Newsletter February 2026

Happy Holidays from Minds for Minds, Te Ara Hāro and the Autism Research Clinic.

Happy New Year! We hope you were able to take some time to relax and enjoy time with family and friends.

Looking ahead in 2026, the Minds for Minds genetics team will be focusing on expanding our Autism Research Clinic in 2026. Our first year has been a great success. Working closely with an outstanding clinical team, we have applied our bespoke genomics approach to support early and more accurate diagnoses for 41 New Zealanders (14 families).

With additional funding (pending), we hope to extend this service to many more families across the motu. Watch this space!

We would also like to offer our sincere thanks to the Freemasons Foundation for their generous support during our first year of operation.

Our wider Minds for Minds and Te Ara Hāro research teams have also been very active. Below are some recent publications from across the team.

Recent Publications

Foundations of an Ovine Model of Fragile X Syndrome

Genes, 17(2) 2026
(**Full Article**)
Victoria Hawkins, Skye Rudiger, Clive McLaughlan, Jennifer Kelly, Klaus Lehnert, Jessie Jacobsen, Renee Handley, Kimiora Henare, Paul Verma, Russell Snell

Fragile X syndrome is a genetic condition that affects brain development and is a common single-gene cause of autism. It happens when a gene called FMR1 does not produce a vital brain protein known as FMRP. At the moment, there are no treatments that address this root cause.

Many potential therapies that look promising in mice studies have not translated well to people. This is partly because mouse brains develop differently to human brains, and there are important genetic differences between species.

In this study we created the first sheep model of Fragile X. Using CRISPR gene-editing, we switched off the FMR1 gene in sheep embryos. This produced two healthy founder sheep (one male, one female) that had no detectable FMRP protein, as hoped. The edited gene was successfully passed on to offspring, making it possible to breed animals reliably for future studies.

This sheep model provides a practical, human-relevant platform to test early-life therapies, such as replacing the missing FMRP protein during critical periods of brain development.

Recent Publications, continued

Does telomere length mediate the association between early life adversity and mental health in childhood?
Journal of Affective Disorders, Volume 394 (Part B) (Full Article)
Benjamin Fletcher, Gemma Hughes-Waldon, Emma Marks, Karen Waldie, Russell Snell, Zaneta Thayer, Susan Morton, Sarah Knowles, Kien Ly & Caroline Walker

The relationship between early life adversity (ELA) and an increased chance of developing anxiety may partly result from telomere length.

ELA is associated with, and had a direct effect on depression, but there was no effect of telomere length on depression. Telomere length did not mediate psychosocial relationships.

Proximal processes and contextual factors associated with early socio-emotional competence development.
Child Psychiatry and Human Development, Volume 56(3)
(Full Article)
Sahrish Ahmad, Elizabeth Peterson, Karen Waldie & Susan Morton

Data from 3,200 mothers and their children in the Growing Up in New Zealand study found that maternal behaviours, such as playing with toys or telling stories, positively predicted socio-emotional competence, whereas attending childcare and having more siblings negatively predicted it. Some evidence suggested that temporary contextual factors (such as the mother being unemployed temporarily) may not have a lasting socio-emotional impact.

Determinants of anxiety in neurodivergent and functionally disabled youth: Findings from Growing Up in New Zealand study.
Neurodiversity, Volume 3
(Full article)
Olivia Sutherland, Lisa Underwood, Benjamin D. Fletcher, and Karen Waldie

Neurodivergent young people experience a higher risk of developing anxiety symptoms, which can negatively impact social, educational and emotional functioning. The study aimed to investigate the relationship between neurodivergence and anxiety among 12-year-olds within an Aotearoa New Zealand context. Neurodivergence was not significantly associated with anxiety after adjusting for covariates, but functional difficulties predicted higher anxiety at age 12.

Gross motor development in children with Autism: Longitudinal trajectories from the Growing Up in New Zealand study.
Autism Research, Volume 18, Issue 2
(Full article)
Paula Araya, Katrina Phillips, Karen Waldie, & Lisa Underwood

This study tracked gross motor development (GMD) in New Zealand children. By age 8, 173 had either an autism diagnosis (n = 108) or parent-reported autism concerns (n = 65). Regardless of diagnosis, GMD delays at 24 months were more common among girls, preterm children, and children of mothers identifying as European.

Recent Publications, continued

After adjusting for antenatal and child factors, the proportion of autistic children with GMD delays was higher than their neurotypical peers across all groups, especially among those with autism concerns or a diagnosis.

GMD changes differed between 9 and 24 months, and no significant differences emerged between diagnosed children and those with concerns. The findings support screening children with GMD delays for autism at 24 months to enable earlier intervention.

Updates from the network

Paula Araya introduces a unique physiotherapy approach to Autism care training

Paula Araya, a Psychology PhD candidate from the University of Auckland and kinesiologist from the University of Valparaiso (Chile), is leading a historic first national training in autism with a physiotherapist approach for specialists and primary care staff of the Ministry of Health in Chile.

The comprehensive national training programme aims to equip specialists and primary care staff with vital knowledge on the early detection of autism.

Training by a researcher with combined research and kinesiology experience means the programme introduces a crucial physiotherapeutic approach to understanding neurodevelopmental conditions.

Traditionally, autism diagnosis and support have heavily emphasised psychological, socio-communication and behavioural markers. This new training module, focusing on children and adolescents, bridges a critical gap by training health professionals to recognise early motor and psychomotor developmental difficulties.

By integrating movement and physical development indicators alongside traditional markers, primary care staff can identify potential developmental delays much earlier.

This initiative represents a massive upscaling of skills for Chile's public health sector, promising earlier interventions and better long-term outcomes for autistic children and their families across the country. Minds for Minds celebrates this incredible example of how interdisciplinary research and international collaboration stemming from the University of Auckland are creating real-world, systemic change in how autism is understood and supported globally.

Community reports showcase results of studies on Autism early intervention and life outcomes

With support from the Laura Fergusson Trust and the Joyce Fisher Endowment Fund Trust, pertinent findings from two major New Zealand Autism studies were reported to the public by Autism NZ.

Conducted at the University of Otago and the University of Canterbury, these studies inform public understanding and policy decisions that support the wellbeing of Autistic people and their families in Aotearoa.

Updates from the network, continued

The **Let's Play/MOSAIC study** findings highlighted the importance of early intervention, while the **Life Outcomes** study utilised population-level data to investigate the challenges faced by Autistic individuals.

Liz Fairgray
Goldstone Travelling Award Winner
A big congratulations to Liz Fairgray who has won the the Margaret Goldstone Travel Award. The award will cover a month visiting centres in the United Kingdom that provide speech language therapy to children with communication challenges.

Although the focus is on children with hearing loss, many of these children are also on the Autism spectrum. Many aspects of working with children with hearing loss are mirrored when working with young children who have autism. These parallel strategies include:

- Parent coaching
- Using a strengths-based focus in interactions with children
- Establishing joint attention
- Employing stages of play to introduce and promote stages of language & communication
- Reinforcing the use of home-based routines as the ideal environment for fostering meaningful communication

These sites include the London-based Auditory-Verbal United Kingdom (AVUK), Oxford, and the University of Manchester.

Resources

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