least and most stress?
2. What factors promote positive outcomes in these families?

Rebecca has spent the last 2.5 years working with children with autism both privately and in educational settings.

OTARC Doctorate of Clinical Neuropsychology Candidates



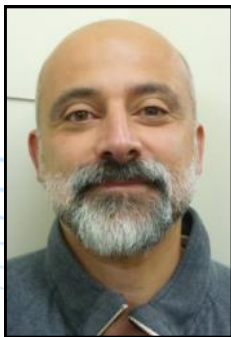
Ms Zena Elhassan completed a Bachelor of Psychological Science degree with Honours in 2008 at La Trobe University. Following this, she worked as an ABA therapist with children who have autism and other learning and cognitive difficulties. She is currently undertaking a Doctorate in Clinical Neuropsychology at the OTARC working under the supervision of Associate Professor Amanda Richdale on a research project that she hopes will help to determine if the simplified elimination diet (a diet that excludes foods that contain additives, salicylates and amines) can improve sleep and daytime behaviours in children who have autism.

OTARC Doctorate of Clinical Neuropsychology Candidates



Mr Kavi Jayasinghe is currently undertaking Doctorate in Clinical Neuropsychology studying Repetitive Behaviours in ASDs: The Role of Stress, Selective Attention to Sensory Stimuli and Conceptual Abstraction.

The aim of his research is to understand the nature of RRSBs in ASDs, and the functional relationship of these behaviours to the other diagnostic criteria. This research will examine the effects of physiological arousal (that is, the body's natural level of responsiveness to environmental stimuli), selective attention to sensory stimuli, and the degree of conceptual development (that is, the ability to make connections between distinct concepts in abstract thought).



Mr Alex Zammit is currently in the third year of his Doctorate of Clinical Neuropsychology working under the supervision of Associate Professor Amanda Richdale. The aim of his research is to investigate whether the manipulation of attention improves automatic facial mimicry in a population of adults with High Functioning Autism. Manipulation will involve explicitly directing participants' attention to images of facial expressions by asking them to remember a key characteristic of the image they have viewed, e.g., gender of person producing the expression. A secondary aim is to investigate the use of facial recognition software as an alternative to electromyography (EMG), as a means of detecting face movements. A better understanding of the role of attention in the interpretation and expression of facial expressions could lead to compensatory strategies that assist people with ASD to alleviate some of their difficulties with social interactions.

OTARC Master of Clinical Psychology Candidates



Ms Claire Forsythe is completing a Masters of Clinical Psychology under the supervision of Associate Professor Amanda Richdale on a project investigating social attention in children with ASD and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Research proposes that executive function deficits, particularly an attention deficit, may explain the social-communicative impairment evident in children with ASD. Attention deficits are common in children with ASD and more than 50 per cent of children meet criteria for a co-morbid diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). To date, much research has explored attention deficits in children with ASD, however, the research has not comprehensively explored a range of attention problems within the one sample, nor has it systematically considered attention problems in relation to social tasks. Additionally, previous research has overlooked the confounding factor of many children with ASD having a co-morbid diagnosis of ADHD. This research will enhance our understanding of attention deficits in children with ASD and ADHD and how these abilities relate to their social difficulties.



Ms Clare James is in the second year of a Masters of Clinical Psychology degree working with Associate Professor Amanda Richdale on a project investigating the effectiveness of weighted blankets in treating sleep onset problems in children with autism. Approximately two-thirds of children diagnosed with Autistic Disorder have sleeping problems, and difficulty falling asleep is one of the most common problems. However, little research has been conducted into treatment options for sleep problems in this population. Weighted blankets appear to be widely used, but their usage has not been tested in any population. Her study will involve a small number of participants (four children aged from four to eight years, using a single case design methodology), monitored over a period of approximately ten weeks. The intervention will involve using a weighted blanket in addition to a bedtime routine, which is a sequence of calming activities that is followed each night before bed. It is expected that the intervention will reduce bedtime resistance, reduce the time taken for children to fall asleep and increase their total sleep time. It is also hoped that improvements will be noted in parent's sleep quality and their ability to manage any difficult behavior shown by their child.

