Research Assistant and Practicum Student Application Guide

Centre for Developing Minds, Trent University

Thanks for your interest in the Centre for Developing Minds! We've put together some answers to common questions and guidance to help you understand what we're looking for when hiring.

Information that can help you decide whether to apply

General overview of the lab's research

Our research spans a lot of social and cognitive development. Our main focus is on children's confidence (how they tell correct from incorrect) and collaboration (how they work with others), but we also have interests in social reasoning, theory of mind, teaching, effort and persistence, decision-making, learning, and many other topics. The best way to know what we're interested in is to read the lab's papers.

Our research focuses on experimental and behavioural approaches. We do not do neurological work (any imaging or physiology), qualitative studies, and we do only very limited computational work. We generally work with children (ages 3-12), and only in typically-developing populations.

What is the role of a research assistant or practicum student in the lab?

First, just to clarify, the lab treats research assistants (who are paid) and practicum students (who receive course credit) the same. The only difference is the required written components of the practicum course. We'll use 'RA' to describe this role from now on.

RAs are primarily responsible for running studies with kids. This involves going off campus to different community locations (schools/daycares, public spaces, festivals) and working one on one with children there. You never do this alone! There are always at least 2 lab members at each appointment. This requires having a reliable form of transportation (or carpooling with other lab members), and having large blocks of time free in your schedule. The best time for schools and daycares is in the morning until about 1pm, and the best time for most community locations is in the afternoon from about 3-4pm until 7-8pm or during the day on weekends. We strongly prefer when people's schedules have multiple open blocks of time and there is some flexibility, but we also understand that you likely have other activities that fill those times and do our best to work around that.

Our studies are largely computer-based. We'll teach you everything you need to know about running the programs and working with kids in a research setting. It does help to have prior experience with children, as a lot of developmental psychology relies on your ability to earn trust quickly and on your improvisation skills when kids do weird things. You will need to follow strict ethical and procedural protocols, and keep timely and organized records (which we train you on).

In community settings, you are also interacting with parents, teachers, and other members of the public. For this, you will need to have good conversational skills and professionalism. We train you on the basics, but it helps to have experience in customer-facing roles.

RAs are also involved in general lab operations. You may be asked to help with recruitment efforts, outreach, social media, or other core operations of the lab. This includes a biweekly (once every 2 weeks) lab meeting where we go over administrative notes, then spend time discussing a research article or presenting research to each other. Your participation in this is expected as part of your role.

RAs are also given opportunities to build independent research skills. We aim to pair you with a specific project. You will read relevant literature and be responsible for this project during your time in the lab. You may also have the opportunity, as your goals align, to design a study, analyze data, or present findings. If you are heavily intellectually contributing to a project, this could also include writing up results for publication. You are always encouraged to find opportunities to build your skills, and you will have regular meetings with Carolyn or a graduate student to work on these goals.

What is the mentorship environment like?

I aim to have a supportive mentorship style, but also one that encourages you to grow. This often means presenting constructive feedback or pushing you to think or act in new ways. I always strive to make sure that you feel emotionally safe to do this: to know that I believe in you and that I am pushing you because I know it will help you grow. I do not believe in a 'survival of the fittest' approach to mentoring. When you ask for advice, I prefer to provide you with as many perspectives as I can, then leave decisions up to you. Occasionally, I might have a strong opinion on what is best, and will share those with you.

If we are working on any written work together, I will give you feedback, but you will need to give me enough time to provide it. Typically, I need one week to provide feedback, and then you'll want to budget some time to make changes before a final deadline. I typically have multiple rounds of feedback for major writing pieces. At the same time, we likely won't have a lot of solid 'deadlines,' but I will expect you to keep on

top of your work and not leave it until the last minute. It will be your responsibility to keep your projects moving forward.

The lab more broadly is a highly collaborative environment. Research is a team sport, and all lab members are expected to contribute and work together. You will have the support of other lab members in your work, and you are expected to help others. I highly encourage you to use our lab space even when not working on lab stuff (provided there is room) as a way to build this kind of comraderie. Also, our lab is nice and the chairs are comfy.

I have a dream study that I want to run. Can I do it?

If your dream study happens to align really well with our interests, maybe! Most projects run by RAs are ones that are part of my broader research program (so things that I have been thinking about for a while). But sometimes there aren't active projects that need support, or you've got an idea that is just super cool. In those cases, we co-create something.

Some roles (thesis students, graduate students) have more of an expectation of co-creating research, and bringing in their own ideas. That expectation doesn't exist for RAs (so you can learn the ropes first!), though we will **always** encourage you to share your ideas and see if there are ways to incorporate them into what we do.

