Brown Center for the Study of Children at Risk Names New Director

Founding Director Barry M. Lester (left) and Incoming Director Marie Camerota (right)

After 20 years of outstanding leadership, Barry M. Lester, Ph.D., professor of Psychiatry and Human Behavior and of Pediatrics, has stepped down as Director of the Brown Center for the Study of Children at Risk. We are pleased to announce that Marie Camerota, Ph.D., assistant professor of Psychiatry and Human Behavior and of Pediatrics, has been appointed the Center's new Director.

Dr. Lester's Legacy

Dr. Lester has spent his career at the intersection of developmental psychology and pediatrics. As the Founding Director of the Brown Center for the Study of Children at Risk (BCC), Dr. Lester has built an interdisciplinary center that seamlessly integrates high-impact, clinically relevant research with evidence-based clinical services and professional training. The BCC was created to address the causes and manifestations of neurodevelopmental disorders in children and provide innovative and effective interventions to promote neurodevelopment and behavioral health in high-risk populations. Under his leadership, the BCC has built a strong national and international reputation for conducting innovative, longitudinal, multi-center studies of infants at risk and their families. The Center for Children and Families, the clinical arm of the BCC, grew out of Dr. Lester's early clinical research focused on infant neurodevelopment and continues to meet a unique need in the state of Rhode Island as one of the few clinics providing behavioral health services for children from birth to age 3.

Dr. Lester's work has reshaped our understanding of developmental pathways in at-risk populations with continuous funding from the Federal Government for 50 years. He has served as Principal Investigator for several landmark NIH longitudinal studies of high-risk infants including preterm infants and infants with prenatal substance exposure. His work helped dispel damaging stigmas towards women who use illegal drugs during pregnancy and their babies, moving the national conversation away

from punitive measures and towards effective, treatment-oriented policies. In Rhode Island, he established one of the first Family Treatment Drug Courts to help keep families together. More recently, he led the BCC in participating in the NIH ECHO Program, which broadly investigates environmental influences on child health. Dr. Lester developed the NICU Network Neurobehavioral Scale (NNNS) to quantify the neurobehavioral status of high-risk infants. The NNNS has become the industry standard for research assessing neonatal neurobehavior in at risk infants and is increasingly being used as part of standard care in hospitals (including Women and Infants) for managing infants born preterm and infants with prenatal drug exposure. He also pioneered the development of acoustic cry analysis as a biological marker of neural integrity in at risk infants. Dr. Lester has been a catalyst for the field of human behavioral epigenetics. On behalf of the New York Academy of Sciences, he chaired a landmark conference that brought together animal and human studies of epigenetics, leading to a spike in research on how gene-environment interactions shape behavior and development. Dr. Lester has been actively involved in NIH, having served on numerous study sections, and participating as a member of NIDA Council, the NIH Director's Pioneer Awards, and the College of the Center for Scientific Review. Finally, Dr. Lester has maintained a passion for mentoring throughout his career and is well known for his success facilitating the career development of undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral students and physicians.

Passing the Torch

Dr. Camerota, assistant professor of Psychiatry and Human Behavior and of Pediatrics, will succeed Dr. Lester as the Director of the BCC. Dr. Camerota did her undergraduate work at Cornell University and received a PhD in Developmental Psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2018. She came to Brown in 2020 as a postdoctoral fellow on the highly competitive Child Mental Health T32 and joined the faculty in the department in 2022. Her long-time research interest is in the development of executive function (EF) particularly among high-risk populations. She was awarded an NIH K01 to study trajectories of EF and attention problems and their epigenetic and environmental antecedents in a multisite, longitudinal study of children born very preterm. In a second NIH grant she is investigating caregiving quality as a protective factor in association with EF and attention outcomes in this very preterm cohort. Dr. Camerota has additional expertise in epigenetic processes among high risk pediatric populations. Her innovative work uses state-of-the-art technologies and analytic techniques to investigate epigenome-wide associations with neurodevelopmental outcomes and develop predictive models. She is pioneering the study of longitudinal epigenetic patterns in relation to environmental exposures and outcomes. Finally, Dr. Camerota has made substantive contributions to the use of child-centered approaches for holistically studying neurodevelopmental phenotypes following very preterm birth, which has resulted in the identification of a novel "hidden" phenotype in very preterm children characterized by subclinical deficits in attention, EF, and social communication. Like Dr. Lester, Dr. Camerota is passionate about mentoring the next generation of psychology and pediatric researchers. Since joining the BCC in 2020, she has demonstrated extraordinary research productivity and leadership which position her to seamlessly transition into the role of Director and uphold the high standards of scientific excellence, clinical service, and research training set by Dr. Lester. We are excited to see how her fresh perspectives advance the Center's mission in years to come.