



Serving Children and Adults at CERC

by Celia Vimont

IN JUST A DECADE, autism has emerged from obscurity to become America's most highly publicized and intensively studied developmental disorder. Once considered rare, autism now affects one in every 110 children, according to the latest federal survey. The rise in autism cases has been attributed to numerous causes, from an increase in gene mutations to better diagnosis to environmental factors such as air pollution. Whatever the cause, Einstein's Children's Evaluation and Rehabilitation Center (CERC)—one of the nation's premier facilities for serving children with autism and other developmental disabilities—is ideally positioned to handle the surge in kids needing help.

More than once, say the experts who work there, the road to CERC has begun on a bus in the Bronx. A mother and child will board, and the child will behave unusually—perhaps flapping his hands or rocking back and forth. Another mother will lean over and say, “My child used to do that,” and she will recommend taking the child to CERC for an evaluation.

CERC opened in 1956 and now serves more than 7,000 infants, children, adolescents and adults each year. These patients have a wide range of developmental disabilities—autism and many others, including ADHD, Down syndrome, spina bifida and mental retardation.

CERC is the clinical arm of Einstein's Rose F. Kennedy University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. The diverse CERC staff of more than 150 healthcare professionals includes developmental pediatricians; pediatric neurologists; rehabilitation medicine specialists; psychiatrists; speech, occupational and physical therapists; a nutritionist; nurses; dentists; and specialists in learning disabilities.

As the services it provides have increased over the years, CERC has scattered among several different sites—presenting major logistical problems both for patients and for staff. “Right now, patients may have to go to separate sites for occupational therapy, audiology testing and other services,” says Robert W. Marion, M.D., director of CERC and the Ruth L. Gottesman Professor in Developmental Pediatrics. “It makes it difficult for patients to navigate, and for staff to communicate.”

Fortunately, help is on the way. Einstein's campus master plan calls for CERC's consolidation within the Van Etten building on Morris Park Avenue in the next several years. (See the related story on Van Etten on page 40.)

“The new site will allow us to provide truly multidisciplinary care for each patient,” says Dr. Marion.

Addressing the Autism Epidemic

Einstein clinicians were helping autistic children long before “autism” became a household word. Isabelle Rapin, M.D., professor of neurology and of pediatrics and a member of Einstein’s original faculty, began studying autism in the 1970s and published several major papers showing that children with autism underwent a regression in language and other skills.

While autism can vary widely in severity, the increasing number of kids who are diagnosed as being “on the

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— Lisa H. Shulman, M.D.

autism spectrum” generally have problems with social interaction; trouble with verbal and nonverbal communication; and restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior.

“In years past, about one-fifth of all the children we saw had autism, and now it’s between one-fourth and one-third,” says Lisa H. Shulman, M.D., associate clinical professor in the department of pediatrics and director of the CERC Infant and Toddler Team, which is part of the RELATE (Rehabilitation, Evaluation and Learning for Autistic Infants and Toddlers at Einstein) program. Increasingly, Dr. Shulman and her colleagues are diagnosing autism at very young ages—2 or under in many cases.

“We at CERC were asking, ‘How early can you make a valid diagnosis of

autism?’ long before anyone else was, and our staff had been trained to use gold-standard instruments for diagnosing autism,” says Dr. Shulman. “So when the autism epidemic hit, we were ready.”

Detecting autism when children are young can make a tremendous difference. “When children are diagnosed early, the services we provide have a much better chance of improving communication skills and correcting aberrant behaviors,” says Dr. Shulman.

As it does for all its patients, CERC offers children with autism a range of services, including occupational and physical therapy as well as help with behavioral and learning issues, speech problems, social skills and feeding problems. Families of children with autism, for example, are offered support groups and help in accessing government programs that provide services. “A diagnosis of autism here is the beginning of the relationship, not the end,” Dr. Shulman says.

Tammy Fried, LCSW, is a social worker who runs support groups for parents of children with autism. There is also a support group for Spanish-speaking parents of children with autism and other developmental disabilities.

“Many parents isolate themselves due to their child’s disability,” says Ms. Fried. “They benefit from a place where they can meet other parents going through similar experiences and share the strategies they use to cope.”

Learning Social Skills

Children with autism spectrum disorders have difficulty interacting with others and need help in learning socially appropriate behaviors. “These children often can’t understand how other people might feel,” says Deborah Meringolo, M.A., M.S., associate director of the Infant and Toddler Team and the RELATE program. “They can misinterpret something as simple as the reason someone pulls away from a conversation. That person might need to go somewhere else, but the child might assume the person doesn’t like them. We teach people with autism spectrum disorders how to think more flexibly about others’ behavior.”

