

Student Studies Siblings of Children With Disabilities

While much research has been conducted on parents of children with disabilities, much less has been performed on siblings of disabled children. “Not a lot of people look at how it affects the siblings; what the siblings feel, how they view the disability and how it affects their life,” says BYU undergraduate, Shannon Martino.

Martino is working with Dr. Susanna Olsen and several other students to learn more about how siblings are affected. “We want to know what the unique stressors are that these families have to deal with,” says Martino. She is interviewing siblings of children with autism and Down syndrome.

“Stressors,” Martino says, are occurrences in siblings’ daily routine that other children do not normally experience, such as learning new ways to communicate or performing special health care techniques. She asks them a number of sentence completion questions such as, “When something bothers me, I _____” or “When I have to take care of my brother, I _____.” The respondents fill in the blanks with their own words helping Martino understand what they experience every day.

The senior from Denver began working on the research 18 months ago, but spent this past winter semester collecting specific findings for her ORCA-sponsored study. Along with research and her coursework she has been interning at Utah Valley Medical Center, helping children with illnesses and disabilities adjust to new challenges.

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In her studies Martino has found that most siblings are pro-active in dealing with difficulties they encounter. “Many say, ‘I’ve learned how to deal with this, or solve it on my own,’” she says. “I think it shows that kids are really resilient and they’re very adaptive to whatever situation they’re placed in. They’re not just passive agents without the ability to deal with things.”

While looking for summer work a couple of years ago, Martino contacted several professors to see if they had any available research positions, not the usual job-hunting route most students take. “I just really fell in love with it, and it is really interesting to me,” she says of her research experience. Following graduation Martino would like to pursue a career in health care. Specifically, she is interested in being an educator on health care issues and applying her research experience. “That’s the end goal of all of

this research,” she says. “To be able to create support groups for parents and for siblings.”

She advises other students to not be intimidated by research, that it can be an active and even a fun pursuit. “It’s not necessarily sitting in the library and looking up research.”

“I felt like I didn’t know anything when I first started, and over the process I’ve learned so much,” she says. “It has given me an opportunity to learn from my professors, who are so brilliant.” She also states that doing research in a field of possible interest is the best way for students to get better acquainted with the discipline, and decide if it’s right for them.

“Dr. Olsen is awesome, I get a lot of support from her,” says Martino. A good relationship has developed between teacher and student through the research experience. It was through her mentor that she learned about the ORCA research opportunity. “With a mentor you get individual, personal, one-on-one attention,” she adds. The attention has helped her develop skills, define her career goals and become competent in the job market.

Martino is also impressed that in weekly research meetings her professors start with a word of prayer. When asked if it affects her working abilities, she says, “Absolutely. I think it helps us keep our minds clear and stay focus. And it helps us come together.”