Developing Minds

Exploring Cognitive Diversity

Newsletter

Issue 11

August 2024

Kingston University London

Foreword

Welcome to our second newsletter of 2024!

Thank you to those of you who attended our Young Scientist Event. Please see pages 4-9 for further information about some of the research studies that your children took part in. We also hosted a webinar earlier this year on the topic of sleep (please see page 3).

Our feature article by Dr Cici Lam is about the importance of parental and teacher support in adolescents' development (see pages 10-16).

You will be able to read about an interview with our lab member Dr Jess Prior and her research interests (see pages 17-21).

For information about our other research activities then please see pages 22-28.

We hope you have a lovely summer.

With very best wishes,

Dr Elisa Back
Director of the Developing Minds Lab
e.back@kingston.ac.uk

Developing Minds
Exploring Cognitive Diversity

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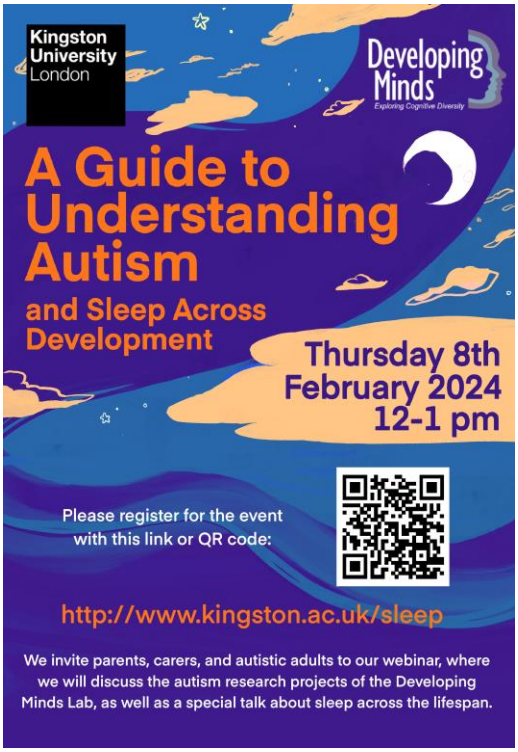
Webinar: “A Guide to Understanding Autism and Sleep Across Development”

This webinar in February focused on the prevalence and progression of sleep challenges that often begin early in the lives of autistic children and continue into adolescence and adulthood.



We explored how these sleep difficulties affect social interactions and overall well-being.

The talk also covered the latest advancements in sleep interventions and emphasized the importance of involving the autism community in shaping future research and treatment approaches.

Recent Events

Young Scientist Event
29th - 30th May 2024

Thank you to those who attended our Young Scientist Event!

Children aged 4-11-years-old spent half a day participating in a variety of research tasks that investigated how children develop.

Some of these tasks are summarised in the following pages. Please read them to learn more about research the tasks that your child(ren) may have participated in this year.

Young Scientist Event
29th - 30th May 2024

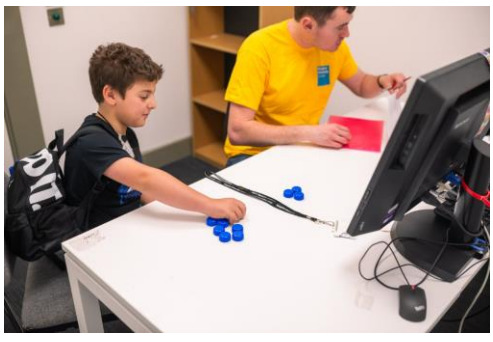
Brain Challenge, Creative Canvas Challenge and Number Balance Quest

Dr Cici Lam

A pilot study was carried out investigating the creative thinking abilities of children aged 4-8.

This research compared the children's performance on two different creativity tests: a general creativity test (Pictorial Multiple Solutions) and a mathematical creativity test (Creating Equal Number) and examined the relationships between general and mathematical creative thinking across various cognitive measures, including working memory, and attention.

The findings will shed light on understanding the divergent and convergent creative thinking profile for young children with autism and their neurotypical peers.