Children with autism and other disabilities learn social rules by participating in skills-based social thinking groups. “We teach them that in every situation there are expected and unexpected behaviors,” says Nancy Tarshis, M.A., M.S., supervisor of speech and



Nancy Tarshis, M.A., M.S., supervisor of speech and language services, and two of her young clients.

“Learning disabilities can make life very difficult, yet they are often overlooked or misdiagnosed...it was very important to me that adults be included in the program.”

— Emily Fisher Landau

language services at CERC. “The children learn that they will get good feedback if they behave in an expected way and that they will usually get negative feedback if they behave in an unexpected way.” Parents are able to view the social skills sessions in an adjacent observation office so they can learn the techniques and use the same vocabulary at home with their children.

Beyond teaching social skills, CERC staffers consult with the children’s schools and refer their patients for other services, such as behavior therapy or reading intervention, as needed. “We make sure their needs are being met all around,” Ms. Tarshis says.

Outreach to Adults

Amid all the publicity over children with autism, it’s easy to overlook that autistic kids grow up to be autistic adults. CERC has recognized this problem and is nationally noted for its programs serving not just children but people of all ages who have autism as well as other developmental disabilities. Those efforts to provide continuing care are centered in the Fisher Landau Center for the Treatment of Learning Disabilities, which coordinates all of CERC’s activities for treating learning problems in children, teens and adults.

The Fisher Landau Center was established in 1997 with a generous gift from Honorary Einstein Overseer Emily Fisher Landau.



EMILY FISHER LANDAU Advocating for Adults with Learning Disabilities

Emily Fisher Landau’s introduction to Einstein came through her friend, the late Judy Rosenberg, a longtime Einstein Overseer and one of the original group of women who came together in the 1950s to raise money for the new College of Medicine. “I wanted to join because I knew that accomplished Jewish students were finding it difficult to get into medical school,” Mrs. Fisher Landau recalls. “I wanted to support them in their endeavors.”

Mrs. Fisher Landau’s interest in Einstein became more specific when she was diagnosed with dyslexia in her 50s. Making it her mission to see that others had more resources for help

than she did, she established the Fisher Landau Center for the Treatment of Learning Disabilities at Einstein 1997, with Ruth Gottesman, Ed.D, as founding director. The two have developed a lasting friendship, in part a result of their shared passion for helping people with learning difficulties.

“Emily Fisher Landau is one of the most extraordinary people I’ve ever met,” says Dr. Gottesman, who is now chair of the Einstein Board of Overseers. “She has been a great friend to me and to Einstein. I was proud to be the founding director of the Fisher Landau Center when it was established by Emily over a decade ago. Einstein couldn’t ask for a better partner in its work with



1. Bambi Felberbaum presents Emily Fisher Landau with Woman of the Millennium Award, May 2000.



2. Mrs. Fisher Landau with Ruth L. Gottesman, Ed.D., left, and Einstein Overseer Renée Belfer, May 2000.

3. Dr. Gottesman visits with Mrs. Fisher Landau in Florida, March 2011.

4. Mrs. Fisher Landau and daughter Candia Fisher host Women's Division tour of Fisher Landau Center for Art, November 2007.



people with learning disabilities.”

Today the center offers educational, psychological, social, medical and vocational help to learning-disabled people of all ages, from preschool children to adults. It was important to her to have adults included in the program because—as she knew from her own painful experience—learning disabilities can go undiagnosed until late in life. Currently based in the Louis E. and Dora Rousso building, the program will soon move to the renovated, more spacious Van Etten building, along with the rest of the Children’s Evaluation and Rehabilitation Center.

Mrs. Fisher Landau’s deep commitment to Einstein has included a decade of service on the College of Medicine’s Board of Overseers, from 1999 to 2009; she now holds the position of Honorary Overseer. A pioneering member of Einstein’s National Women’s Division, she currently serves on the division’s board of directors and on the New York chapter’s executive committee. In recognition of her distinguished service to the

College of Medicine, Yeshiva University awarded her an honorary doctorate in humane letters in 1998.

“From my first meeting with Emily Fisher Landau, at a lunch in Palm Beach with Dr. Gottesman, I found her completely charming and a fascinating conversationalist, and someone with a deep concern for people with learning disabilities,” says Dean Allen M. Spiegel, M.D. “We are honored by this remarkable woman’s involvement with the College of Medicine. She has shown tremendous courage in recognizing, understanding and overcoming her own learning difficulties, and we greatly appreciate her very generous support for our efforts to improve the lives of others—both children and adults—who face similar problems.”

Mrs. Fisher Landau’s other great passion is art. In the 1960s she started buying modern masters such as Picasso, Léger and Dubuffet, and by the early 1980s she had become a champion of contemporary American artists. To help display her large collection, she opened

the Fisher Landau Center for Art in a former parachute harness factory in Long Island City, Queens, in 1991, and in 2010, she pledged 367 works to the Whitney Museum of American Art, where she has long been a trustee. The gift included works by nearly 100 major American artists, including Jasper Johns, Ed Ruscha and Andy Warhol, and in her honor, the Whitney has released a book titled *Legacy: The Emily Fisher Landau Collection*, featuring a selection of works from her donation and tracing ideas that have preoccupied American artists since the 1960s.

In 2000, the Einstein Women’s Division named Mrs. Fisher Landau “Woman of the Millennium” for her devotion to Einstein’s mission, her efforts on behalf of those in need and her impact on cultural life. “Never stop learning, never stop looking,” she says.

Mrs. Fisher Landau is the widow of Martin Fisher, a principal in the real estate firm Fisher Brothers, and of Sheldon Landau, a clothing manufacturer.

Ruth L. Gottesman, Ed.D., a professor of pediatrics at the College of Medicine who initiated the Adult Literacy Program at CERC in 1991, was named founding director. Over the years, the center has received wide recognition for the excellence of its comprehensive and innovative services.

Mrs. Fisher Landau's interest in learning disabilities stems from personal experience. She learned she had dyslexia when she was an adult, after many years of struggle. "Learning disabilities can make life very difficult, yet they are often overlooked or misdiagnosed," says Mrs. Fisher Landau, who recently turned 90. "As someone who was diagnosed later in life, it was very important to me that adults be included in the program."

On a visit to the center in 2010, Mrs. Fisher Landau met several parents whose children's lives had been turned around thanks to the center. "Three mothers told her how their children were failing in school and were on the verge of dropping out, with the prospect of life on the streets and perhaps even prison," Dr. Marion says. "Those kids found their way to the Fisher Landau Center, were evaluated, received the academic and social support they needed and started to excel. Now they are headed toward a life that includes college and the prospect of a good job."

Dr. Gottesman, who is now chair of Einstein's Board of Overseers and professor emerita of pediatrics, retired in 2001 from her posts as founding director of the Fisher Landau Center and director of the Adult Literacy Program. "Most adults with learning disabilities need to understand that they aren't the problem—they *have* a problem—and that there is technology that can help them manage it so they can succeed in their lives and careers," explains Dr. Gottesman. (Thanks to additional support from Mrs. Fisher Landau,

"People who have trouble reading have underlying problems in processing information. To learn to read they need to learn techniques to compensate for those processing problems, which is not so easy to do." – Mary S. Kelly, Ph.D.

Dr. Gottesman introduced computers specially programmed to "read" digitized text and "speak" it aloud as a high-tech learning aid for clients in the Adult Literacy Program.)

The Adult Literacy Program offered by the Fisher Landau Center is the only



Mary S. Kelly, Ph.D., is director of the Fisher Landau Center and the Adult Literacy Program.

CERC's New Research Focus

Thanks in part to support from Einstein's National Women's Division, CERC now has its first full-time director of clinical research: John J. Foxe, Ph.D., professor in the department of pediatrics and in the Dominick P. Purpura Department of Neuroscience, who was recruited from the City University of New York. Shortly before starting at CERC in January 2010, Dr. Foxe and his research partner, Sophie Molholm, Ph.D., were awarded a \$2.8 million grant by the National Institutes of Health to study why autistic people have trouble processing sounds and other sensory inputs.

"If you're at a loud party, it can be hard to make out what people are saying," according to Dr. Molholm, who is also an associate professor of pediatrics and of neuroscience at Einstein. "Looking at the

speaker's face helps you figure out what he or she is saying—a process combining sight and sound known as multisensory integration. But in children with autism, visual signals don't help them recognize spoken words nearly as well, and lacking this ability can pose major challenges."

Drs. Molholm and Foxe are studying how the brain integrates different inputs such as visual cues, sounds and vibrations. "We found that multisensory integration comes online later in autistic children than in typically developing children—their brains are putting things together, but the sensory inputs are out of sync, so it makes it difficult to manage the world," she says. "We hope to show where the deficits in sensory integration lie, so we can target specific treatments to each individual."

CERC has expanded its autism research by forming collaborations

program in New York City that provides one-to-one help for adults with learning and reading disabilities. It also teaches self-advocacy skills to help adults live independently.

“Learning disabilities are lifelong,” says Mary S. Kelly, Ph.D., who succeeded Dr. Gottesman as director of the Fisher Landau Center and the Adult Literacy Program. “People who have trouble reading have underlying problems in processing information. To learn to read they need to learn techniques to compensate for those processing problems, which is not so easy to do,” she adds.

The Adult Literacy Program continues to grow in popularity. “We’re known in the community, and we also get referrals from mental health clinics and literacy programs,” Dr. Kelly says. The program is usually helping 50 to



Up to three million adults in New York City need literacy services, but fewer than 60,000 receive them. The Fisher Landau Center’s Adult Literacy Program is the only literacy program in the city that provides the individualized coaching that is essential for teaching grownups to read.

with basic scientists at Einstein and Montefiore. Much of this new research activity focuses on the molecular basis of autism. Projects include collaborations with John Greally, M.B., B.Ch., Ph.D., at the Einstein Center for Epigenomics (he is associate professor of genetics and medicine and Einstein’s Faculty Scholar for Epigenomics, an endowed academic position established by Dr. Ruth L. and David S. Gottesman); Bernice Morrow, Ph.D., director of the division of Translational Genetics in the department of genetics (she is professor of genetics, of obstetrics & gynecology and women’s health, and of pediatrics and the Sidney L. and Miriam K. Olson Professor in Cardiology); and Brett Abrahams, Ph.D., assistant professor, department of genetics, who recently joined Einstein from UCLA and is looking into the genetic basis of autism.

The lab of Drs. Foxe and Molholm is also working to identify schizophrenia in children as young as 10 or 11. “We are looking at children with a family history of schizophrenia, who are at higher-than-normal risk of developing schizophrenia themselves,” says Dr. Foxe. “If we can identify children who will go on to develop the disease,

they might benefit from preventive treatment before having a major psychotic episode.”

John Foxe, Ph.D., and Sophie Molholm, Ph.D., stand behind a young man wearing a cap containing numerous electrodes that record brain wave activity.



60 people at any one time and performs 500 new evaluations a year.

Making Dental Visits Manageable

Few people like going to the dentist. But for Lloyd Vener, a recent dental visit made him scream, throw himself on the floor and try desperately to escape. “He’s very strong,” says his mother, Anna Mae Vener, “and his instinct is to resist.”

Lloyd is 44 years old and severely developmentally disabled. Luckily, CERC’s Special Care Dentistry Unit can deal with Lloyd’s terror and provide the care he needs. In fact, Lloyd has been going to CERC’s dentistry unit since he was three years old.

Receiving dental care is an especially troublesome problem for people with developmental disabilities. CERC’s dental unit is the only dental facility in New York City that offers them conscious sedation, a condition in which patients are awake and responsive while anesthetized against



People with autism and other developmental disorders often have difficulty sitting still and cooperating while receiving dental care. The Children’s Evaluation and Rehabilitation Center is the only facility in New York City that offers conscious sedation, in which patients are awake yet anesthetized against pain.

pain. The unit attracts patients from far and near who can’t be treated at conventional dental offices.

“If you have autism and don’t want someone to touch you, or you don’t want to sit in a chair for a long time, it’s very difficult to get dental services,” says

Dr. Marion. “As a result, many people who are developmentally disabled have poor dental hygiene. The conscious sedation we provide is not just for dental care but also allows other specialists, such as ophthalmologists or ear, nose and throat specialists, to provide care during the same session.”



Janine Santos, 17, a patient in CERC’s Pediatric Rehabilitation Unit, has known pediatric physiatrist “Dr. Rani”—Dona Rani C. Kathirithamby, M.B.B.S.—since age 6 months, when she started therapy for cerebral palsy. Dr. Kathirithamby directs the unit.

Looking to the Future

Philip O. Ozuah, M.D., Ph.D., oversees CERC in his role as chair of Einstein’s department of pediatrics. “For 55 years, CERC has done a fantastic job of serving the needs of developmentally disabled children,” says Dr. Ozuah, who is also a professor in the departments of pediatrics and of family and social medicine. “Once CERC becomes consolidated on the first and second floors of the Van Etten building, I know we’ll be able to do an even better job of helping these kids.” **E**

 **ON THE WEB**
More about CERC:
www.einstein.yu.edu/cerc