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## Tackling Timely Issues

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# Tackling timely issues

*Two psychology professors  
and their students  
study local youth and  
the challenges they face.*

**I**n 2002, two young psychologists fresh out of graduate school settled into adjacent offices in Pioneer Hall and quickly became friends as well as colleagues.

Personally, Jennifer Linder and Tanya Tompkins, both assistant professors of psychology, have much in common. They are running buddies and young mothers - their daughters were born only 10 months apart.

Professionally, they began research projects in local schools with common threads of youth and family mental health. Linder is studying relational aggression with the Girls and the Media project. Tompkins is involved with the Families and Adolescents Coping with Stress (FACS) project and suicide prevention research.

Separately, they are tackling issues that hit close to home for Yamhill County families – stress, depression, aggression and suicide. Together, their research packs a punch that they hope will ultimately benefit the Linfield students they mentor and the local community they call home.

## Families and stress

At any given moment, hundreds of Yamhill County adolescents are dealing with intense stress stemming from divorce, illness, relationships and grades. Tompkins believes that how youth define and cope with that stress is critically important.





Tanya Tompkins, left, and Jennifer Linder, both assistant professors of psychology, launched collaborative research projects in the community to explore growing issues facing today's youth including stress, suicide and relational aggression. The research provides valuable information for families, while giving Linfield students a deeper look at important topics.

“We live in a fast-paced, goal-oriented culture, and research suggests that we’re over-scheduling our kids,” Tompkins said. “Working parents are absent. Kids feel alienated. It’s a recipe for disaster when you think of mental well-being.”

Tompkins is studying high school students and the relationships closest to them – family and peers. She wants to learn their reactions to different types and levels of stress, and whether the reactions can be moderated either by the individual, peers or family influences. Tompkins and her students are analyzing and evaluating results from a survey completed by local high school

students, their teachers and parents. Ultimately, Tompkins would like to expand her research to observe families as well.

As is often the case for researchers, one question leads to another as Tompkins and her students sift through stacks of data.

“I’ve always had ‘why’ questions. My poor mother,” she said with a laugh. “And that’s what psychology is all about. Why are we the way we are? Why are people so different?”

And that’s the challenge for Tompkins, a first-generation college graduate who enrolled at the University



Depression among people born after 1970 has increased 10 fold, according to Tanya Tompkins, whose work provides a snapshot of stress levels, behavior problems and emotional issues affecting local youth. In addition, she and Jody Witt '07 studied the effectiveness of suicide prevention training, both in local schools and in the Linfield resident adviser orientation.

of Colorado with an eye on law school but quickly found her niche in psychology. Her love of children further pinpointed her child clinical specialty. If her work leads to solid findings, Tompkins may be able to help today's youth better cope with demands they face at a young age.

## Suicide prevention

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 10- to 19-year-olds, Tompkins said. That is one reason she's a member of the Suicide Prevention Coalition, a local organization formed in 2005 after a string of teen suicides in Yamhill County.

“We live in a fast-paced, goal-oriented culture, and research suggests that we're over-scheduling our kids.”

— *Tanya Tompkins*

Last year, Tompkins and her students launched a research study to test Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR), a suicide prevention program, and to determine its effectiveness in Yamhill County schools. QPR teaches school district personnel how to recognize warning signs of potential suicide and refer students for help.

Tompkins and her students collected baseline data before school personnel received QPR training. Follow-up results indicate the training improved knowledge, providing participants with the ability to recognize warning signs of suicide and the confidence to intervene.

With the community research project finished, Tompkins and Jody Witt '07, who helped draft the study, brought the research back to Linfield by integrating the QPR training into resident adviser (RA) orientation. Witt received a Linfield faculty/student collaborative research grant to create a study involving five other institutions to determine whether QPR is useful at the college level as well.

“This is research that has been needed for a long time,” said Witt, a psychology major and former RA who has worked closely with Tompkins for the past three years. “So many schools are using these programs and no one knows if they're working. Most suicidal thoughts happen during transitional periods in students' lives and RAs can see changes in behavior. They're the eyes and the ears of the dorms where most students live.”

Community psychological research projects such as these not only build knowledge, but also directly help people. Witt knows that in addition to providing needed data for her research project, RAs came away with training crucial for their work with students.

“When students come upon a person who may be suicidal, they will have the tools to address that,” Witt said.

The suicide prevention work has broad implications for youth in the community, according to Kristen (Snook) Michael '04, prevention specialist with Yamhill County. Michael, who is also a member of the Suicide Prevention Coalition, said Tompkins' evaluation of the QPR training program is not only helping to identify short-term effectiveness and limitations to the program, but also will aid in improving training focus and methods.

“Tanya’s research will certainly benefit the community, if as a result, we are able to educate community members in a more meaningful way and help those in need access important life-saving resources,” Michael said.

## Girls and TV aggression

One source of stress and depression among younger girls is their relationships with peers. For Linder’s Girls and the Media project, she and her students studied 100 fifth-grade girls to determine whether those who watch aggressive programming are more likely to be aggressive and have poor-quality relationships.

Linder is specifically interested in relational aggression, behaviors that use relationships for harm, such as rumor spreading or the silent treatment. Previous

research on media aggression has focused almost exclusively on physical aggression, found more commonly in boys.

“Skills acquired in relationships early in life tend to impact later relationships,” she said. “If a girl is using relational aggression in a friendship in childhood, that has implications for her functioning throughout the rest of her life.”

Both aggression and media were topics of interest to Linder during graduate school at the University of Minnesota Institute of Child Development when she completed an internship at the National Institute on Media and the Family.