Focus Group – Friendships

Dr Katharine Clifford

The qualitative focus group research was aimed at exploring experiences across development of loneliness for primary aged school children in a post-covid environment. In thinking about the role of school and the social interactions of children, various aspects of research have been investigated, such as the types of play that children engage with in school (Howard et al., 2017), and how teachers and staff create a supportive environment for children (Cole et al., 2023). However, the experiences of primary aged school children in school continue to be studied because of the links made to developmental outcomes.

At the Young Scientist Event, several focus groups were conducted with over 30 child participants (aged 5-11).

Some *key discussion points* from the focus groups included:

- Most of the child participants identified playtime at school as very important.
- The younger child participants discussed having more play time in school and suggested they play with different peers. Some children played with the same peers every day.
- Older child participants joined lunch time clubs with their peers to avoid feeling alone at school.
- Different views of what loneliness was were expressed at varied ages, with older child participants placing more emphasis on feeling part of a peer group.
- Some children across the age range expressed the support they felt from teachers and assistant teaching staff during playtime, if they were not interested in playing with other children.
- The importance of lunchtime clubs and resource areas to play with their peers was highlighted during the research.

Wubbly's Adventure, Find the Toy and Brainy Bee Quiz

Dr Dina Spano

The study compares sleep and memory patterns between autistic and neurotypical children. We expect to find a strong connection between sleep quality and memory performance in both groups.

However, we also anticipate that sleep difficulties in autistic children may contribute to differences in memory performance compared to neurotypical children.

Cyberspace Action / VR Gesture

Dr Elisa Back and Dr Greg Mill

This project investigates how sign languages develop out of social interaction. Pairs of participants play a collaborative game similar to "charades", in virtual reality. On each round, one participant is given an emotion word that they need to communicate, using only gestures, to the other participant. Succeeding at the task, therefore, requires participants to establish novel gestures for each emotion.

We are currently using this approach to look at how participants develop shared sub-languages for referring to emotions, comparing neurodivergent with neurotypical populations. This will deepen our understanding of how emotions are communicated, and also to inform the design of new virtual reality interfaces.

Photo: DISNEY/PIXAR

'Inside Out 2’: Get a closer look at the teenage brain and why parents and teachers are still important?

Written by: *Dr Cici Lam*

> “There is so much going on inside a teenage brain that Disney’s Pixar subsidiary made a whole movie about it.”

In the Disney Pixar movie "Inside Out 2," we gain a vivid portrayal of the teenage brain's complexities, showcasing the emotional turbulence and cognitive growth that characterize adolescence. The film's depiction of Riley, a 13-year-old girl as a main character, and her experiences provide a relatable framework for understanding the profound changes in teenager's puberty and their effect on mental well-being. As Riley navigates new challenges and emotional landscapes, the importance of support from parents and teachers becomes evident. This article will describe what changes are happening in the teenage brain during the transition and explain why parent and teacher support is still crucial in helping teenagers manage their evolving cognitive and emotional worlds, mitigating the risks associated with this critical developmental stage, and fostering resilience and healthy growth.

> “Inside Out 2” follows the main character, Riley, as she turns 13 and experiences all the emotional changes that come with puberty: more sensitivity, awareness of her place in her social circle, and a lot of anxiety.

