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The Autism Science Foundation provides funding directly to scientists conducting cutting-edge autism research to discover the causes of autism and develop better treatments. We also provide information about autism to the general public and support the needs of individuals with autism and their families.

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Samantha Els, known better as Sam, is the sister to Ben, an incredibly charismatic 19-year-old male diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Though she is a proud South African, Sam was born on May 26, 1999 in the United Kingdom and spent her younger years travelling the world with her family. She moved to Florida, in the United States, when she was 8 years old. Sam is an agent of change worldwide for siblings of individuals with ASD. She is the Ambassador of Sam’s Sibs Stick Together, a webinar series sponsored by Els for Autism® and the Autism Science Foundation. Her capstone project at Stanford University, the Social Side of Sibs, focused on the lived experiences of siblings of individuals with ASD.

Sam just recently graduated from Stanford University, where she had been attending since September of 2017. She graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Human Biology, concentrating on Global Public Health and Neurobiology. Sam is a member of the Stanford’s Women’s Rugby team and has spent a semester abroad conducting coral research in Australia. In addition to her participation in Stanford sports programs, she was a mentor for the Stanford Health Careers Collaborative where she designed curriculum for an after-school program encouraging underrepresented students from the East Palo Alto Academy to pursue scientific research while providing mentorship for their academic interests.
In 2005, Suzanne and Bob Wright co-founded Autism Speaks, inspired by their grandson who was diagnosed with autism. The Wrights helped raise funding for groundbreaking science, effective advocacy and extensive family services, enhancing lives now and into the future.

They spearheaded Autism Speaks’ signature initiatives: new federal laws ensuring financial security for people with disabilities and insurance reform for autism care; a public service campaign credited with educating countless families about the early signs of autism; World Autism Awareness Day, sanctioned by the United Nations; and the Light It Up Blue awareness campaign, now involving more than 150 countries.

Mrs. Wright also helped launch the iconic blue puzzle-piece logo now recognized around the world. The co-founders’ efforts earned international recognition, including a spot in the 2008 Time 100 “Heroes and Pioneers” category for their commitment to global autism advocacy.

Prior to Suzanne’s death in 2016, the Wrights had been married for 48 years and enjoyed spending time with their three children and six grandchildren.
Tom Bak

I was diagnosed with autism at the age of 3 and epilepsy at 7. When I was 2 I started liking rock music, and began playing guitar when I was 7 and piano at 10. It was then that I left public school and transferred to The Vanguard School, which specializes in education for students with disabilities including autism. I took lessons for guitar and piano and practiced every day (and still do). I discovered that I was really good at reading music and identifying notes and chords in songs. In high school I started a band with my sister for fun, and met many other musicians playing live shows and got to perform with them. I began choosing more difficult pieces to learn and perform, which improved my skills. After high school I attended community college and decided to transfer to a four-year university and major in music. I am now 22 years old and an undergraduate student in the music program Wells School of Music at West Chester University of Pennsylvania, studying piano.

Susan Daniels

Dr. Daniels serves as the Acting Department of Health and Human Services National Autism Coordinator, a role created by Congress to facilitate coordination and implementation of autism activities across federal departments and agencies. She also is Director of the Office of Autism Research Coordination (OARC) at the National Institute of Mental Health, and the Executive Secretary of the Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee (IACC), a federal advisory committee created by Congress to coordinate federal activities and provide advice to the Secretary of Health and Human Services on issues related to autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In her role with the OARC and IACC, Dr. Daniels oversees the strategic planning, policy, communications and operations for the committee, and serves as a liaison with external agencies and advisory committees. She has been serving in a leadership role for federal autism policy since 2008. Prior to working at NIMH, Dr. Daniels worked in policy and program management related to neurodegenerative diseases and infectious diseases at two other NIH institutes, National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). Before coming to NIH, Dr. Daniels was a Christine Mirzayan Science and Technology Policy Fellow and consultant at the National Academy of Sciences. She received her Ph.D. in molecular and cell biology from Brandeis University, where she conducted neuroscience research focusing on the function of the sensory nervous system.
Speakers

Brigitta Gundersen

Dr. Gundersen earned her undergraduate degree in biology from Stanford University and her Ph.D. in neuroscience from the University of Pennsylvania. Her graduate work, in the laboratory of Julie Blendy, focused on uncovering the molecular mechanisms underlying the behavioral effects of antidepressants in mouse models. Following her graduate work, she joined Nature Neuroscience as a scientific editor, where she coordinated peer review of papers across the entire field of neuroscience (specializing in neurodevelopmental and psychiatric disorders), as well as writing for the journal and organizing special focus issues and international meetings.

In 2016, Dr. Gundersen joined the Simons Foundation Autism Research Initiative (SFARI) as a member of the team of scientists responsible for managing SFARI’s autism grant portfolio. As a Senior Scientist, she focuses on grants involving work in animal models employing behavioral, electrophysiological and molecular approaches. She is also responsible for managing SFARI’s zebrafish resource and overseeing the SFARI Collaboration on Sex Differences in Autism.

