

Child Development and Health

As a future pediatrician committed to both medicine and advocacy, I believe it is necessary for my pre-medical education to include courses that capture the multi-dimensional idea of children's health. Healthcare is a service, rooted in communication and compassion between people; clinicians cannot forget this. When working with children, that conversation becomes much more complicated because they may not know how to verbalize their illness experiences. As such, pediatricians have the unique responsibility to be both teacher and doctor, encourage understanding and provide treatment. At its core, the practice of pediatric medicine is inherently interdisciplinary. Therefore, I want to create an interdisciplinary major, entitled Child Development and Health, which merges classes from the departments of anthropology, human development and family studies, physiology and neurobiology, and psychology. The range of this curriculum will allow me to explore the diverse biological, psychological, social, and political processes that shape a child's physical and mental growth. It will also improve my understanding of pediatric practitioners in community contexts.

I entered UConn as a physiology and neurobiology major interested in a future pediatric career with a very narrow-minded view of medicine. I was deeply rooted in a biological understanding of disease and illness, an opinion that was challenged by introductory courses in social psychology, and completely transformed by Medical Anthropology (ANTH 3300). As I expanded my academic plan to include more courses in anthropology and psychology, I realized that the questions I was asking focused on children's health and accessible care and I decided to pursue them through this individualized major. Moreover, pediatric medicine is a field distinct from adult medicine. During the first years of their life, children are rapidly developing and as a result are more vulnerable and susceptible to environmental and social changes. Therefore, pursuit of a career in their field requires an education tailored to their needs in order to give them the best treatment.

Some of the questions and sub-themes I will focus on include: how do the systems that exist for children's health differ from established general and adult health infrastructures? How do social contexts affect a child's health both physiologically and from their own interpretations? What are the health issues associated with the different stages of a child's development?

My individualized major centers on two levels of courses, introductory and advanced, in the different departments that comprise my curriculum. PNB 2275 (Enhanced Human Anatomy and Physiology II) and PSYC 2200 (Physiological Psychology) establish the foundational biology of development, which is supported by the social and family influences that are the focus of HDFS 2100 (Human Development: Infancy through Adolescence). Consideration of the illness experience of children and the rights that they intrinsically possess are then covered through ANTH 3300 (Medical Anthropology) and ANTH 3098 (Global Health and Human Rights). My more advanced coursework will allow me to specialize specifically in children's health. PSYC 5150 (Neurodevelopment and Plasticity) and PSYC 3370 (Seminar on Autism and Developmental Disorders) concentrate on the impact of early neuropathologies on typical and atypical social development patterns. Then, through graduate medical anthropology seminar courses, ANTH 5305 (Anthropology and the Clinical Encounter) and ANTH 5305 (Health and Human Rights), I will be able to integrate these neurobiological and socio-psychological perspectives with person-centered interpretive approaches and create in-class research projects that explore specific issues in children's neurological health. For example, this semester I am in the Anthropology and the Clinical Encounter seminar, researching the different explanatory models clinicians' use when diagnosing autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

This individualized major is also a key component of my University Scholar research project (PSYC 3899, PNB 3299). I am an undergraduate researcher in the Fitch Lab of the Behavioral Neuroscience Division of Psychological Sciences, studying a particular mouse model of syndromic

ASD. My current project is an examination of the neurobiology and anatomy of that model to explore possible neurobiological origins for ASD-typed behavior: stereotyped, repetitive actions and socio-communicative deficits. I will ultimately write my Honors Senior Thesis (PNB 4296W) on this work, which will serve as my individualized major capstone. The themes explored in the courses I will take alongside my research will expand my understanding of my conclusions.

This major is deeply important to my commitment to pediatric medicine and neurology. After graduating with my degrees in Physiology and Neurobiology and Child Development and Health from the University of Connecticut, I plan to take a gap year before pursuing my MD. During that time I want to work in either the research field of neuroscience as a lab technician or for a community based organization involved in children's health. I also intend to earn a dual Masters of Public Health so that I can engage with the particular communities I hope to serve once I have my medical degree. I want to serve as both physician and advocate for my patients and the educational value of my individualized, interdisciplinary curriculum, interrogating different fields from the humanities and sciences, will form the critical foundation for my future career.