

Applying for Graduate Studies with The ASPIRE Lab and Dr. Ryan Persram

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Thank you for your interest in joining the Adolescent Social Processes and Interpersonal Relationships (ASPIRE) Lab at Toronto Metropolitan University. I typically review graduate applications every year, but the chance to admit a student each year depends on many factors.

I will be reviewing applications for either the Psychological Science (PS) or Clinical Psychology (CP) stream to start in Fall 2027.

Please note that I **do not** meet with potential applicants prior to the deadline. I do this to minimize bias, avoid creating unfair advantages to others, to ensure that everyone receives fair consideration during the review process, and to protect my own time.

In lieu of meeting with prospective applicants, I have created this document to help you decide whether our lab and I am the right fit for you.

Applying to TMU

Applications are due in December 2026 (Date TBC). You can learn more about graduate training in psychology [here](#). You may also contact me directly via email to express interest and/or ask questions about current research projects. General questions about admissions, applications, or our program can be directed to our graduate program administrator (psychgrad@torontomu.ca).

International Students

Unfortunately, if you are not a Canadian citizen or a Permanent Resident of Canada, we are generally unable to accept international students into our program. Our admissions website reads, "Please note this program is extremely competitive and spots are currently limited to qualified domestic applicants." We hope this changes in the future.

Graduate Fellowships

My work is primarily situated within the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) area of funding, so I encourage potential graduate applicants to apply for the Canada Graduate Scholarship - Master's (CGS-M) under SSHRC. Details for this fellowship can be found [here](#).

Post-Application Submission

Once submitted, I will review applications that specify me as a potential supervisor. While I do review all applications, only a small portion of my applicant pool will be considered for a formal interview. Please note that due to the number of applications that I receive, I am unable to comment specifically on your application.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is the ASPIRE Lab's primary research interests?

Our lab is focused on the developmental psychology of social relationships and adjustment among youth. We use various quantitative and qualitative methodologies to examine questions related to the benefits and drawbacks of specific relationships that contribute to youth development and well-being. Our work is theoretically driven and aims to have an impact in research and the real-world. Some of the projects that we are currently working on include:

1. *Daily Self-Disclosures to Siblings and Friends*. In this study, we are mainly focused on asking questions about how adolescents share personal information with their siblings and friends on a daily basis. To what extent do youth share information about themselves to their siblings and friends each day and how does this relate to their mood? Does disclosing to a sibling or friend happen more when they think that person is responsive to them? Under what circumstances do adolescents disclose more to a sibling or to a friend?
2. *Daily Dyadic Interactions between Siblings*. In this project, we will be collecting daily diary data from participating sibling dyads on their day-to-day sibling interactions. We aim to address questions about whether adolescent sibling interactions impact them as well as their sibling on a daily basis.
3. *Late Adolescent Relationships and the Transition to Postsecondary Education*. How do specific relationships, namely sibships and friendship protect from mental health decreases during the transition to postsecondary education? In what ways are these relationships especially useful to those who identify as a first-generation student?
4. *Self-Disclosure and Communication*. How do young adolescents communicate self-disclosures to others? Specifically, what kinds of internal state language terms (or mental state language) do they use? How does the use of ISL facilitate relationship maintenance for youth?
5. *Relational Congruence and Incongruence Across Relationships*. How do adolescents similarly (or dissimilarly) perceive their relationships with others (i.e., parents, siblings, friends, romantic partners)? How do these patterns differ on various measures of adjustment.
6. *Perceptions of Trust with Siblings and Friends*. How do perceptions of different forms of trust (e.g., reliability, honesty) predict youth adjustment? How do these patterns vary as a function of cultural context or sibling constellation? Under what circumstances can siblings and friends compensate (i.e., make up) for or amplify youth adjustment. To what extent is trust healthy? In other words, can having very high trust be related to poor adjustment?

****AN IMPORTANT CAVEAT****

Please note that my work and research that we conduct in the ASPIRE lab is not clinically focused. We study the impact of social relationships on youth mental health, well-being, and adjustment broadly and with community samples. I do not have the expertise, nor do I conduct or have plans to study these phenomena with clinical populations at this time.

Q: What do you look for in a potential graduate student?

