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An Expansive Vision

In a world where a child's social skills are limited by autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a small gesture — say, a toddler smiling at his parents for the first time — becomes a tremendous feat.

Such moments are prized by researchers at UC Santa Barbara's Koegel Autism Center, according to director Ty Vernon. An assistant professor of clinical psychology in UCSB's Department of Counseling, Clinical and School Psychology, Vernon took the helm this month after serving six years as director of the center's autism assessment clinic.

He has ambitious plans for the research center that is already internationally renowned for its pioneering work on Pivotal Response Treatment (PRT). "We will be working hard to connect with local families, establish partnerships with the community and continue to create some of the very best autism intervention programs in the world," Vernon said. "My team is dedicated to accomplishing an ambitious goal — soon, anyone will be able to walk through the doors of our center and immediately be enrolled in an exceptional intervention program."

That team includes Anna Krasno, the center's new clinical director, and a staff of UCSB researchers composed of 12 graduate students and 30 undergraduate research assistants. A clinical psychologist who graduated from UCSB and completed a fellowship at Yale University, Krasno is responsible for designing and implementing clinical service initiatives, overseeing clinical training and supervising staff.

Vernon aims to establish separate treatment programs for toddlers, children, adolescents and adults, including the recently developed social immersion group intervention for teens, known as START (Social Tools And Rules for Teens). “It has proven to be one of the most effective programs for teens,” he said. “We are now adapting it for use with child and adult populations. We are also developing specialized programs to assist those with limited language, intellectual disabilities and diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.”

Among other initiatives, Vernon plans to expand the center’s focus more on the needs of adults with ASD — a range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication.

“As individuals with autism grow up, they must navigate an increasingly complex set of unwritten social rules as they attempt to maintain friendships, establish romantic relationships, interview for jobs and interact with professors and work supervisors,” he said, noting that special education supports for adolescents ends when they leave high school. “We designed the START program to make this transition much easier for them.”

Vernon’s other goal is to boost research efforts on PRT. Based on principles of positive motivation, the treatment finds and targets pivotal areas of behavior, the effect of which ripples to other aspects of a child’s behavior — as opposed to protocols that target and drill individual behaviors. PRT also has been found to result in greater levels of the highly sought interaction and connection between parents and teachers and the children with ASD they care for, compared with other available interventions. The widely-used PRT therapy was developed by Vernon’s predecessors, Koegel Autism Center’s co-founders Lynn and Robert Koegel.

“Our recent empirical work has focused on modifying the PRT model to focus on targeted social engagement opportunities, which has a transformative effect on parent-child connections and subsequent development,” Vernon said.

With the center serving more than 100 families a year, Vernon said he and his colleagues have the opportunity to improve engagement with the Santa Barbara autism community by creating a parent support program, as well as partnering with local pediatricians, schools and organizations. According to Autism Speaks, a nonprofit advocacy organization that has provided research grants to the Koegel Autism Center, autism is one of the fastest-growing development disorders in the U.S., affecting one in 68 children. The autism spectrum is very broad and

encompasses previous categories of autistic disorder, Asperger's syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder.

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