

Allison Lipitz '05 Takes on Research into Children's Suggestibility

Advancing an area of study is not typically the first thing on the minds of college freshmen. However, Allison Lipitz '05, now a sophomore in the College of Human Ecology, may do just that as she contributes to the work of her mentors with the research project she began her first semester at Cornell. The Policy Analysis Management and Human Development double major spent the past year studying the behavior of children in Ithaca and New York City. As Lipitz analyzes her data, Human Development Professor Stephen J. Ceci, her supervisor, considers that her undergraduate research is a two-way street.

Lipitz first heard about Ceci in her Psychology 101 class. Ceci's status as a leader in the study of child development caught her attention. A prospective lawyer, her interest was piqued by Ceci's investigations into the suggestibility of children and its relationship to their behavior in court testimony. As a Cornell Presidential Research Scholar, Lipitz was looking for undergraduate research opportunities.

When she contacted Ceci and expressed interest in working with him, he invited her to his meetings with Human Development doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows to learn more about the research in the field. Lipitz had an opportunity to immerse herself in studies that were only referenced in her psychology class. She read reports on the development of intelligence and memory, and she attended presentations about the accuracy of children's courtroom testimonies. Lipitz welcomed this early introduction to an academic atmosphere in her busy freshman schedule. She recalls that signing on with Ceci "worked out perfectly."

Soon after Lipitz started attending Ceci's meetings, she latched onto a research project. Postdoctoral researcher Gabrielle Principe's work with preschool-aged children in the Early Childhood Center sparked Lipitz's curiosity. Principe's work, gauging the impressionability of children, inspired Lipitz to develop her own research project. She set out to investigate juvenile memories by finding out how children incorporate new knowledge into knowledge they already have. Throughout her freshman year, she visited the children in the Early Childhood Center and read them a story. The story always involved two characters, Sam and Sally, and sometimes included a picture that illustrated their activities. After her narrative, Lipitz asked her audience a variety of questions to test their memories and to see what types of questions elicit certain answers. She found that including a picture, as well as when in the story it is introduced, affected the children's responses and their ability to accurately remember the story's events.

Lipitz's dedication to the Early Childhood Center project impressed Ceci and Principe, and both supported her decision to continue the study over the summer. Ceci was confident in Lipitz's abilities and had no qualms about extending her project. Ceci affirmed that when he and Principe approved Lipitz's proposal for a summer study, "We felt she had gained the research tools needed to do her own research project."

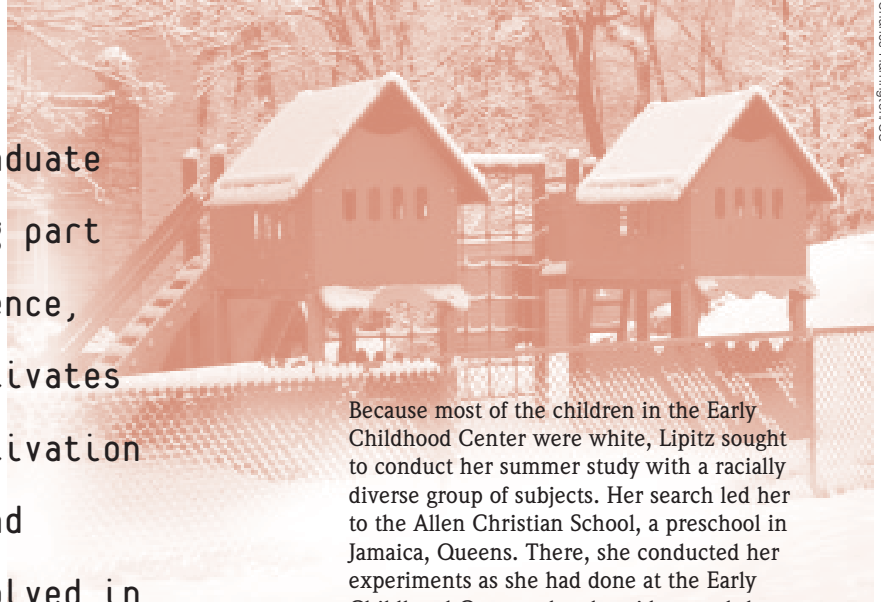
Sheila Marikar



Allison Lipitz

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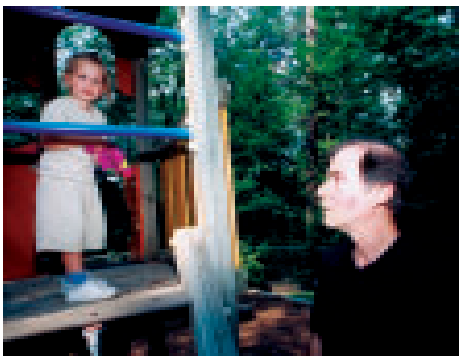
Because most of the children in the Early Childhood Center were white, Lipitz sought to conduct her summer study with a racially diverse group of subjects. Her search led her to the Allen Christian School, a preschool in Jamaica, Queens. There, she conducted her experiments as she had done at the Early Childhood Center; she also videotaped them to facilitate data coding and analysis. Lipitz reflects fondly on her summer study at the Allen Christian School: “The children were so friendly, helpful, and eager to find out what I was doing. They made the experience a lot of fun.”

Lipitz began her sophomore year by analyzing the data she collected over the summer and synthesizing it with her previous research at Cornell. She hails undergraduate research as a defining part of her college experience, asserting that it cultivates her skills of self-motivation and time management and allows her to get involved in studies similar to those she reads about in class. Her supervisors anticipate her project’s success; Ceci has already invited Lipitz to present her findings to his Human Development doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows.

Ceci took Lipitz on as an undergraduate research assistant chiefly to encourage her scholarship. Working with her for over a year, Ceci now speculates whether Lipitz’s research might enhance his own projects, and comments, “If that were to happen, it would be just terrific.”

Sheila Yasmin Marikar '05

Matthew Fondeur/CU



Stephen Ceci, Human Development



For more information:

Allison Lipitz '05
anl9@cornell.edu
Professor Stephen J. Ceci
Human Development
sjc9@cornell.edu