



By Queen's Psychology
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For Queen's Psychology faculty and graduate students, conducting research over the past 12 months has been anything but business as usual. COVID-19 restrictions have meant that researchers have had to literally think 'outside the box' of their normal lab spaces in Craine Building and Humphrey Hall.

Dr. Valerie Kuhlmeier of the [Social Cognition Lab](#) (part of the Developmental Psychology program in the Department of Psychology) says that she and her lab feel incredibly privileged to be able to work safely from home during the pandemic.

"We had to stop many in-lab studies that were examining the early development of prosocial behaviour", Valerie recalls. "We are still adapting our methods. The summer and fall of 2020 were spent examining our options, and learning new software and coding".

Like many other labs, The Social Cognition Lab has had to transition to online testing, which presents many challenges when participants are younger than 5 years of age. Valerie and her team had to find ways to adapt their in-lab measures of helping, sharing, comforting, and cooperating behaviour to keyboard and mouse clicks, all the while making it seem naturalistic. Their first project – one that three undergraduate students along with PhD student, Sylvia Pinheiro, are involved with – is meant to examine whether children engage in sharing behaviour in a similar manner in synchronous (like Zoom) and asynchronous (pre-recorded) tasks. [\(Click here to learn more about the studies\)](#)

Valerie and her lab have also had to shift from in-person meetings on campus to virtual interaction. "I've been pleasantly surprised with how well we've been able to stay in communication", Valerie says. "We use Teams for posting messages, holding individual meetings, sharing files, and streaming pre-recorded presentations. The chat function works well

as a replacement for my “open-door” on campus. We use Zoom once a week for our lab meeting, and we join other labs every other week for a Zoom “journal club”. Department of Psychology Information Technology Assistant Justin Siu set up a new file share system on campus for us, so we can access our lab files remotely”.

The Social Cognition Lab’s research projects have definitely slowed down, however, and changing to online testing with children has held many challenges. For example, PhD student Tara Karasewich was forced to change the last study of her dissertation because it relied on in-person testing.

There were also unexpected positive aspects to the switch to virtual research. “We connected with Queen’s PhD alum Dr. Kristen Dunfield, and now, Tara and I are collaborating with Kristen’s lab at Concordia on a project with data that were collected pre-pandemic”, Valerie explains. “Tara has been able to make connections with graduate students there, and because their lab meetings are virtual now too, she can regularly attend.”

Another unexpected positive change Valerie and her lab have discovered is access to virtual conferences and talks. Many of these are free or have greatly reduced registration fees. Unlike traditional events, there is no travel associated with attending these events, making them more inclusive and environmentally responsible. Members of the Social Cognition Lab have attended talks hosted by other universities that they would otherwise might have been out of reach.

Looking forward to eventually returning to campus and in-person research, Valerie feels that aspects of her work - like data collection - will be much easier. “Though we will still hold on to some of our online testing methods if we find they are effective”, Valerie concludes. “Online testing has the potential benefit of reaching a much more diverse participant sample.”

Valerie says that the Department of Psychology resources and leadership have been instrumental in navigating pandemic-era work life. “Staff support has helped us get to where we are today”, Val concludes. “And our departmental leadership has been great in creating an atmosphere that puts our well-being first.”

Families that are interested in participating for studies can go to:
<https://www.queensu.ca/psychology/devstudies>