OTARC Master of Clinical Psychology Candidates



Ms Lisa Rumney is a Clinical Masters student working with Dr. Kristelle Hudry on a project investigating the potential effects of bilingualism on maternal synchrony for families of children with Autism.

Recent theories have proposed that aspects of early social environments may be important in maximising beneficial outcomes among children with ASDs. However, little is understood in regards to whether these interactions may be effected by the child having exposure to two languages. The aim of the research is therefore to explore aspects of monolingual and bilingual families with children with ASDs. This research may help to clarify the lack of knowledge regarding the effects of acquiring two languages for children with autism.

After completing her honours thesis in 2010 in the field of developmental psychology, Lisa is keen to learn more about autism through the OTARC team. Lisa also works part time as a child-care assistant.



Ms Nicole Porter is currently undertaking her Masters of Clinical Psychology and is also working with Dr. Kristelle Hudry on a research project investigating the potential effects of bilingualism on children with Autism.

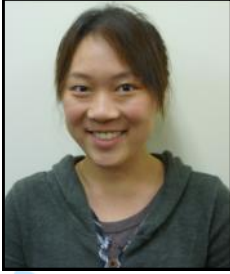
At present little is known about whether having exposure to two languages is beneficial or detrimental to children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. As such, this research aims to determine whether or not bilingualism has an impact on factors such as language development and early social communication, as well as on family functioning and parent-child interaction. Given the small amount of research that has been conducted to date, this project hopes to provide some insight on the effects of bilingualism on children with Autism. Nicole is excited to be joining La Trobe University and the OTARC Team after completing her Honours in 2010 at Monash University. Nicole is keen for a career in child, adolescent and family psychology where she hopes to continue to work with children with Autism and their families.

OTARC Honours Candidate in Psychological Science



Ms Parise Nichole Genticoglou is undertaking her Honours year under the supervision of Associate Professor Amanda Richdale. They are working on a project examining how sleep problems in children with an ASD affect mother's sleep and well-being. To date, very little research has considered the impact of the children's sleep problems on their families. Better understanding of the impact of sleep problems in children with an ASD will help in the development of prevention strategies and interventions for the children and their families.

OTARC Honours Candidates in Speech Pathology



Ms Xueta Ying Tan's honours project aims to evaluate Key Word Sign intervention program for preschool aged children with autism who use little or no functional speech. Key Word Sign (KWS) intervention involves creating communication opportunities during play activities and modelling the use of the key word signs with speech. KWS aims to support the child's environment to facilitate communication and this research may help assess whether this approach, which is commonly used in clinical practice, leads to increases in the communication of children with autism. This project is supervised by Dr David Trembath (OTARC) and Karen Bloomberg (National Training Coordinator and Victoria Coordinator of Key Word Sign Australia).



Ms Michelle Smith's honours project investigates the Structured Use of Music and Movement intervention program for preschool children with ASD. The intervention program incorporates music and movement strategies with traditional speech pathology intervention, to better support the communicative needs of children with ASD. The project is being supervised by Dr David Trembath (OTARC) and Dr Beverly Joffe (previously School of Human Communication Sciences).

