

Researchers study social communication in pediatric traumatic brain injury

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Dr. Genova is the assistant director of the Center for Neuropsychology and Neuroscience Research at Kessler Foundation. Credit: Kessler Foundation/Jody Banks

Kessler Foundation researchers conducted a pilot study to determine

ways to assess social communication difficulties in children with impaired social functioning caused by moderate-to-severe traumatic brain injury (TBI). The article, "The relationship between social communication and social functioning in pediatric TBI: A pilot study" was published on August 14, 2019 by *Frontiers in Neurology*.

The authors are Helen Genova, Ph.D., Alison Haight, Joman Natsheh, MD, Ph.D., John DeLuca, Ph.D., and Jean Lengenfelder, Ph.D., of Kessler Foundation. Dr. Natsheh is a former Children's Specialized Hospital-Kessler Foundation fellow in neuroscience. This study was conducted during her fellowship training, with funding from the Research Center at Children's Specialized Hospital.

Social functioning comprises a range of skills including social cognition, [social skills](#), emotional perception and social communication. Among children with traumatic brain injury, social communication is frequently impaired, adversely affecting wellbeing, school performance, and community integration. Despite these consequences, there is no gold standard for assessing disorders of social communication in pediatric TBI.

In this [pilot study](#), researchers used an [assessment tool](#) often used in assessing children with [autism spectrum disorders](#)—the Social Communication Disorders Checklist (SCDC)—to test its efficacy for assessing deficits in social communication in children with TBI. They correlated this assessment with objective and subjective measures of social cognition and social functioning.

Researchers compared two groups of children, 16 with [traumatic brain injury](#) (TBI), and 20 children who had not sustained a brain injury. All underwent neuropsychological evaluation and completed a task of social cognition (Theory of Mind), which tests the ability to discern the thoughts and beliefs of others. Their parents completed two

questionnaires -the SCDC and the Behavior Assessment System for Children, 2nd edition (BASC-2).

Compared with the children without brain injury, parents reported that children with TBI had significantly poorer social communication skills, and more behavioral and social issues. In addition, deficits in social communication correlated closely with deficits of social cognition as measured objectively by the Theory of Mind task.

"These preliminary findings support our hypothesis that children with TBI who have problems with social communication also have problems with [social cognition](#) and social functioning," said Dr. Genova, assistant director of the Center for Neuropsychology and Neuroscience Research. "This study also suggests that the SCDC has potential for screening children with TBI for deficits in social communication," she continued. "Such a tool would help us understand the complex social and behavioral impact of TBI in the pediatric population, and develop interventions that will help clinicians provide optimal long-term care to young patients and their families."

More information: Helen M. Genova et al, The Relationship Between Social Communication and Social Functioning in Pediatric TBI: A Pilot Study, *Frontiers in Neurology* (2019). [DOI: 10.3389/fneur.2019.00850](https://doi.org/10.3389/fneur.2019.00850)

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