

## Meet the People of the Lurie Center: Dr. Devina Savant Talks Passion for Pediatrics

### **What is your area of expertise? Why did you choose to specialize in this area?**

I'm a developmental and behavioral pediatrician (DBP). The way I explain it to folks who have never heard that term before is that I am a medical doctor who works with children who have special healthcare needs and/or neurodevelopmental disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), intellectual disability, and cerebral palsy.

I've wanted to be a pediatrician since I was a young child. I did my medical training in India, and in my second year of pediatric residency I did a rotation in developmental medicine. It was my "aha" moment! Developmental medicine is by no means an exact science, but the beauty of it lies in collaboration with patients and their families, figuring out what works for them, and what makes sense culturally and socially. I loved the developmental medicine rotation so much that by the end of that month I had decided that this is what my life's work would be.

### **What's the most rewarding part of your job?**

Oh, working with families, hands down! It is so amazing to see children when they are young, talk to their families about their concerns for their child, what their hopes and dreams are, and then follow along for that developmental journey. It's an incredible privilege and honor to be the developmental pediatrician for these amazing children. Collaborating with families and learning from them brings me so much fulfillment. They teach me about love, joy, hope, and resilience.

### **If you weren't a developmental and behavioral pediatrician, what would you be doing?**

I think I would be a veterinarian. I love animals, especially dogs!

### **Do you have pets?**

I do! I have a sweet 8-year-old golden retriever, Miss Buffy. She's the best. I joke that she is my emotional support animal because it's so great to come home and snuggle her after a long day.

### **Do you have a mantra or motto that is important to you?**

There are some quotes from the Bhagavad Gita that resonate with me. Two are 'Change is the only constant' and 'Nothing lasts forever.' I try to remind myself of that in particularly challenging times. It's good to have a phrase that you can use to ground yourself and make sure that you are meeting your own emotional needs.



### **What does a typical week look like for you?**

Most of my time at the Lurie Center is spent doing my clinical work. I see patients for new autism diagnoses, follow up care for management of behaviors and medical problems associated with ASD, medication visits and developmental testing. We also teach medical students, pediatric residents and neurology and psychology fellows at the Lurie Center, so I often have a learner with me seeing patients and families. I really enjoy teaching. I am also involved in several research projects at the Lurie Center, and I run a [parent support group](#) for families of South Asian heritage who have a child newly diagnosed with autism. So, it's a good mix of clinical, academic and research work!

### **Can you talk a bit more about the research studies you're involved in here at the Lurie Center?**

Yes of course! I'm a part of the "[AWARE](#)" study the purpose of which is to help us understand the benefits and side effects of medicines often used to treat ADHD in children with ASD. I'm also involved in the "PATH" study which

involves genetic testing to better understand the genetic associations of ASD. Our research is listed on the [Lurie website](#), so families can read more about studies that are ongoing and recruiting participants. Something else that I'm working on is studying parental stress levels and parenting styles in families of South Asian heritage who have young children with ASD. The purpose is to understand how best to provide ASD care in culturally sensitive and affirming ways.

**What were you like in high school?**

I was interested in schoolwork and worked hard to get into medical school. However, I also did the typical “teenage-y” stuff. I'd wanted a dog my whole life, but my parents always managed to be evasive. So, I finally decided to take matters into my own hands. A dog who lived on our street had puppies and I snuck 3 of them into my parents' home. I managed to keep them fed and thriving until I was eventually caught about a week later. So, I did get into my fair share of trouble.

**Favorite meal or cuisine?**

Home-cooked Indian food made by my mom or my mother-in-law. My family is back home in India, so every time my parents visit, or I travel there, it's a food fest every single day!

**What breakthroughs do you hope to see in the future within ASD care and related conditions?**

I would like to see equitable access to care and services for all. One in 10 children in the U.S. have a developmental disability, but there are currently only about 800 developmental and behavioral pediatricians in the U.S. The wait time to see a DBP ranges from 12 to 18 months. If you think about it, a young child with developmental delays and concerns for ASD who needs a diagnosis to get services is waiting over a year to get appropriate care. This is so unfortunate because they could be benefiting from services during that critical period of growth and development.

From a community standpoint, I'd like to see a better understanding of neurodiversity. I think, as a society, we still don't fully recognize the big, beautiful spectrum of neurodiversity. No one human is exactly like another. We each have our unique traits, we process information and prioritize tasks in unique ways, and value different things. We each bring our own unique strengths and challenges to the table. In the future, I would love to see us move towards providing care and services based on a ‘needs based model’ rather than a ‘medical diagnosis model.’

**What is your secret talent?**

I don't know if it's a talent, but it's certainly a hobby: I really like to cook. It helps me de-stress. Cooking is a form of meditation for me –with a yummy meal at the end of it!

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

*Thank you to Dr. Savant's interviewer, Ms. Sabrina Ladiwala, a Lurie Center for Autism Undergraduate Intern, Class of 2024.*