What kind of commitment is expected?

We expect RAs to be willing to commit 10 hours per week. This includes the lab meeting and individual meetings. For practicum students, written work may go beyond the 10 hours, though most work is known early in the semester and not due until the end.

Many weeks will not have 10 hours of work, especially if we are not testing participants. You are welcome to either work fewer hours, or to find tasks to do that support the lab (like outreach efforts, supporting others in the lab, or generating research ideas).

We have a strong preference for people who are able to commit for multiple terms. You are welcome to bounce between paid positions, practica, and eventually thesis roles, depending on your eligibility and the availability of funds. Commitment through the summer is always nice, though not expected.

What compensation is available?

All members of the lab receive compensation for their roles – we do not hire volunteers.

Some RAs are paid from our grants, which is typically an hourly rate set to living wage. Let us know if you are eligible for TWSP, as this can help us recoup some costs.

Over the summer, students can hold TSWEP or NSERC USRA positions to conduct full-time work. Priority for these positions is always given to students in the lab first, but applicants are welcome to mention an interest in these and we can arrange applications if it fits.

Practicum students need to meet the criteria for those courses (75% in methods/stats, 3rd or 4th year). Our preference is for multi-semester practica.

The lab is also open to Mitacs positions and Community-based research roles, when the projects are a clear fit to the lab expertise. Priority for these will be given to people already in the lab.

Information that can help you prepare an application

What is the application process?

Typically about 1 month before each semester, we will open up applications. Often, applications will be coordinated through Trent's job board, though sometimes we'll handle them internally. We aim to complete hiring within about 2-3 weeks so that there is time to process the hiring paperwork.

Applications include a few pieces. We ask for you to answer some questions about how you are prepared to succeed in this role and why you are interested. We also ask for your CV/resume to understand your prior work experience, your transcript to know where you are in your degree and what academic knowledge you have. It's also important to provide your schedule (i.e., when you are generally available to work, we don't need to know the exact events you have scheduled).

We review applications and select some to interview. Interviews are conducted with Carolyn and usually another lab member. If we select you for an interview, we will provide you with a list of questions that we will ask so that you can prepare. Please do! This shows us that you take the role seriously.

We try our best to provide all applicants, especially those who make it to the interview stage, with some feedback. Even if we don't have time to provide individualized feedback, we'll at least let you know if you didn't get the role.

What do you look for in an applicant?

We look for signs that you will be successful in the duties above, and that you'll fit into our lab culture.

Prior experience with research, children, and customer service is very helpful, but it's more about what skills you have in these areas than saying you did a role. When

preparing an application, we encourage you to review the info above to understand how your experiences map on to the roles, and communicate that to us.

Since we work with children, it's important that you be a friendly person! This doesn't mean you need to be sunshine and rainbows all the time, but you should be able to at least put on a convincing act when needed. This comes through in your writing style and your interpersonal communication during the interview. We know that you're probably nervous, and will try to make you feel comfortable so that you can show this to us.

We also need a high level of professionalism. Being well-spoken, prepared, and with polished application materials and email etiquette all demonstrate this to us. Again, you don't need to be this way all the time, but you do need to know how to pull it out when needed.

If you want to be pushed to the top of our list, then in addition to the above, we want to see a genuine curiosity from you about things we care about. We're in this field because it's cool to learn things about psychology! We want to see your enthusiasm for learning and for our research in particular come through. You can show this to us by mentioning articles of ours that you've read and maybe some of your own thoughts on them, ideas that you've had that relate to our work, or other things like that. We have a few questions in our interview that give you the opportunity to nerd out and we love it when you really go for it. It's best when your brand of nerd matches our brand of nerd, but often we just love to be around other people who love learning.

Any general tips?

We often get applicants who don't have any experience (especially in research – perfectly normal for undergraduate applicants). When we ask about research experience, you can absolutely admit that you don't have any experience yet, but it's really important to tell us why you feel that you will be successful here! This is a critical interview skill, and there's lots of advice online about how to handle this. Generally, you want to think about what that kind of experience involves and find other experiences you have that speak to that. Or, at the very least, tell us about how you can learn those new experiences (and maybe back that up with an example of another time you learned a similar skill!).

When we ask why you want to work in the lab, the most frequent answer we get is 'I want research experience,' followed by 'I like the research you do.' While we appreciate the honesty, these answers don't tell us anything about *you*! Why does this area of research interest you, what is it about research experience that you really want to learn, and why?

We always have more qualified applicants than we have room for. That often means that decisions come down to arbitrary things. When that happens, don’t give up on us, or on research! Sometimes you just need to keep trying until the timing is right.