Effectiveness and Implementation of a Mental Health Intervention for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (PI: Brookman-Frazee; SDSU Site PI: Roesch) is a 5-year (2012-2017), $3.25 million study from the National Institute of Mental Health.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that 1 in 110 children have ASD and the societal cost of ASD is estimated to be $35-$90 billion annually. The prevalence of ASD is increasing and, given the high and enduring costs of caring for individuals with these disorders, research on the effectiveness and implementation of evidence-based practices (EBPs) in usual care settings is critical to meet this growing public health need. The CMH system plays an important role in caring for school-age children with ASD, especially those with milder forms of ASD (e.g., Asperger’s) who exhibit challenging behaviors (i.e., a broad range of problem behaviors including aggression, noncompliance, self-injury). Unfortunately, there are widespread concerns about the quality of care provided to children with ASD in community health services. Therapists lack specialized training to address the complex needs of children with ASD, particularly behavior problems, and do not use EBPs consistently or intensively. Targeting children with the most common presenting problems (i.e., challenging behaviors) has potential to make a significant impact on care for most children with ASD served in CMH clinics.

The purpose of this randomized controlled trial is to test the effectiveness of a mental health intervention for children aged 5-13 with ASD who exhibit challenging behaviors and are served in community and school-based mental health service settings.  Participants include children and therapists from participating mental health programs in San Diego and Los Angeles Counties. This study has the potential to make a significant public health impact by building local capacity to serve school-age children with ASD in routine service settings, and advancing the science on the effectiveness of packaging EBPs for specific community service settings. It will also produce generalizable knowledge about implementation that can be applied to other ASD interventions.