

Charting a Course Together: Meet Dr. Briana Brukilacchio

Dr. Briana Brukilacchio, PhD, EdM, is a clinical psychologist at the Lurie Center for Autism who brings empathy, curiosity, and a passion for partnership to every diagnostic evaluation. In this Q&A, she shares how her early experiences shaped her career and what inspires her most about working at the Lurie Center. In addition to her diagnostic work, Dr. Brukilacchio leads workshops to educate and support families, such as her popular Autism 101 series, a supportive group for parents and caregivers navigating a new diagnosis.



What do you do at the Lurie Center for Autism? Do you have a particular area of expertise?

I provide autism diagnostic evaluations for young children with a range of different social/medical circumstances. For example, I often see patients with known genetic or neurological conditions, physical disabilities, or complex social situations, and I love being able to partner with families to individualize an evaluation to meet their child's needs.

What factors influenced your decision to become a psychologist?

In high school, I worked as an adaptive recreation specialist at the ARC of Massachusetts. I became very connected to the individuals and families that we served and realized that I wanted to focus my career on autism. In college, I spent some time figuring out which lens to approach autism from. Initially, I thought I would go into genetics. Then I zoomed way out and considered a career in policy. Over time, I found that psychology would allow me to work one-on-one with families as a clinician, contribute to research, and advocate for systems and policies that improve the lives of our patients and their families.

If you hadn't pursued a career in psychology, what alternative career path might you have chosen?

If I had gone in an entirely different direction, I might have been an investigative journalist. I love interviewing people, reviewing documents, and making sense out of a bunch of information.

What do you enjoy most about working at the Lurie Center for Autism?

At the Lurie Center, our team is very agile. If there's a rationale for creating a new program or changing the way that an existing program functions, we work hard to better meet our patients' needs. For example, I've been very involved in expanding the educational and supportive services that are available to parents and caregivers after receiving an autism diagnosis for their young child. I find that work to be extremely rewarding. If anyone would like to enroll in one of our

Autism 101 groups, they are open to the public and we'd love to have you! [see information below]

How do you stay current with the latest research in diagnosis and treatment?

I pay close attention to any advances in diagnosis because that's my area of expertise. During the pandemic, I was particularly focused on tele-diagnostics, and currently I'm paying close attention to the emerging role that AI [artificial intelligence] might play in this process.

For other updates within the scientific community, I subscribe to Spectrum through a publication called [The Transmitter](#). If parents bring up questions about treatment and I don't have a clear understanding of the state of the research, I typically consult colleagues in our research department at the Lurie Center and relay the information back to the family.

Do you have any pets?

Yes! We have two dogs, and they couldn't be more different from one another. Rooster is a small rescue with big ears and an even bigger personality. Snowball is a large fluffy Samoyed who enjoys chasing chipmunks through the woods and begging for peanut butter treats.

What do you do for fun?

Sail! Sailing is an immersive sensory experience that requires keen attention, communication, and situational awareness. When you're on a 40-ish foot sailboat out in the ocean, things will go wrong, and you will face plenty of stressors! Smooth sailing is fun and relaxing, but those stressors also present an opportunity to practice the skills I help others build as a psychologist, like stress management, distress tolerance, communication, and group problem-solving. In fact, I often use "boat analogies" in my work with families. For example, when parents receive an autism diagnosis for their young child, it can feel like they've suddenly entered uncharted waters. Not only that, but their compass has stopped working and during this period of confusion, it often brings up feelings of fear or anxiety which can be really immobilizing. It is very meaningful to me to partner with families in the midst of that confusion, help them rediscover their "true north" as a family, and guide them to assemble the crew of providers, therapists, and teachers who will help them on their own unique journey as a family.



Dr. Brukilacchio enjoying a hike with her pups, Rooster and Snowball.

How would you describe yourself in three words?

Curious, empathetic, and enthusiastic!

**Autism 101:
4-Session Series for Parents of Newly Diagnosed Children**

Autism 101 provides interactive lessons, question and answer sessions, and the opportunity to connect with other families with newly diagnosed children. If you've found yourself typing "my child diagnosed with autism" into the Google search bar, this group will help address that 'now what' feeling that you may have been experiencing. Autism 101 is appropriate for parents or caregivers of young children, aged 7 and under. Attendance at all four sessions is recommended.

TIME: 12:00pm - 1:30pm

COST: Insurance billable under the child's insurance

DATES: This 4-session series is held six times per year. The first session of each series starts on the first Friday of January, March, May, July, September and November.

The Lurie Center for Autism invites parents, guardians, and families to participate in our workshops. All workshops are held virtually and open to the public, however registration is required. To reserve your spot contact us at LurieCenter@mgb.org or 781-860-1700.