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Press release : 2005 : 07 : 13 : Psychology Professor Receives \$400,000 Grant

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Psychology Professor Receives \$400,000 Grant

July 13, 2005 9:02AM EST

A USF St. Petersburg professor recently received a major research grant for \$405,000 from the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD), recognizing him as one of the country's leading scientists in the field of psychology. The NICHD has only awarded six of these peer-reviewed grants to researchers working in the area of child and family development during the past 30 years, and this is the first for the University of South Florida.

The Independent Scientist Award, formally known as a KO2 grant by its application and review process, was presented to James P. McHale, PhD, associate professor of psychology. The grant's purpose is to support the work of newer independent scientists whose investigations have already made a unique mark in their field, so that they may devote more intensive effort to their research.

"This prestigious award recognizes Dr. McHale's growing reputation in the field of psychology," said Mark Durand, PhD, vice chancellor for Academic Affairs and psychology professor. "The grant will support his already outstanding research on children and non-traditional families, and will enable him to expand his potential for significant contributions to the field. In his short time with USF St. Petersburg, Dr. McHale has brought national visibility to the campus and the psychology program."

McHale's research introduced the concept of "co-parenting" to the field of child development. During the past decade, his work has established that even very young toddlers benefit when the adults responsible for their care support one another's parenting efforts – and conversely, that children frequently exhibit social and behavioral adjustment difficulties when the co-parenting adults raising them undermine one another's parenting efforts.

"When parents don't see eye-to-eye about how best to comfort, discipline, and socialize their children, they are more likely to engage in conflicting parenting practices, to undermine one another's efforts, and sometimes to disengage from active parenting altogether. When this happens, children develop a variety of difficulties ranging from impulse control problems to aggression to anxiety," said McHale, who earned his PhD in clinical psychology from the University of California Berkeley.

The primary focus of McHale's grant is to illuminate factors that influence early patterns of co-parenting that develop within months after a new baby arrives. To date, he has found that when expectant parents express pessimism about future family dynamics during pregnancy or show significant distress in their marriage, they are less likely to provide adequate support for one another's parenting efforts – especially when the family is joined by a **temperamental** baby.

"The mystery is why so many parents develop co-parenting difficulties, despite having been adamant before the baby was born that they did not want to recreate problematic co-parenting dynamics they experienced in their own families. My students and I are working to solve that mystery, and this award will help accelerate our efforts."

McHale's work already established that co-parental support and antagonism are stable through time, highlighting the critical importance of early identification and detection of co-parenting problems. The significance of his previous findings was underscored last summer, when the national organization "Zero to Three" awarded McHale a contract to publish his research in a forthcoming book entitled, "Charting the Bumpy Road of Co-parenthood."

According to the National Institute for Health's Computer Retrieval of Information on Scientific Projects (CRISP) database, of the six KO2 awards presented to family studies researchers, three focused on family-related biological factors and three focused on social factors in child and family adjustment.

"I have truly been fortunate since joining the faculty at USF St. Petersburg to have received both affirmation and administrative support for my scientific work" said McHale. "I have especially appreciated the university's clear commitment to support my research efforts, and those of my colleagues."

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