About five years ago the principal investigator of our project, Dr. Martha Rueter, Ph.D., was sitting in on a lecture that Dr. Ascan Koerner, Ph.D. was presenting about a theory called Family Communication Patterns Theory. He created this theory to explain how family members develop a shared understanding of the world around them. Every family is different and according to this theory, each has its own way of seeing the world that is determined by how family members interact with each other and their world.

Dr. Rueter and Dr. Koerner put their heads together and realized that the Family Communication Patterns Theory could help understand the experiences of families that have gotten little attention from social science research. These include ART families, adoptive families, and foster families. All these families are growing in number and have unique characteristics.

In its early years, Family Communication Project research focused on adoptive families. However, Dr. Rueter and Dr. Koerner quickly recognized that ART families received little attention in research, but have a great need for accurate information from physicians, policy makers, insurance companies, and other families experiencing infertility. So, Dr. Rueter and Dr. Koerner invited Dr. Jennifer Connor to join their research team. Dr. Connor is a marriage and family therapist with research and training expertise specific to ART families.

People continue to join the Family Communication Project team. The research team is shown below, but the FCP also includes lots of people who do the behind the scenes work that keeps the project running, and most importantly, our team includes the families who generously give their time to help others get an accurate picture of ART parents and their children.

Check out the Looking Forward article later in this newsletter to learn more about what the future holds for the Family Communication Project.

By: Veronica Jasperson
A Healthy Group of ART Children

Dr. Jennifer Connor, Co-Investigator on the Family Communication Project, evaluated the overall physical health of the ART children. Her findings reported that the ART children were, overall, a healthy group of kids.

ART children are a healthy group, even though about a third were born prematurely (3 weeks or more early), and a little more than a third weighed less than 5 pounds when they were born. For example, rates of birth defects and childhood disorders appear to be on par with the general population. Those who were born prematurely were more likely to be twin and triplets than singletons.

By: Jennifer Connor Ph.D.

Percent of FCP families vs. Families in the General Public
Scoring in the Normal Range on Adjustment Scales

To learn more about how ART children and parents are doing compared to the general population, we used the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) and the Adult Self Report (ASR; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2003). Both questionnaires assess various aspects of adjustment and well-being. The graph shows the percentage of ART children and parents that scored in the normal range versus the percent of the general population that scored in the normal range. The ART families that participated in our research scored higher than the general public on every scale, meaning that they had fewer problems than families in the general public. The following are examples of symptoms for each scale: Anxious-Depressed: Feeling like you can’t stop thinking about problems; Somatic: belly aches when you don’t want to go to school; Aggressive: hitting, slapping, biting, property destruction; Internalizing: thinking "I'm a bad person", self-injury "cutting"; Externalizing: Calling others names, Yelling at others; Total Problems: all of the scales combined.

By: Colleen Kelly

Parent-Child Relationship and Disclosure Among ART Families

Chanel Wright, an undergraduate student at the University of Minnesota majoring in Family Social Science evaluated parent-child relationship and disclosure among the FCP families. Her study asked three questions regarding parent-child relationships and disclosure of ART conception.

(1) Does ART parent-child relationship quality vary by disclosure? Probably not, parent-child relationship quality was just as strong in families that have disclosed as in families that have not disclosed. (2) Is the age of the child associated with disclosure? Yes, children were more likely to know of their ART status the older they were. (3) Does disclosure vary by method of conception? Yes, more donor children knew their ART status than non-donor children. Overall, in this group of FCP families, disclosure does not seem to affect parent-child relationships; however, further research is needed to be sure these findings apply to ART families, in general.

By: Chanel Wright
Family Interview Experience
This past year, all FCP parents took an online survey. Some were also invited to an in-person family interview. Invitations went to families whose children were at least 7 years old and who lived close to the Twin Cities metro area. At the in-person interviews, families did what is called a structured interaction where they talked about what is important to them as a family. They also completed a few more surveys. The discussion lasted 15 minutes and was videotaped so FCP researchers can learn more about communication in ART families. Families seemed to enjoy having the chance to talk about what is important to them and to have direct involvement with the research process. Thanks to everyone who was able to take part in the in-person interviews!

By: Kali Logue

Meet The Staff

You have allowed us to get to know a lot about your families, now it is our turn to let you know a little more about us!

Martha Rueter is the Principal Investigator for the Family Communication Project. Her research interests include family interactions in families where children are not genetically related to parents, adoptive family interactions, and child and adolescent adjustment within the family context.

What has been really interesting so far?
Martha: I would have to say that the most exciting finding is that FCP families, for the most part, are doing better than the average family.

Why do you think these families are doing so well?
Martha: That is exactly what the FCP is about: learning how ART families are doing and understanding their strengths and challenges. I am really impressed with the commitment FCP families have shown to reaching this goal. 82% of the families we contacted took part in the study. That is an astounding response. It really shows that FCP parents are dedicated and willing to take a lot of their time to help other ART families. Research is a slow process, so we won’t know for sure until later, but one hypothesis we will focus on will be on how focused ART parents are on their children.

What do you like to do in your spare time?
Martha: I like to snowboard and bike. I stopped running, but I also like canoeing and gardening with the spare time that I have.

Interviewed By: Veronica Jasperson

FCP Demographics
There were a total of 216 families who participated in the FCP online survey. This is enough families to begin to give us an idea about how things are generally going for ART families. Usually families had two children, although many had one and some had up to five. A wide range of family income was reported by FCP families, from $10,000 to more than $200,000 annually. About half of families earned over $100,000 per year. Most FCP families live in Minnesota, however, twelve other states across the U.S. are represented. In total, there were 312 ART children between the ages of 6-12 years old. Over half of the children were female (54.5%, n = 170). Children were on average 8.48 years old (SD = 1.43). Most children were conceived with parental gametes. As shown in the chart below, there are less donor children (n = 41, 13.4%) than non-donor children (n = 264, 84.6%). Among those using donor gametes, it was split about half and half between donor sperm and donor egg.

By: Di Samek & Anna Bohlinger

FCP: What is your role on the Family Communication Project?
Martha: I am the Principal Investigator, which basically means the buck stops with me. I am responsible for the overall success of the research project. But the project would never be successful without there being a huge group of researchers and students working together on it, and most importantly, there wouldn’t be a project without the families. More than 200 families participated in the last phase of our study. On the FCP research team, we have five investigators: Jennifer Connor Ph.D., Ascan Koerner Ph.D., two reproductive endocrinologists: Mark Demario M.D. and Brad Van Voorhis M.D., and me. The investigators are all professors. We also have several graduate students and quite a few undergraduate students. Together with the families, we are this big team that makes this all possible.

FCP families, for the most part, are doing better than the average family
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Looking Forward

The Family Communication Project is designed to be a longitudinal study that will help us learn about how ART families are doing as their children move into their teens and twenties. We just completed the first phase of this project, which was a pilot study. Through the pilot study, we tested out all the project procedures, including the online survey and in-person interviews. Now the research team is in the process of applying for funding from the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation to start the next phase of the FCP. For the next phase, several thousand families from across the country will be joining the FCP. Adding more families to the project will help us get an even clearer picture of the strengths and challenges of ART families.

What does this mean for current FCP families? About 95% of FCP families told us they would like to continue being a part of this ground-breaking research. In 3 or 4 years, we will create a second online survey and ask FCP families to tell us how they are doing as their children move into late childhood and early teens.

By: Martha Rueter