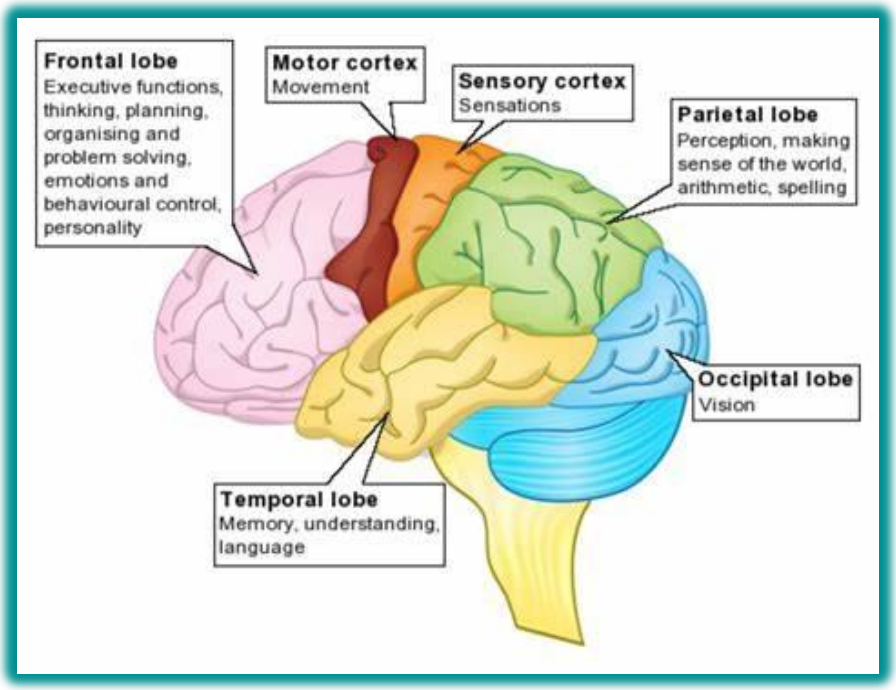
What is happening inside the teenage brain during transition?

The teenage brain undergoes significant structural and functional changes during adolescence, profoundly affecting teenagers' wellbeing. One of the most crucial areas undergoing development is the prefrontal cortex, responsible for executive functions such as decision-making, planning, and impulse control. This region is one of the last to mature, often not reaching full development until the mid-20s (Casey et al., 2019).

Photo: DISNEY/PIXAR

In "Inside Out 2," we see Riley struggling with impulsive decisions and risky behaviors, which are depicted as the result of her prefrontal cortex still developing. This ongoing maturation process can lead to behaviors that prioritize short-term rewards over long-term consequences, influencing various aspects of their lives, from academic performance to social interactions.

Simultaneously, the limbic system, integral to emotion regulation and reward processing, matures earlier than the prefrontal cortex. This discrepancy creates a neurological imbalance, leading to heightened emotional responses and a stronger focus on reward-seeking behaviors (Blakemore and Mills, 2014). In the film, Riley's limbic system, represented by characters like Anxiety, Envy and Embarrassment often overpowers her ability to think rationally, illustrating her intense emotions and challenges in regulating them effectively. This emotional volatility can exacerbate mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, increasingly prevalent among teenagers (Kessler et al., 2005).



During adolescence, the brain undergoes synaptic pruning and increased myelination, enhancing neural efficiency and cognitive abilities (Lebel & Beaulieu, 2011). Synaptic pruning involves eliminating weaker neural connections to streamline brain function, while myelination insulates nerve fibers to speed up neural communication. These changes support the development of advanced cognitive functions, such as improved abstract thinking and problem-solving skills.

However, in "Inside Out 2," Riley's brain restructuring is depicted through her fluctuating memory islands, showing how these processes can also render the brain more vulnerable if it does not adapt optimally, potentially leading to cognitive and emotional challenges. Indeed, the pressure to excel academically and socially can overwhelm teenagers, negatively impacting their cognitive functions and leading to increased stress and anxiety (Leblanc et al., 2005).

The ongoing development of the prefrontal cortex and limbic system significantly impacts teenagers' emotional regulation and social dynamics. The heightened activity in the limbic system, coupled with an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex, makes it difficult for teenagers to manage their emotions effectively.

This imbalance can lead to increased sensitivity to stress and difficulties in controlling impulses, affecting their overall emotional wellbeing (Blakemore & Mills, 2014).

Furthermore, adolescents are more susceptible to peer influence due to the ongoing maturation of their social brain networks.

In "Inside Out 2," Riley's interactions with her peers and her desire for acceptance illustrate how the desire for peer acceptance and fear of social rejection can drive behaviors that may not align with their long-term wellbeing, such as risky activities (Albert, Chein, & Steinberg, 2013).

Why is Parent and Teacher Support important for Teenagers?