Last year, fifth-graders answered questionnaires about their relationships and favorite TV shows. Now, Linfield students are watching the TV programs to provide a breakdown of the types and levels of aggression



Jennifer Linder’s ongoing study of 100 fifth-grade girls is looking at relational aggression and whether those who watch aggression in TV shows are more likely to be aggressive. In the long run, Linder hopes her work will have a positive impact on the community and start a conversation between youth and their parents.



From right, Linder, along with Kelsey Lyle '07, Holly Dyson '07, Milana Smith '09, and other Linfield students watch favorite TV shows of fifth-grade girls to provide a breakdown of the types and levels of aggression in each show. The work is part of Linder's Girls and the Media project.

in each show. Preliminary findings suggest that relational aggression occurs at the same rate as physical aggression. Ultimately, Linder will examine how viewing aggression relates to children's behavior in relationships.

Kelsey Lyle '07, a psychology major and Linder's research assistant for the past three years, has been surprised by the adult-like viewing habits of the preteens.

"A lot of girls listed shows that don't seem appropriate for fifth-graders," she said. "I wonder how and why they are allowed to watch these shows."

During a second component of the study, Linfield students also observed and videotaped girls with their best friends to assess the quality of their friendships and conflict resolution skills.

Linder's project has resulted in a plethora of data and research possibilities for students. Last year, Lyle used TV and movie ratings to examine whether girls who watched age-inappropriate media used more aggression.

"There is so much data," Lyle said. "When you're collecting it you don't think about how many directions it can take, but when you look through the questions you realize there is a lot to work with."

Don Benton, a counselor at McMinnville's Memorial Elementary School, said projects like these help local school personnel to better understand youth issues.

"This research is important," Benton said. "It's

heightening awareness of situations when kids feel uncomfortable. We need to empower kids to recognize when there's a problem and teach them to deal with it in ways that are respectful of others."

Once findings are compiled, Linder hopes to share the results with the community, and ultimately hopes they influence parents' decisions about media use. She would also like to see the school district adopt a media literacy program to educate students about media influences.

Meanwhile, her advice to parents is simple.

"Know what your children watch and talk about it," Linder said. "Research has shown that if you talk to your children about what they're watching, the negative effects of media are greatly diminished. If even one parent changes media practices at home, I feel this has been a success."

## Sparking questions

More than just assisting Tompkins and Linder on their research, students have developed projects of their own and presented their research extensively at state and national conferences. In addition to Witt and Lyle, Chip Dendere '08 is looking at the emotional adjustment of children who are forced to assume adult-like responsibilities. Ashley Reichelt '07, Jess Wilson '07 and Jennifer Schenck '08 have been instrumental in collecting data, while Cassi Lundberg '09, Kendall Moriarty '09,

“I never understood the importance of what I learned in the classroom until I started applying the knowledge to these projects. Concepts became clear to me. It was like putting two pieces of the puzzle together to see the full picture.”

– Jody Witt '07

Stephanie Pulliam '07, Anna Breckenridge '09, Holly Dyson '07, Emily Jenkins '08 and Milana Smith '09 are helping to code the TV shows.

Community research projects such as these bring coursework to life, according to Witt.

“I never understood the importance of what I learned in the classroom until I started applying the knowledge to these projects,” said Witt, who hopes to become a school psychologist. “Concepts became clear to me. It was like putting two pieces of the puzzle together to see the full picture.”

Tompkins' own student research and clinical experience proved pivotal to her career. As an eager undergraduate student at the University of Colorado, she became involved with a local mental health center and provided a respite for parents whose children had severe emotional and behavioral problems. One child in particular, an adopted 5-year-old with severe ADHD and bipolar disorder, touched her profoundly.

“The parents had only been away from her twice in five years, and one of the times she tried to set the house on fire,” recalled Tompkins, who became interested in family stress, treatment and diagnosis. “I wondered, ‘Why is she this way?’”

For Lyle, the past three years have inspired ideas about how to apply psychology in a career. After a stint in the Peace Corps, she hopes to pursue environmental psychology. She said the chance to work on cutting-edge research is exciting.

“This is a fairly new area of study,” she said. “Content analysis of shows being watched by fifth-grade girls has never been done.”

– Laura Davis

## Internships build strong community ties



Linda Olds

The Linfield College Psychology Department has strong ties to the community, thanks to Linda Olds, who has been crafting win-win partnerships for more than three decades.

Olds, professor of psychology, has coordinated more than 340 internships for Linfield psychology majors in the local community since her arrival at the college in 1975. The experience helps local agencies, while providing students with valuable experience as they seek jobs or graduate programs.

“Internships are a wonderful two-way avenue,” she said. “They enrich links and service to the community, while also giving students exceptional opportunities to experience the kinds of learning relevant to possible professional futures and toward applying abstract concepts from their classes.”

With a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and a minor in community psychology, Olds makes sure students gain experience in understanding the vast range of human service and study. Thanks to her efforts, Linfield students have interned in locations including Juliette's House, Rainbow Family Services, Yamhill County Health and Human Services, McMinnville Parks and Recreation, Henderson House, Crime Victim Services, Oregon Department of Human Services, local schools and more.

Many Linfield graduates continue in local social service roles. Kristen (Snook) Michael '04 completed an internship at the Yamhill County Commission on Children and Families, where she works.

“There are certain things that just can't be taught in a classroom,” said Michael, now a prevention specialist. “My internship helped me develop the skills to be effective in my current field, and I still work with many of the individuals I connected with during my internship.”

– Laura Davis

### Digging deeper

Media and children's development:

**[www.mediafamily.org](http://www.mediafamily.org)**

Relational aggression:

**[www.opheliaproject.org](http://www.opheliaproject.org)**

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:

**1-800-273-TALK**

**[www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)**

Family involvement:

**[www.family.samhsa.gov](http://www.family.samhsa.gov)**