Honorary Members of the OTARC team

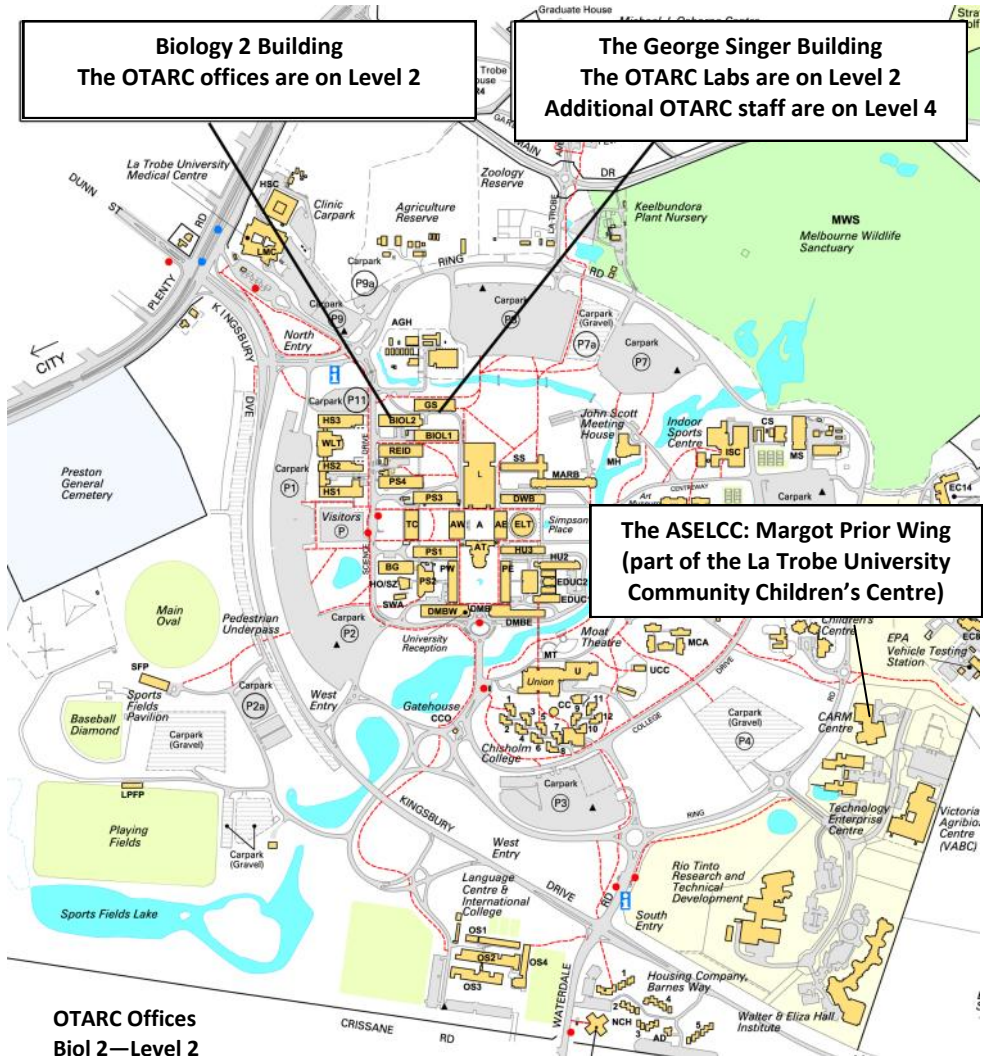


Ms Amanda Golding (Monash, 1975) has worked as a teacher, in the family business and as Executive Officer for Autism Victoria (1991 – 2007). She is currently the senior autism consultant to the Parenting Research Centre, a committee member of the Autistic Family Support Association, a life member of Alpha Autism Inc and director of the recently established Autism Noticeboard. (www.autismnoticeboard.com.au)



Mr Wojciech Nadachowski (La Trobe 2001) is supporting the development and implementation of a Communications and Fundraising strategy at OTARC. Wojciech also has a keen interest in the niche application of mobile devices for those experiencing communication challenges, and is part of OTARC's Mobiles for Autism project.

Where in La Trobe University is OTARC?



OTARC Offices

Biol 2—Level 2

A/Prof Cheryl Dissanayake
 A/Prof Amanda Richdale
 Dr Elfriede Ihsen
 Dr Giacomo Vivanti
 Dr David Trembath
 Dr Josie Barbaro
 Ms Lisbeth Wilks

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Prof Edith Bavin
 Dr Kristelle Hudry

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OTARC Labs

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Ms Emma Baker