Parental and teacher support play crucial roles in promoting teenagers' wellbeing during this critical period. Research consistently highlights the importance of a stable and nurturing environment in buffering against the negative effects of stress and promoting emotional and social development (Masten, 2014).

In the movie, Riley's parents provide support and guidance, helping her navigate her evolving cognitive and emotional landscapes. Previous research has shown that active involvement from parents, characterized by open communication, emotional warmth, and consistent discipline, has been associated with better mental health outcomes and reduced engagement in risky behaviors (Steinberg, 2001). Similarly, teacher support, through fostering a positive school climate and providing academic and emotional encouragement, can enhance students' academic engagement and psychological wellbeing (Reddy, Rhodes, & Mulhall, 2003).

Parents can support their teenagers by maintaining open lines of communication, providing emotional validation, and setting appropriate boundaries. Encouraging adolescents to express their feelings and thoughts helps them develop better emotional regulation and problem-solving skills. Parental involvement in their teenagers' lives, such as participating in school activities and being aware of their social circles, also contributes to a sense of security and belonging (Fletcher, Steinberg, & Sellers, 1999).

In "Inside Out 2," we see Riley's parents engaging with her, understanding her struggles, and offering guidance, which significantly impacts her ability to cope with her emotions and challenges. Additionally, consistent and fair discipline helps teenagers develop self-control and respect for rules, crucial for their long-term success and wellbeing (Doe & Smith, 2022).

Teachers can contribute to teenagers' wellbeing by creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment. Building strong, positive relationships with students can make a significant difference in their academic motivation and emotional health. Teachers can enhance pastoral care programs that teach students skills like empathy, self-awareness, and effective communication, essential for their overall development (Purdy, 2024).

Furthermore, providing academic support and recognizing individual student achievements can boost self-esteem and encourage a growth mindset, helping students overcome academic and personal challenges.

In summary, the teenage brain undergoes profound changes that affect emotional regulation, social dynamics, risk-taking behavior, and cognitive development. Understanding these changes and providing appropriate support from parents and teachers can significantly enhance teenagers' wellbeing during this critical period of their lives. The right interventions and guidance from caregivers and educators can help mitigate the challenges associated with these developmental shifts, fostering resilience and promoting healthier emotional and cognitive growth.

And as *Inside Out 2* reminds us, being a supportive parent or teacher is a bit like being the voice of reason among Riley's emotions: you might not always get a standing ovation, but your patience and guidance are the real backstage passes to helping the teens navigate the ups and downs of adolescence!

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Purdy, N. (2024). The importance of pastoral care in education to support the mental health of children and young people. *Pastoral Care in Education*, *42*(1), 1–3. https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2024.2310335

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Meet the Researcher

Developing Minds
Exploring Cognitive Diversity

As you may now know, Developing Minds is a research group consisting of academics, PhD students and researchers with a broad range of interests and expertise in how children learn and develop.

We are very happy to tell you more about Dr Jessica Prior in this interview.

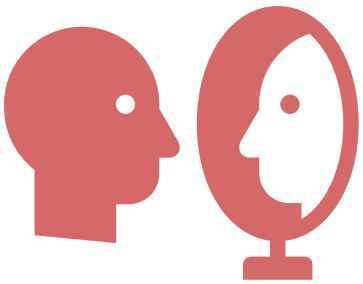
Jess, your research focuses on children and adolescents who look different and feel different, including visible differences of the face. Can you tell us more about this and how/why you got interested in it?

In 1992 I won a research scholarship to study for my PhD at the University of Westminster from the Quintin Hogg Trust. My doctoral research focused on young children's abilities to describe familiar and unfamiliar faces. I was interested in how well children aged 4-11 could describe faces compared to adult participants, and how well these descriptions could be used to identify the faces they were describing. Somewhere along my doctoral studies I became very interested in speaking to the children themselves, and in naturally occurring conversations - as part of what is now termed 'ecological validity'.

