# Psychology at La Trobe

## Autism Spectrum Disorders Research

### Professor Cheryl Dissanayake

I’m Professor Cheryl Dissanayake, I’m the Director of the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre at La Trobe University.

Autism Spectrum Disorders are a complex set of neurodevelopmental disorders and we now believe that there might be up to hundreds of these disorders but each of them are characterised by impairments in social communication and a restricted range of repetitive behaviours and interests.

La Trobe really is a hub of excellence in Autism now, given that we have the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre. We’ve also opened an Early Assessment Clinic and in addition we also have the Victorian Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centre.

Our mission here is really to advance our understanding of the nature and causes of Autism Spectrum Disorders and how to study evidence-based strategies and interventions for helping to manage this set of complex conditions.

Starting from early development we’re looking at what the signs of Autism are in very early infancy and toddlerhood and then how these children develop and how the Autism changes as they develop, how they engage with other people, both socially and emotionally, what they understand about other people and what they understand about themselves. We need to know about these manifestations in order to know how to intervene and help these children and their families and help their families to manage them.

We’ve also got a research program looking at how to help people transition into high school and importantly, into tertiary education. And taking us into adolescence and adulthood, we’re also studying what other conditions sometimes happen with Autism Spectrum Disorders, what we call comorbid conditions like, for example, sleep disorders and anxiety disorders.

We have now a really large team of researchers, of students, of postdoctoral fellows. In fact at last count we had 44 live projects running within the centre. We also have many collaborations with other universities across Australia as well as international research centres. Some of the international work we’re doing is conducting training in other countries; we’ve gone to Poland, we’ve trained in South Korea, in Japan and we’re about to go to China to train these community-based professionals on what Autism looks like in infancy, so that they can identify these children earlier.

Our work is funded by grants but also through philanthropy. By that I mean individual donations, but also we work in partnerships with many philanthropic trusts and foundations.

In the absence of known causes and cures for this complex body of conditions, our best approach is identifying early, diagnosing early and ensuring that these children have access to good evidence-based interventions so that we can alter the developmental trajectories, which we know creates a better outcome for these children and their families.