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Introducing the 2021-2022 SRCD U.S. Policy Fellows

The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) is pleased to announce the 2021-2022 SRCD U.S. Policy Fellows.

The SRCD U.S. Policy Fellowship Programs include placement opportunities in federal congressional offices as well as federal and state executive branch agencies. The purpose of the fellowship programs is to provide researchers with immersive opportunities to learn about policy development, implementation, and evaluation, and to use their research skills in child development to inform public policy at the federal or state level.

Learn more about the SRCD U.S. Policy Fellowship Programs

2021 - 2022 SRCD Federal Policy Fellows

SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellows



Marissa Abbott, Ph.D.

Dr. Marissa Abbott is a SRCD Federal Executive Branch Fellow in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Her work at ASPE focuses on child welfare, primarily a data linking project between state child welfare and Medicaid agencies. Dr. Abbott is an interdisciplinary social scientist who blends public health, social work, and human development perspectives to examine programs and policies surrounding child maltreatment prevention and intervention. She is interested in addressing the etiology and consequences of child abuse and neglect and investigating ways to improve trauma screening for at-risk families. Dr. Abbott received her Ph.D. in Social Welfare from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her dissertation critiqued how researchers and clinicians assess childhood adversity in at-risk families and explored an alternative measure that captures positive experiences from childhood that exemplify family resilience. She holds a B.A. in Epidemiology and M.P.H. from the University of Rochester. Before receiving her Ph.D., Dr. Abbott also worked as a California Epidemiologic Investigation Service Fellow at the California Department of Public Health, focusing on child maltreatment prevention. Read about Marissa's fellowship experience.



Lorena Aceves, Ph.D.

Dr. Lorena Aceves is a second-year SRCD Federal Executive Branch Fellow in the Office of Head Start (OHS) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. She is currently involved in two lines of work within OHS. The first line of work involves creating a seamless connection between OPRE's Head Start research portfolio and OHS's Policy and Training and Technical Assistance divisions. Another line of work she is focused on includes diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives throughout OHS. Particularly, in shaping efforts put forth by the National Center for Health, Behavioral Health, and Safety and the OHS DEI commission. Finally, Dr. Aceves is also on detail with the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), where she is gathering data on the state of research focused on Latinx students that has been funded by IES. Dr. Aceves is a first-gen Latina scholar who completed her Ph.D. and M.S. in Human Development and Family Studies at the Pennsylvania State University and a B.S. in Family Studies and Human Development at the University of Arizona. Dr. Aceves' research has focused on understanding how cultural, familial, and individual-level factors contribute to Latinx adolescent's academic outcomes. Her main goal with her research and fellowship experience is to shed light on how to better support minoritized populations at the intersection of science and policy. Read about Lorena's fellowship experience.



Jackie Gross, Ph.D.

Dr. Jackie Gross is a second-year SRCD Federal Executive Branch Fellow in the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. She is currently working on research and evaluation projects in the Head Start and Child Welfare portfolios at OPRE. Dr. Gross is a developmental psychologist and received her Ph.D. and M.S. from the University of Maryland, College Park (UMD) and her B.A. in Psychology from Trinity University. Her research focuses on how family and environmental factors, in particular the parent-child relationship and parenting behaviors, influence children's social-emotional development. Prior to joining OPRE, Dr. Gross was a Postdoctoral Associate at the Center for Early Childhood Education and Intervention (CECEI), where she worked on research and evaluations examining the impact of Maryland's Preschool Development Grant programs on children's school readiness, programs to improve the quality of family engagement in young children's education across the state of Maryland, and the scope of early education experiences available to young children with disabilities in Maryland. Read about Jackie's fellowship experience.



Frances Martínez Pedraza, Ph.D.

Dr. Frances Martínez Pedraza is a second-year SRCD Federal Executive Branch Fellow in the Office of Child Care (OCC) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Her focus at the OCC includes understanding US territories' child care program operations and policies and working on health and mental health promotion initiatives. Dr. Martínez holds a Ph.D. and M.A. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Massachusetts Boston, and a B.A. in Psychology from the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus. Prior to the SRCD Fellowship, Dr. Martínez was a Postdoctoral Associate in the Center for Children and Families, Department of Psychology at Florida International University. Dr. Martínez's research has centered on the dissemination and implementation of evidence-based mental health screening and intervention tools in Part C Early Intervention systems serving young children with developmental delays and their families. Her work has focused on strengthening workforce supports that are culturally grounded and contextually relevant with the goal of reducing racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic disparities in early care and education access and quality. Dr. Martínez is committed to using research to inform child and family policies that promote equity and support the well-being of children and families living in poverty from racial and ethnically diverse backgrounds.



Kelsey McKee, Ph.D.

Dr. Kelsey McKee is a SRCD Federal Executive Branch Fellow in the Office of Head Start in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. She is a developmental scientist with a particular interest in how parents promote their children's early development, particularly in the context of poverty. Dr. McKee holds a Ph.D. in Human Development as well as certificates in Measurement, Statistics, and Evaluation and Population Studies from University of Maryland and a B.S. in Psychology from Arizona State University. While at the University of Maryland, Dr. McKee worked as a Graduate Research Assistant conducting research on a randomized controlled trial of a parenting intervention, as well as conducting program evaluations of graduate research training programs. Prior to graduate school, Dr. McKee worked as a home visitor delivering parenting interventions within the state child welfare system in Arizona. She is committed to working to promote programs and policies that are effective in supporting parents and children's early childhood development. Read about Kelsey's fellowship experience.