I wanted to look at faces and appearance in more real-world contexts, and I promised myself that once my PhD was over, I would try to do this (and learn more about qualitative methods!). After my PhD I collaborated with a national charity called Changing Faces, in order to understand more about how children and young people manage life with a visible difference, and I have continued to look at many aspects of visible difference since then.

You have a long-standing interest in the psychology of appearance including attitudes to face transplants, living with facial acne in emerging adulthood and coping as a family construct when a child as a visible difference. Can you tell us more about this and why it is important to continue to investigate this?

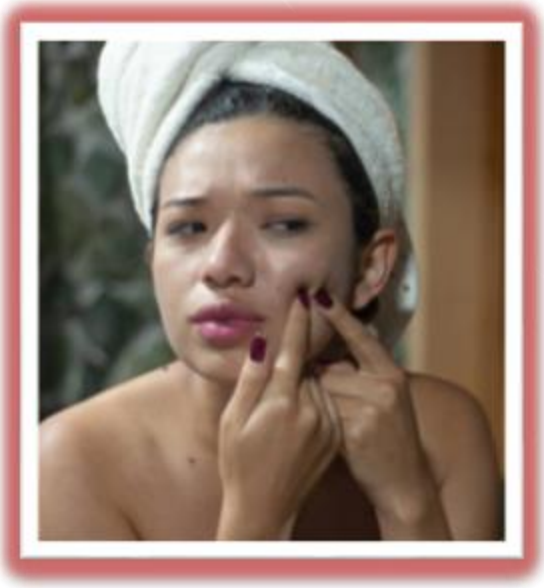
Yes, I have always been interested in the psychology of appearance. We all look different, but as many as 1 in 5 people have a visible difference, so it more common than people may realise. Psychology and visible difference | BPS We live in an increasingly image conscious world, and there are many pressures and expectations to look attractive even thought this may not always be possible. Our appearance impacts on how others see us, and importantly how we see ourselves. Research on appearance links to important ideas and theories in psychology such as identity, resilience, and stigma. I am a social developmental psychologist, and it has often been helpful to consider appearance in a lifespan perspective as well.



Are there any research projects that you are working on currently and if so, could you tell us a bit about it/them?

For the past four or five years we have thinking about resilience and visible differences and what it means to be resilient. This has followed on some projects I have been involved with from Dr Katharine Clifford's doctoral work, focusing on secondary school transition for children with a visible difference. This is an area I would like to continue researching.

I have also been collecting data on university belonging, especially for students who have a hidden disability. University belonging is an important factor that can contribute to engaging with university, academic success and enjoyment of studying, and very little research has been conducted in the UK in this area.



Of all the projects you have worked on so far, which one is your favourite and why?

That's a very hard question. I think I would choose a book I wrote with Dr Jo van Herwegen, as something that I am especially proud of. I learned so much about editing a book and liaising with colleagues on the various chapters. It was a steep learning curve, but the book is something I am proud of.

Prior, J., & Van Herwegen, J. (Eds.). (2016). Practical research with children. UK: Taylor & Francis

Have you had any other jobs besides being an academic?

I have had various jobs before I started my PhD in 1991! I worked in a pet shop, in a pub, as an au pair, and in a book shop during my PhD.

What do you like to do when you are not working on research?

I am an outdoor person. I volunteer at different nature reserves, go on bat walks, watch birds, and grow a few vegetables. I also enjoy meals with friends, and theatre trips, and my garden.

Finally, what advice would you give to aspiring researchers, researchers early in their career and mature student researchers?

The best advice I can give is just to make a start. As soon as you start a project, even in a small way, it has a habit of gaining momentum. Try and keep an open mind about methods, approaches and different ideas and this can lead you in some unexpected directions with your thinking.

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Assisted Reading with Google ReadAlong for Children

Who can take part?

Autistic and Neurotypical children aged 6-7

What's involved?

Children will answer questions about reading motivation, read a fictional story aloud to a computer and a researcher, and respond to comprehension and enjoyment-related questions.

How to get involved?

If this sounds interesting and you would like to participate, click on the link or contact one of the researchers below. You will receive a £10 online shopping voucher for participating.

