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Press release : 2004 : 10 : 18 : USF St. Petersburg Professor Garners Campus-- Largest Research Grant in History

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Head banging, hand biting, screaming and face slapping are tactics some children with special needs use to express themselves. But this self-injury can be symptomatic of a spiraling problem that can spin beyond a parent’s grasp. USF St. Petersburg’s V. Mark Durand, PhD, has been awarded a five-year federal grant from the highly competitive Innovations in Research program of the U.S. Department of Education to investigate the most efficient way to help parents address their child’s behavior.

The largest grant in USF St. Petersburg’s history, this $892,622 research project could change the way psychologists offer support to parents of special needs children. This research award brings campus research totals to nearly $2.5 million. In FY 2003-04, the campus recruited 51 new faculty members and 13 new administrators to campus and research funding totaled $1.6 million.

Durand said, "If a child is banging his head to tell his mom to come spend time with him, I want to help parents figure out why the child is behaving this way. In the past, our field used punishment to teach children – we restrained them, shocked them or slapped them. We have found a better way that doesn't punish children."

"Expect more good news from USF St. Petersburg's growing research programs," said USF St. Petersburg's Research Leader Christopher F. D’Elia. "This highly competitive research award is testimony to the scholarship of Dr. Durand, who is recognized internationally for his work on childhood behavior and autism, as well as his popular college psychology textbooks."

The goal of this five-year longitudinal study is to work with the family, not just the child, to address severe behavior problems and prevent them from becoming worse. Dean of the College of Arts at Sciences at USF St. Petersburg, Durand will identify young children with parents that score high on pessimism tests and already feel out of control with their children. Families will receive one-on-one therapy instead of traditional group therapy to help prevent severe behavioral problems in the future. The testing will be done at the USF Center for Autism and University of Albany Center for Autism and will include 40 families at both locations.

"Parents often blame themselves and feel worthless and embarrassed because their children act poorly, so they don't want to be in group situations," Durand said. "We need to get parents back to the point where they want to try to work with their children again."

This project will adapt a program called Optimism Training, developed by Martin Seligman, PhD, University of Pennsylvania psychologist, to offer alternatives to help them work through their child’s bad behaviors. A pilot study found that when researchers used Optimism Training first, parents were much more successful in addressing and reversing behavior problems.

Durand said that the field has been very receptive of these new findings, beginning a paradigm shift for the field of psychology. "We are trying to re-educate the field that these are not bad parents. The pilot study found that parents do not participate because it's one more person that is telling them that they are a bad parent."

**About V. Mark Durand, PhD**

Known worldwide as an authority in the area of developmental disabilities, Durand has written five books including the best-selling abnormal psychology textbook that is used at more than 330 universities. This textbook, which has changed how this course is taught worldwide, has been translated into Spanish, French and Hindi.

Durand has worked with children’s psychological issues for more than 20 years, administering more than $3 million in federal research and training grants in the areas of functional communication, assistive technology, home-school training, and improving the problem behaviors of children and adults with autism and other sever disabilities.