There are several characteristics and attributes that I value in prospective graduate students. For example:

- You should be intellectually curious and passionate about the research that the lab studies. Although research interests and projects change and develop over time, there is always a degree of necessary overlap in these projects. Our program is designed to be approximately six years long. This includes 2 years for the MA and at least 4 years for the PhD. Therefore, passion and genuine curiosity are essential.
- You should be intrinsically motivated and take an active interest in their work. Research is not a passive or static process. We actively seek out new research questions and findings, and therefore it is expected that you are motivated to study relevant questions that pushes the field forward.
- You should also be genuine and honest about your goals and intentions. Graduate school is an investment for both of us. I am making an investment in training and mentoring you in becoming a responsible researcher and scientist. You are making an investment in furthering your development and expertise in the field. That said, from the moment you send your application, I strongly encourage you to be clear and upfront about your goals and intentions. For example, if you have thoughts about becoming a clinician later but you've applied to a research program, or if you are unsure about whether you want to remain in academic after your PhD, this is important information for us to know. Laying the foundation for a good working relationship rest on the values of trust, being genuine, and honest. Having a better understanding of your goals helps me to know how best to support you.
- Important hallmarks of being a good researcher is learning about what it means to being a good scientist. That means that I value students who are dedicated to learning, not afraid to make mistakes, but most importantly,
- Ideally, prospective students will have at least one year of related research lab experience. Additionally, independent research opportunities, including undergraduate theses, peer-reviewed publications are considered an asset.
 - Please keep in mind. A PhD is fundamentally a research degree. You will develop and maintain an independent research program, use advanced statistics and methods, write manuscripts and funding applications, and present your research at various local and international conferences. No experience is expected or necessary, as this is a core part of the training you will receive.
 - Some of this feels stressful or scary, and that is ok. That said, I encourage all students to embrace the unknown and the challenges that come with it head on. Trust me, you'll find yourselves liking it more than you realize!
- **What is probably most important is your fit within our lab culture.** The ASPIRE Lab has worked hard (and continues to do so) at fostering a culture of support, community, and professionalism. Prospective students should be highly attentive to detail, organized, conscientious, and collaborative. Our lab is communal and warm. We collaborate with and support one another, as well as with other members of our department, our university, and elsewhere.

Q: What are your expectations for graduate students?

Regardless of whether you enter the PS or CP streams, my expectations generally remain the same. Students ultimately achieve an MA and PhD in psychology based on their research. As such, my expectation for students is that they conduct research that is not only related to the lab, but is original, ethical, and impactful. The term ‘impactful’ is very broad – your research can be impactful in terms of publications in addition to having an influence within our community. We strive to connect our work within and outside of academia, and I expect students to be motivated to conduct research that achieves these goals.

Additionally, while students typically apply to work with us at the MA level, it is expected that you would continue into the PhD program. If you are considering completing an MA only, it would be greatly appreciated to state this upfront.

Q: What is your mentorship style?

Working with graduate students is one of my favourite parts of being an academic. This is because I get a front-row seat to watch your research journey take off.

- While I have high expectations of my students, I also provide lots of support. I am committed to work hard to support your growth in graduate school and beyond, regardless of where you land after you finish.
- New students (MA-level) are typically integrated into existing studies led by me or other senior students. As you gain more confidence and comfort with the research and its methodologies, you will increasingly gain independence to develop your own research program.
- I do not provide support to the point of micromanaging or hand-holding. However, for most students, I typically provide more support at the beginning to help you get integrated into the lab and become more accustomed to our research. This includes meetings to review what you’ve been reading or discuss portions of your writing. Again, as you develop greater confidence in your research capabilities, you will be more independent.
- I strongly value open communication with my students. Research breaks down when there is little or no communication. Consequently, I tend to meet students on a bi-weekly basis (minimum) to a weekly basis to check in.
- Rigorous research practices include clear and concise written and oral communication. As such, students will receive consistent, detailed, direct, and frequent feedback from me on all of their work. Upon receiving this feedback, I expect that students will not only consider what the feedback is but also why it is given. Relatedly, I am very detail-oriented in my work, therefore, I expect students to develop habits that emphasize attention to detail (e.g., triple-checking values, careful proofreading, proper citation) in their work.
- Mentorship is not just about work. I strongly value and believe in a healthy work-life balance. Moreover, I recognize that my balance will differ from my students. I work during weekdays, with the rare exception made for evenings and weekends. I expect students to work hard during the week but encourage them to protect the time they choose for themselves.

Q: Can I be admitted into the program as a psychological student and then transfer into the clinical psychology stream?

Unfortunately, students admitted into our psychological science program are not eligible to be admitted into the clinical psychology stream. It is **not** typical to do an MA in research psychology and apply to the PhD in clinical psychology. At most institutions, clinical training begins at the MA level. Therefore, if you are thinking about becoming a clinical psychologist, you'll need to consider either (a) continuing to apply for graduate training in clinical psychology or (b) completing a research psychology Master's and then pursuing a second Master's in Clinical Psychology before matriculating into the PhD program.