Researcher:

Ward Danial: k2029510@Kingston.ac.uk

Principal Investigator:

Dr Elisa Back: e.back@kingston.ac.uk

Link:

Click Here

Developing Minds

Exploring Cognitive Diversity

Kingston University London

Faculty for Business and Social Sciences

PARTICIPANTS WANTED

For neurodiversity business research investigating digital communication style, preference and user experience in collaboration with Google

We aim to investigate:

- The communication needs and choices of neurodivergent and/or vision impaired small-medium business owners and self-employed individuals (merchants)

Participants we are looking for:

- Adult neurodivergent and/or vision impaired small-medium business owners and self-employed (merchants)

What you'll get from taking part:

- A £20 online shopping voucher

What taking part entails:

- Sociodemographic questions, followed by an online interview about your business communication experiences (~30 minutes)

How to take part:

- To book interviews or ask any other questions related to the study, email the Research Assistant on adam.kremis@kingston.ac.uk

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Are you interested in learning more about your sleep patterns?

You can earn up to a **£145 Amazon Voucher** by completing this study

Who are we looking for?

We are looking for **AUTISTIC young adults** between the ages of **18 to 30 years**

What will you be doing?

The study involves wearing a **watch** that tracks your sleep/wake patterns, **recording food intake, mood**, etc., completing **sleep diaries** for 14 days and filling out **questionnaires**. In addition, you'll also have the opportunity to share your unique sleep experience through an **interview**

Where will it be?

Our study includes **two visits at Kingston University**. In the 14 days between visits, you'll **carry out the study's protocol at home**, wearing the sleep watch and engaging in your usual activities

SCAN THE QR CODE TO KNOW MORE ABOUT OUR STUDY

Kingston University

Kingston University London

Is your child between 7 and 11 years old?

Our study aims to study Sleep and Memory in Autistic & Neurotypical Children.

You can earn a **£20 Amazon Voucher** by completing this study

* Participants will also receive a **Sleep Report.**

Who are we looking for?

We are looking for Autistic and Neurotypical participants between the ages of 7 to 11.

*Child must be willing to wear a wrist sleep tracking device over 7 days.

What will you do?

Participants will be asked to complete Cognitive and Memory Tests. Parents will be asked to complete Sleep Diary and other Questionnaires.

Where will it be?

This study will be conducted at Kingston University, Penrhyn Road Campus.
*two visits of 45 mins each

Scan the QR Code to know more about our research!

Recent Publications

Day, Ed., **Manitsa, I.**, Farley, A., & Kelly, J. (2024). The UK National Recovery Survey: nationally representative survey of people overcoming a drug or alcohol problem. *BJPsych Open*. https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2023.654

Ho, F. C., & **Lam, S. C.** (in press). Professional learning for teachers of students with specific learning disabilities in Hong Kong. In *The Palgrave Encyclopaedia of Disability*. Springer.

Manitsa, I., Livanou, M., Burnett Heyes, S., **Barlow-Brown, F.**, Gardia, N., Siegfried, O., Clarke, Z.*, Coelho, H.*, & De Caro, A. (accepted). The development of Vi-Connect: An educational game for the social inclusion at school of students with vision impairment. *PLOS ONE.* *authors contributed equally

Manitsa, I., & **Barlow-Brown, F**. (accepted). Exploring the "interactive" hypothesis in adolescents with vision impairment: The relationship between school belonging and self-esteem. *Psychology.*

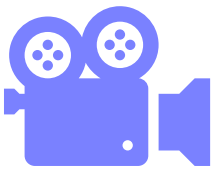
Manitsa, I., Gregory, A., Broome, M., Marwaha, S., Bagshaw, A., & Morales-Munoz, I. (accepted). Shorter night-time sleep duration and later sleep timing from infancy to and adolescence. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry.* https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.14004

Spanò, G., Combs, D., Dwyer, P., Luongo, A., Parent-Johnson, W., & Edgin, J. (2024). Autism and sleep across development: Advancing research and treatment through co production. *Neurodiversity*, *2*, 27546330241238668.

Media Engagement & Invited Talks

Back, E. (May 2024). Social and sensory support in education for autistic adults and children. *Vrije University, Amsterdam*.

Manitsa, I. (20 June 2024). Exploring the lived experiences of students with vision impairment in UK Higher Education and promoting their inclusion. Oral presentation at the workshop *"Towards improving the accessibility of the mathematical sciences for visually impaired people"*; 20 June 2024, University of Glasgow. (Online presentation)



Manitsa, I. (20 May 2024). *Examining the inclusion of people with vision impairment across the lifespan.* Oral presentation at the Department of Ophthalmology Great Ormond Street Hospital, London, UK. (Online presentation)

Manitsa, I. (5 March 2024). *The development of university guidance for the social emotional needs of students with Vision Impairment in Higher Education.* Oral presentation at representatives from the Communication Department, Universitas Al Azhar Indonesia, organised by Professor John Ravenscroft, University of Edinburgh. (Online presentation)

Funding

Paliokosta, P., **Back, E**., Gibson, S., & Jacob, A.(2024). Balance in Bloom: Co-Producing Inclusive Therapeutic Horticulture for Neurodiverse Communities, UKSPF BIG Growth Programme. £13,500

Martinelli, C. & **Spano, D**. *Disordered Eating and Sleep in Adolescents at Risk for an Eating Disorder.* BA/Leverhulme Small Research Grant. £10,000

Conferences

Back, E., Main, E., **Manitsa, I**., **Clifford, K**., Schur, P., **Barlow-Brown, F**, **Parchment, S**., & **Spurin, H**. The benefits of an Autism Peer Network in Higher Education. *Neurodevelopmental Annual Seminar*, University of East Anglia. June 2024.

Back, E. & Paliokosta, P. Amplifying Neurodiverse Voices in Environmental Debates: Learning Opportunities Around Participative Research Engagement. *Oxford Educational Research Symposium*, St Anne's College. University of Oxford. July 2024.

Clifford, K. & **Prior, J**. *Resilience, educational transitions and alignment* [Poster session]. Appearance Matters 10, Bristol, UK. (June 12-14, 2024).

Lam, **S. C**. *A Blueprint of AI Integration in Teaching Psychology for Managing Diversity and Inclusion*. [Poster Presentation]. *Festival of Learning*. Kingston University London, U.K. (June 20, 2024)

Manitsa, I. Educational inclusion and the role of habilitation services in the lives of children and young people with vision impaiment. Habilitation VI UK Conference, Copthorne Hotel, Merry Hill-Dudley, Brierley Hill, UK. (6 March 2024)

Manitsa, I. (Presenting author), **Barlow-Brown, F**. (Presenting author), Hewett, R., Ravenscroft, J., Thurston, M., Roe, J., & Temple, S. *Developing university guidance for the social inclusion of students with vision impairment.* Oral presentation at the NADP 25th Anniversary Conference: Embedding Inclusion into Everyday Practice; 18-19 June 2024, Chesford Grange Hotel, Kenilworth, Warwickshire, UK. (19 June 2024).

Manitsa, I. (Presenting author), **Barlow-Brown, F**., Hewett, R., Ravenscroft, J., Thurston, M., Roe, J., & Temple, S. *Developing university guidance for the socio-emotional needs of students with vision impairment: Findings from phase one.* Poster presentation at the Advance HE's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Conference 2024 "The future is now: Building EDI practice for the changing world of HE"; 6-7 March 2024, Hilton Liverpool City Centre, Liverpool, UK. (7 March 2024).

Spano, D. *Understanding the Role of Consistent Bedtime Routines in Infant Development: Insights from Down Syndrome and Typically Developing Infants*",Neurodevelopmental Annual Seminar (NDAS), 28th June 2024.

Developing Minds Group members

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Let us know if you have any questions.
You can leave a comment on our FB page or tweet us

Have you read our previous newsletters? You can find them here

Let us know what you would like to read in our next newsletter

Stay tuned: more updates and events will follow

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