£3.7m facility to advance leading autism research

Wohl Wolfson ToddlerLab set to give researchers a better knowledge of autism

Breakthrough discoveries made at Birkbeck about the early development of autism and other behavioural conditions will be furthered at a new laboratory designed to study toddlers.

Research at the £3.7m Wohl Wolfson ToddlerLab will increase the understanding of developmental disorders and will potentially generate a programme of interventions and life-changing prospects for future sufferers.

To date, discoveries have been made with young infants in the BabyLab at Birkbeck’s Centre for Brain and Cognitive Development (CBCD). Scientists at the CBCD have lowered the age at which differences in brain development can be detected to just six to eight months, and they were recognised as making the “top autism discovery of 2012” by the Simons Foundation Autism Research Initiative.

In the BabyLab, researchers place passive sensors on babies’ scalps to register brain activity, while babies engage in games and other everyday behaviours. However, the BabyLab’s facilities are not designed to study toddlers, who require more space as they carry out various daily activities, including walking and playing.

Using the latest wireless technologies, the Wohl Wolfson ToddlerLab will enable the advanced scientific study of brain development for children from 18 months to three or four years in an environment simulating familiar surroundings for toddlers. Studying brain activity during sleep will also be possible, thereby providing valuable data about how sleep impacts on child development.

The research in the Wohl Wolfson ToddlerLab will help to develop and assess the efficacy of early interventions, which have considerable scope for success compared to treating conditions when they emerge, by which time they are deeply embedded. According to research in the Netherlands, even expensive early intervention can save more than £860,000 per individual with autism during a lifetime.

Professor Mark Johnson, Founder and Head of the CBCD, is leading the development of the Wohl Wolfson ToddlerLab. He said: “The more we understand the early signs of autism, and how they unfold into the full syndrome over the first years of life, the better we can target support services and help children and their families. The research conducted at the Wohl Wolfson ToddlerLab promises to change the lives of future autism sufferers.”

The Wohl Wolfson ToddlerLab, which will adjoin the existing CBCD offices at 32 Torrington Square, is being made possible thanks to generous donations from the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation and the Wolfson Foundation.

For more information, visit: www.cbcd.bbk.ac.uk/babylab