Parisa Parsafar, Ph.D.

Dr. Parisa Parsafar is a SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow in the Child Development and Behavior Branch at the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health. Prior to starting her current fellowship, Dr. Parsafar was an SRCD Federal Policy Congressional Fellow in the Office of Senator Chris Coons where she worked on health-related policy issues. Dr. Parsafar is a developmental psychologist and received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Riverside (UCR). Her dissertation focused on the understanding of emotions in young children. At UCR, through an NSF grant, Dr. Parsafar collaborated with a professor of water economics and policy to investigate the role that children's negative emotions play in shaping their thoughts about water contamination and their tap and bottled water consumption behaviors. She earned her M.A. in Psychology at New York University and earned her B.A. in Psychology at the University of California, Davis. Read about Parisa's fellowship experience.



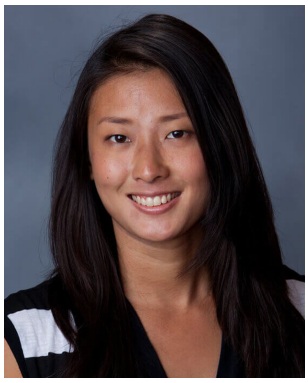
Virginia Salo, Ph.D.

Dr. Virginia Salo is a SRCD Federal Executive Branch Fellow in the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) in the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Her research examines the interactions that occur between children and their caregivers during the first few years of life; specifically, how patterns within these interactions develop and predict individual differences in children's social-cognitive and language development. Her graduate work focused on preverbal infant communicative development and mechanisms supporting infant learning from interactions with their caregivers. Prior to the SRCD Fellowship, Dr. Salo completed a NIH National Research Service Award (NRSA) F32 Postdoctoral Fellowship at Vanderbilt University in the Department of Psychology and Human Development. During this fellowship, she examined potentially modifiable targets for promoting positive caregiver–child interactions. Dr. Salo earned a Ph.D. in Human Development from the University of Maryland, College Park, a M.S. in Psychology from Villanova University, and a B.A. in Public Relations and Psychology from Syracuse University. Read about Virginia's fellowship experience.



Neda Senehi, Ph.D.

Dr. Neda Senehi is a SRCD Federal Executive Branch Fellow in the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. She is currently working on research and evaluation projects in the Head Start and Child Care portfolios at OPRE including Head Start REACH and Early Care and Education Research Scholars projects. Dr. Senehi holds an MA in Clinical Psychology and a Ph.D. in Human Development and Family studies from Michigan State University. Her doctoral work focused on examination of parental mentalization, parental emotion-socialization, and self-regulation in young children from low-income families. She completed her postdoctoral fellowship in Developmental Psychobiology, Psychopathology, and Behavior funded by National Institute of Health-Ruth L. Kirschstein National Research Award at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus where she examined parental and child's stress response indicated by salivary and hair cortisol, parent-child relationships, and social-emotional development. Her research has focused on caregiving quality and stress-related health and development in ethnic-racially minoritized families and childcare settings facing adversity including Early Head Start (EHS) children and families, EHS teachers and preschoolers, tribal communities, and parents experiencing mental illness and childhood trauma. Read about Neda's fellowship experience.



Dianna Tran, Ph.D.

Dr. Dianna Tran is a second-year SRCD Federal Executive Branch Fellow in the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. She is currently working on research and evaluation projects in the Child Care and Head Start portfolios at OPRE. Dr. Tran holds a Ph.D. and M.A. in Developmental Psychology with a minor in Advanced Quantitative Social Science from University of Notre Dame, and a B.A. in Psychology from California State University Long Beach. Her graduate work focused on children's socioemotional development, academic development, and ecological systems effects (e.g., parenting, extended family caregiving, poverty, cultural norms). Dr. Tran was also a Mirzayan Science & Technology Policy Fellow during spring 2020 at NASEM (National Academies of Sciences Engineering Medicine) where she worked with the Board for Children, Youth, and Families and the Forum for Children's Well-Being. Dr. Tran is committed to translating and communicating research to inform policies that enhance the well-being of children and families. Read about Dianna's fellowship experience.

SRCD Federal Congressional Policy Fellow



Tanya Tavassolie, Ph.D.

Dr. Tanya Tavassolie is a SRCD Federal Congressional Policy Fellow in the Office of Senator Maggie Hassan. She is working on the Senator's early childhood and education portfolios. Prior to starting her current fellowship, Dr. Tavassolie was a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Maryland where she led an ongoing evaluation for an early childhood research-to-program partnership in Washington, DC. While there, she provided technical assistance for early educators around data usage and understanding. She also led the evaluation for an Early Head Start Childcare Partnership. Dr. Tavassolie is a developmental psychologist and received her Ph.D. from George Mason University in Applied Developmental Psychology in 2018. