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## Drexel School of Public Health Awarded \$14 Million NIH Grant for Autism Research

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Philadelphia

The Drexel University School of Public Health was awarded today an Autism Centers of Excellence (ACE) grant from the National Institutes of Health for more than \$14,300,000 to examine risk factors and the development of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in expectant mothers and their babies. The ACE is the largest grant received by the School of Public Health in its 11-year history.

The Drexel School of Public Health will use the grant to establish a network of research sites nationwide that will study possible risk factors and biological indicators for ASD during the prenatal, neonatal and early postnatal periods. The researchers aim to follow 1,200 mothers of children with autism at the start of a new pregnancy and document the development of the newborn through 36 months of age.

The Drexel University School of Public Health will coordinate the overall study and will lead the Philadelphia research field site. The grant was awarded to Craig J. Newschaffer, PhD, Chair of the Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics at the Drexel School of Public Health, who will serve as the principal investigator.

"The project will build a network of parents and families participating in groundbreaking studies on the etiology of autism spectrum disorders," said Newschaffer. "The Autism Center of Excellence grant will help Drexel advance our ongoing research on ASD risk factors, and reach new heights in autism care and research."

The project, entitled the Early Autism Risk Longitudinal Investigation (EARLI) Study, will examine possible autism environmental risk factors and biomarkers during different developmental windows, as well as the interplay of genetic susceptibility and environmental exposure. A number of environmental exposures will be investigated. The study is also expected to advance researchers' understanding of the natural history and progression of ASDs.

Lead by researchers at the Drexel School of Public Health, the EARLI Network includes four, local research field sites: Drexel University School of Public Health/Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP); University of California at Davis/MIND Institute; Johns Hopkins School of Public Health/Kennedy Krieger Institute; and Northern California Kaiser Permanente. The Network also includes a Data Coordinating Center at the University of California at Davis and a Central Lab and Biosample Repository at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health.

"This new grant award to Drexel University exemplifies the research that NIH is supporting to better understand the interplay between genetic and environmental factors and the development of diseases like ASD," said Cindy Lawler, Ph.D., scientific program director at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. "By following a large cohort of mothers of autistic children and their newborn siblings, the grantees will be providing valuable insight into some of the environmental factors that may contribute to the development of autism."

Under the direction of Newschaffer, the Drexel School of Public Health will lead overall recruitment and outreach efforts for the study. The Philadelphia-based research site, led by Newschaffer, includes Dr. Susan Levy at CHOP, Dr. Jennifer Pinto-Martin at the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing, and Dr. Jennifer Culhane at the Drexel University College of Medicine. The research site will directly recruit participants from the southeastern Pennsylvania region, including Bucks, Delaware, Chester and Montgomery counties and the City of Philadelphia. The other research sites will also recruit participants from their local areas.

The research team expects to begin enrollment of participants into the study by early 2009.

The ACE award will allow the School of Public Health to build upon its ongoing research on ASDs. A renowned autism epidemiologist, Newschaffer is currently a co-principal investigator in the national Study to Explore Early Development (SEED). Launched by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, SEED is a 5-year, multi-site study designed to identify childhood risks for ASDs and other developmental disabilities. Newschaffer is also involved in CDC-funded autism prevalence monitoring activities and work on other studies searching for autism risk factors, including a project on autism, autoimmunity and the environment funded by Autism Speaks.

The Drexel University School of Public Health promotes the health of communities through education, research, service and practice. As the only school of public health in the greater Philadelphia region, the school's innovative academic and research programs integrate real world experience with classroom learning in one of the most diverse and culturally rich communities in the United States. The School of Public Health is built on a foundation of understanding that health and human rights are inextricably entwined. This unique, community-collaborative approach fosters leadership and provides students with the critically necessary hands-on experience to meet today's public health demands.

For more information on the Drexel University School of Public Health, visit <http://publichealth.drexel.edu>.

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News media contacts:

Niki Gianakaris, Drexel News Bureau  
215-895-6741, 215-778-7752 (cell) or [ngianakaris@drexel.edu](mailto:ngianakaris@drexel.edu)

Brian Rossiter, Drexel News Bureau  
215-895-2705, 267-228-5599 (cell) or [brian.rossiter@drexel.edu](mailto:brian.rossiter@drexel.edu)

Rich Ochab, Drexel School of Public Health  
215-762-4110 or [richard.s.ochab@drexel.edu](mailto:richard.s.ochab@drexel.edu)

Contact [universityrelations@drexel.edu](mailto:universityrelations@drexel.edu), 215-895-1530