Zoë Hawks

Dr. Hawks is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Laboratory for Brain and Cognitive Health Technology at McLean Hospital and Harvard Medical School. She received her B.S. in Biopsychology, Cognition & Neuroscience from the University of Michigan (2014) and her Ph.D. in Psychological & Brain Sciences from Washington University in St. Louis (2021). Under the mentorship of Drs. John Pruett, John Constantino and Desirée White, her dissertation evaluated prospective associations between infant cerebellar functional connectivity and autism-associated behaviors and outcomes. Her ongoing research leverages digital (e.g., smartphone-based) technology to dynamically assess behavior and cognition in adults. Future directions include using digital technology to support behavioral phenotyping, characterize intra-individual processes and predict functional and psychological outcomes in autism. Her work has been generously funded by the Autism Science Foundation and National Institute of Mental Health.

Matthew Maenner

Dr. Maenner is an epidemiologist and Surveillance Team lead in the Child Development and Disability Branch at the National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities. He leads CDC’s Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, which currently tracks the prevalence of autism among children, progress in early identification, and needs of adolescents in multiple U.S. communities. Dr. Maenner received the Presidential Early Career Award in Science and Engineering for advancing developmental disabilities research and surveillance. He joined CDC in 2013 as an Epidemic Intelligence Service Officer assigned to the Developmental Disabilities Branch. He received his Ph.D. in Population Health at the University of Wisconsin and completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the Waisman Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison, focused on intellectual and developmental disabilities research. He was a class of 2010 ASF predoctoral fellow.
Richard Spurling

Richard Spurling achieved a degree in International Business from Florida Atlantic University, where he played Division I tennis. After graduation, Richard continued to pursue a career in the tennis industry, teaching tennis and managing several high-profile tennis programs in Florida and Massachusetts. Richard earned his MBA from Babson College in 2008, with a focus on entrepreneurship. While living in Massachusetts, Richard and Dr. Shafali Jeste, an autism researcher, collaborated to create a program that was designed to use the sport of tennis as a means to provide unique social and developmental benefits to children with autism.

The first program location of ACEing Autism launched soon thereafter in the Longfellow Club in Wayland in 2008. Over the last 10 years, ACEing Autism has grown into a vibrant, volunteer-driven organization that serves over 1,000 children in 32 states through 100 program locations. Richard currently resides in Los Angeles with his two children, Nischal and Kiran, where he is advancing the vision of ACEing Autism with the aim of serving 2,500 children by 2023. He also serves on the Southern California Tennis Association and USTA National Adaptive Tennis Committees.

Amy Wetherby

Dr. Wetherby is a Distinguished Research Professor in the Department of Clinical Sciences and Director of the Autism Institute in the Florida State University College of Medicine, and the Laurel Schendel Professor of Communication Disorders. She has over 40 years of clinical experience with Honors of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. Dr. Wetherby’s research has focused on improving early detection of autism and communication disorders and providing community-viable evidence-based early intervention for toddlers with autism and their families. She is the Executive Director of the Florida State University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities. Dr. Wetherby is the Project Director of the FIRST WORDS Project, a longitudinal research investigation on early detection of communication delay and ASD. She has unique research and clinical expertise infusing technology to improve early detection and parent-implemented early intervention. As Director of the FIRST WORDS Project, Dr. Wetherby developed and implemented screening tools for ASD and communication delays in large population-based samples of children 9-24 months of age, which culminated in the development of Baby Navigator. She is lead investigator of an Emory Autism Center of Excellence RCT to test the efficacy of teaching parents of infants with early signs of ASD how to embed evidence-based intervention strategies into everyday activities. She is co-developer of Autism Navigator®, an innovative collection of online tools and courses designed to bridge the gap between science and community practice. Dr. Wetherby is the PI on the Autism Center of Excellence ACTION Network to blend clinical effectiveness and implementation research designs to study individual and combined effects of two evidence-based interventions in real world settings. She is also PI on a new collaborative research grant funded by NIMH to implement an effectiveness RCT of Mobile Coaching with the ESI model for parents of toddlers with ASD identified at 18 months.
In person in New York, Baltimore or Toronto, or join our virtual ride anywhere!

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Samantha Els and the family of Suzanne Wright on being honored with the 2022 Caryn Schwartzman Spirit Award

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Samantha is the moderator and ambassador of Sam’s Sibs Stick Together. Through her own experiences as a sibling of an individual with autism, she helps shine a light on the importance of sibling research and support.

samssibssticktogether.com
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March 30, 2022
The Neurodiversity Foundation is proud to recognize

Samantha Els & the late Suzanne Wright

for their incredible work to support the autism community.

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for honoring Samantha Els

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