

2019-2020 SPRING LECTURE SERIES

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DR. JACOB BURACK, Department of
Educational and Counselling Psychology
at McGill University

TALK: Developmental and strength-based
approaches to studying attention in persons
with autism spectrum disorder: Toward a
more rigorous and humanitarian science

BIOGRAPHY

Jacob A. (Jake) Burack is Professor of School/Applied Child Psychology and Human Development in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology at McGill University (Montreal). He is the founder and director of the McGill Youth Study Team (MYST), through which his work and that of his students is guided by the motto of "excellence in the study and education of all children". Jake is a founding co-investigator of two national networks funded by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research – the Autism Research Training Program (ART) and the National Network on Aboriginal Mental Health (NAMHR) – a member of the Research Management Committee of Kids Brain Health Network and the editorial boards of Development and Psychopathology and the Journal of Intellectual Disability Research, and the scientific director of the Summit School Center for Education, Research, and Training.

ABSTRACT

Based in classic developmental theory and in more than two centuries of ever-increasingly sophisticated medical thinking and science, the developmental approach has transformed the theory, methodology, and interpretation of the study of persons with intellectual disability and other developmental conditions, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The primary contributions include the differentiation among persons with intellectual disability by etiology, the application of developmental principles, the emphasis on mental age (rather than chronological age), the consideration of the "whole person" along with their family and community, and the rejection of the "deficit" model. The developmental approach allows for considerably more precision in the study of these populations and the resultant rejection of common deficit myths, albeit as part of a process that highlights the extent to which this field is a nascent one. In this presentation, I will both provide a historical overview of the developmental approach to developmental conditions and suggest a rethinking of traditional deficit models. In particular, evidence from the study of attention among persons with ASD will be cited in the context of the rethinking of the notion that performance inherently reflects disability, ability, or capacity in favor of a more nuanced story that involves an emphasis on styles and biases that reflect real-world attending. The ultimate goal is to suggest that the study of attention, and other aspects of functioning among persons with ASD, as well as those with other developmental conditions, might best be recast in terms of the question of "how" rather than "how well".