



Bob and Lynn Koegel in front of the Koegel Autism Center. “Their work is enormously influential in schools, with families, and within the medical community,” says Jane Close Conoley, dean of the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education.

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Where Autism Gets Treated Right

Renowned Koegel center settles into a new and bigger home

BY GEORGE FOULSHAM

When Bob Koegel arrived at UC Santa Barbara in the 1970’s, children with autism weren’t allowed to go to school. In fact, most of the world hadn’t heard of the word. “When I started, people made bumper stickers that said ‘Educate Autistic Children,’” Bob says. “Nobody knew what autistic meant. They thought it was a typo — they thought it meant ‘artistic’ children. Now, everybody knows what autism is.”

It’s an epidemic, and the Koegel Autism Center, which recently moved into its impressive home on the west end of the new Gevirtz Graduate School of Education building, has never been busier. Lynn Koegel is director of the center, which has been recognized by the National Academy of Sciences as one of the best in the country. Her husband, Bob Koegel, is co-director and a professor of counseling, clinical, and school psychology, as well as head of the special education program. He

teaches graduate students and directs their research, while she applies their findings to the treatment offered at the clinic and in the field.

Bob Koegel’s autism research at UCSB began with only 20 children in a small house on the west side of campus. Today, he, his wife, and about 100 clinicians work intensively with several hundred autistic children and, on a short-term basis, with as many as 1,000. “And they come from all over the world — Europe, South Africa,

Mexico, South America, Asia, everywhere,” Lynn Koegel says. “We do have long wait lists. It’s sad that there are so many kids now.”

Their research has led to legislation forcing states to include autistic children in public schools. It’s also been covered extensively by the major television networks — ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS all have done documentaries on the Koegels’ research. “This has become a national problem,” Bob says. “All of this research, productivity,

political activity, media attention — all of this led to the growth of the autism center.”

A leadership gift of more than \$2.5 million from Brian and Patricia Kelly has played a big role in enabling the center to expand into its new state-of-the-art facility. And a \$940,000 grant from the Broad Foundation has funded the new Eli & Edythe L. Broad Asperger Center at the Koegel clinic.

Lynn Koegel is the author of *Overcoming Autism*, hailed as one of the most practical and helpful books available on autism treatment. In addition, she was featured in a 2005 episode of ABC’s “Supernanny” television series. She worked with the child of parents who had all but given up hope that their son could be helped. “Before your eyes, she gets this child talking, and smiling, and laughing,” says Bob.

The couple’s expertise is used every day by doctors, here and around the world. They have trained every pediatrician in Santa Barbara County to recognize the signs of autism. But it doesn’t stop there. They helped train every pediatrician in Nova Scotia — and Holland is next. “We’re training a team that’s going to train all of the health providers in Holland,” Bob says. “People are hearing about this, so now we’re being contacted not only by other countries, but also organizations that would like to do large-scale training in the United States.”

Jane Close Conoley, dean of the Gevirtz School, explains the importance of the Koegels’ research and clinical work. “Lynn and Bob Koegel lead the nation in developing effective treatments for individuals with autism spectrum disorders,” she says. “Their work is enormously influential in schools, with families, and within the medical community. In addition to their National Institutes of Health-supported research efforts, they offer expert clinical services to many hundreds of families each year. They are committed to developing the next generation of researchers and practitioners. UC Santa Barbara is very fortunate to be home to the Koegel Autism Center.”

While their work provides hope for forlorn parents who had all but given up hope, the Koegels’ long-term goal is to cure autism. “We’re searchers,” Bob says. “We don’t just take what the world gives us. Like the whole campus, our goal is to improve the world.” ■

CAN AUTISM BE CURED? ASK THE EXPERTS

Bob and Lynn Koegel Answer Frequently Asked Questions

Q We didn’t know much about autism at all in the 1970’s, yet now it’s an epidemic. Can you explain why? Was it misdiagnosed, or just misunderstood for many years?

A Autism was rare prior to the late 1980’s with an incidence of about 1 in 2,500. The most current estimates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are now 1 in 110. The research suggests that there is an actual increase in the number of children with autism, and not just misdiagnosis. However, with any disability, there may have been some, especially the more mild cases, that were misdiagnosed in the earlier years.

How does one recognize autism?

Autism is still diagnosed by three symptom areas. The children have deficits in communication, difficulties socializing, and highly restricted, often ritualistic and repetitive interests. Early on, such as in the first year of life, the children can already have lower levels of social interaction — for example, they may not be interested in little games like “peek-a-boo” and may not respond with a social smile; they often don’t respond to their names, and seem more interested in toys than people. Their onset of first words is usually delayed, and if they do acquire words, they often aren’t social words, such as “mama” and “dada” like typical children. They may play repetitively or line up toys and many exhibit repetitive body movements such as hand-flapping. In the pre- and elementary school years they exhibit social communication difficulties, show little or no interest in peers, and prefer to engage in solitary (often repetitive) activities.

What’s the difference between autism and Asperger’s Disorder?

The main difference has been the development of language. To be diagnosed with autism an individual has to exhibit a language delay. Children with Asperger’s Disorder do not have a language delay, but exhibit difficulty with the social use of their language, such as difficulties with voice modulation, low levels of eye contact, and so on. Individuals with Asperger’s Disorder usually have average or above average IQs, while the language delays can result in (often misleading) lower scores on intelligence tests in individuals with autism. Both have challenges socializing and restricted interests.

The Koegel Autism Center focuses on treatment of autism and Asperger’s. Can you explain what you do?

The Koegel Autism Center has focused its efforts on developing “Pivotal Response Treatment” or “PRT.” Pivotal responses are those that, when learned, result in widespread positive changes in a number of other untreated behaviors. This is so important, because in the past the intervention was extremely time intensive and costly. By focusing on pivotal areas the habilitation process is much more rapid. One key pivotal area is motivation. Through our research, we have developed a number of strategies that improve the children’s motivation to learn. This also reduces the children’s disruptive behaviors and simultaneously improves their positive affect. When used in combination, these motivational strategies are extremely efficient and effective. We also work closely with families. We have programs where families can come from outside the city, state, or country for a week to learn intervention procedures, which they can take back home with them and train others.



A staff member at the Koegel Autism Center works with a young client.

at this point, each year the intervention procedures that we have developed are resulting in more and more children who lose all of their symptoms.

— Interview by George Foulsham