

VUW Infant and Child Cognition Lab
Information for Volunteer Research Assistant Position

What is psychology research in general?

The goal of psychology research is to understand the mind and behaviour. This can range from exploring how the human auditory system perceives sounds, to how hormones influence memory, to how children think about the actions and thoughts of others.

What kind of research are we doing at the VUW Infant and Child Cognition Lab?

Researchers at the VICC Lab study social cognitive development in infants, toddlers, children, and sometimes adults under the supervision of the lab director, Dr. Alia Martin. Just a few examples to illustrate our research: We might ask whether babies understand that some kinds of actions (like speaking or gesturing) are useful for communication while others (like coughing or walking) are usually not. Or we might study when babies begin to pay attention to and care about what other people can see or what they know about.

How do we do the research?

Our research involves parents and infants from the community visiting our lab at VUW to participate in approximately 10-minute long experiments. In our experiments, infants sit in their parents' lap and are presented with sounds like speech or music, and with visual displays such as videos, animations, live action shows, or interactive games. We measure infants' responses to what we show them: we'll almost always measure how long their look at things, since infants tend to look longer at things they find more interesting or unexpected; but we also use other measures of infants' behaviour like who they choose to play or share with. By measuring infants' spontaneous responses, we can find out what infants understand about other people, and about the world around them. We also do some more interactive studies looking at social cognitive development in older children typically between 2 to 5 years of age. These studies might be done in the lab, or at local schools or child care centres.

What kind of research activities will I be participating in at the VICC Lab?

As a volunteer research assistant you will be participating in many aspects of research. You may help schedule infants and parents for studies, test infants or children in studies, process and code infant data (translation: watch videos of babies in studies and evaluate their behaviour). You will attend lab meetings at which we discuss current research projects in the lab and recently published papers, and you will contribute to general lab tasks like helping to design and create recruitment materials, and set up a lab that will be fun and interesting to children.

What kind of commitment does doing research at the VICC Lab involve?

Research at the VICC Lab requires a minimum commitment of 7 hours a week. This includes some combination of 2- or 3-hour weekly work shifts in the lab, and a weekly 1-hour lab meeting. At every lab meeting, all lab members do short check-ins discussing their activities of the week, then we discuss current studies going on in the lab or a recently published paper, and finally, we discuss any problems that came up during the week, ranging from computer problems to testing mistakes, and how to improve our research practices. We ask students to commit to at least one trimester in the lab (i.e., commit to the lab for the remainder of the trimester in which you signed up) in order to get a solid background and understanding of developmental research.

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What will I get out of my research experience at the VICC Lab?

Through your lab experience, you will get hands-on experience with research in developmental psychology. You will be exposed to all stages of the research process, from the conception and development of a research idea to its implementation. This is ideal for students who are considering a career for which research experience is relevant (psychology graduate school, clinical psychology, speech pathology, medicine), or who just want to get a better idea about what research in psychology is like. One full trimester of work in the lab is required to be eligible for a letter of reference from the lab director. However, two trimesters or a more intensive one trimester in which you work at least 10-15 hours would likely result in a stronger letter (we need to get to know you and your work in order to provide a good reference).

Are there opportunities for paid positions?

There are occasional opportunities for part-time paid RA positions, typically for Honours or postgraduate students; however, a strong undergraduate applicant with relevant experience would also be considered. The best way to get experience relevant to a future paid position is to spend a trimester or two volunteering in the lab.

Students interested in becoming more involved in research and potentially leading their own research project in the lab should consider applying for a VUW Summer Research scholarship (minimum stipend of \$6000 for 10 weeks of full-time work over the summer; <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/students/money/scholarships/summer-scholarships>). Students who have volunteered in the lab for at least one trimester are *significantly* more likely to be eligible to apply for this scholarship under Dr. Martin's supervision. The reason for this is simply that conducting research with infants requires many specific skills, including knowledge of experimental software, professional manner with parents and children, knowledge of the consenting process specific to families with children, etc. So if you think you might be interested in pursuing developmental research in your career, come try out working in the lab for a trimester or two. Of course, students with strong research experience working in other labs will also be considered for these scholarships.

Are there opportunities for undergraduates to work in the VICC Lab for course credit?

Yes. If you're interested in working more independently on a research project in the lab during the academic year and are a 2nd or 3rd year student, you might consider a Directed Individual Study course such as SCIE306. You should contact Dr. Martin in advance of the trimester in which you want to take the course to discuss potential research projects. Students who have already worked in the lab will have an advantage in terms of skills and readiness to do an independent project with infants or children.

Are there opportunities for postgraduate students to do their research at VICC Lab?

Yes! Students interested in doing Honours research in the lab, or joining the lab as a Master's or PhD student, should email Dr. Martin directly to express interest (do not fill out the application form). Information about postgraduate study in psychology at VUW can be found at <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/psyc/study/postgraduate-study>.

So how do I become a volunteer research assistant at the VICC Lab?

Fill out the Research Assistant application form (same form for volunteer or paid position) and email it to the lab manager, Mary Beth Neff, at marybethneff@gmail.com with a recently updated CV. The goal of the application form and CV is to get a sense of your skills, experiences, and interests that are relevant to the lab. Promising candidates will be contacted for an interview.

Please return application to marybethneff@gmail.com and alia.martin@vuw.ac.nz.