

BY DAWN STUART

DIISP Lab Strives to Help **REDUCE CHILD ABUSE IN DURHAM**

RESEARCH TAKING PLACE at the Duke Interdisciplinary Initiative in Social Psychology (DIISP) lab is contributing to a community effort to reduce child abuse in Durham.

Lisa Berlin, research scientist with Duke's Center for Child and Family Policy (CCFP), is conducting the study to determine how community services for at-risk families are affecting parent-child attachment. Berlin, who has been at Duke since 2000, specializes in early child development and early intervention, particularly the prediction and prevention of child abuse and neglect.

"We know a great deal about normal attachment," she says. "This study is bringing that knowledge together with public health and child abuse prevention."

Berlin's study is one of many types of social science research for which the DIISP lab was created in 2005. "We are an interdisciplinary lab," says David Neal, lab director, explaining that the creators of the facility envisioned collaboration between branches of social science as well as achieving economies of scale.

"Having the shared facility brings people into dialogue, creating knowledge exchange and building relationships between disciplines," says Neal.

Additionally, it prevents duplication of effort and gives researchers access to leading-edge technologies. "Using our facility and equipment can make research projects more viable and cost effective," Neal says. "There is no need for researchers to obtain their own sophisticated audio and video recording systems."

The DIISP lab facilities include four observation rooms equipped with state-of-the-art audio and video recording equipment, networked desktop systems and removable desk partitions for individual or group testing, and two psychophysiology recording rooms equipped with biofeedback monitoring systems.

Berlin's technological needs for this research were fairly simple, though. She used video cameras that drop down from the walls instead of the clandestine ones. "The babies usually don't notice them," she says, describing the subjects of her research (children between the ages of 12 and 20 months).

Partnering with Berlin for the study is the Durham Family Initiative (DFI), a collaborative program of Duke's CCFP and the Center for Child and Family Health, a Duke-affiliated community service provider. DFI helps Durham County families at risk of child abuse become self-sufficient and supportive of their children's growth and development, with a goal of reducing child maltreatment by 50 percent in the next 10 years.

In the effort to meet this goal, DFI is evaluating the effectiveness of community service programs such as those of the Center for Child and Family Health. One such program, Healthy Families Durham, provides intensive support for at-risk new mothers through social workers' home visits beginning during pregnancy and continuing



up to a child's third year. Risk factors include child-bearing at a young age, mental health problems, low social support, and a history of trauma or domestic violence.

Mothers and babies involved in DFI's evaluation of the Healthy Families program are participants in Berlin's

research involving the "strange situation," a specific procedure widely used in studying attachment in early childhood development. During this procedure, the mother leaves her toddler in an unfamiliar playroom for up to three minutes. Observers note and record responses to the mother's departure, the presence of an unfamiliar person and the mother's return.

"The situation we are creating is mildly stressful and akin to a real life circumstance such as a baby being left briefly with the nurse at a doctor's office," says Berlin. "The separations are three minutes at the most, less if the baby gets very upset."

"We are interested in seeing what the stress elicits from the babies, especially in terms of using their moms as a source of comfort and support," she says. "There is remarkable diversity in how the kids react. Not all babies are able to use their mom for support, and not all parents provide the support easily or comfortably."

Research findings will indicate if the Healthy Families home-visit program is creating healthier mother-child attachments. "We would think that, if this program is preventing maltreatment, it should also be improving attachment," says Berlin. "But we're not sure. We are looking to learn more about the relationship between attachment and child abuse prevention in high-risk situations."

Berlin has found the DIISP lab's location at Erwin Mill among its most valuable features. "People are much more amenable to coming to central Ninth Street than a location on Duke's campus," she says. "It is easy to find, and there's plenty of parking."

Additional resources available to lab clients are a database of 1,000 adults willing to participate in studies and \$500 grants that can be used to pay participants. Any Duke department may use the facility, which is supported through the College of Arts and Sciences, the Office of the Provost and the Office of the Vice Provost for Research.

For information about conducting experimental research at the lab, contact David Neal at 919-681-6728. 🍷🍷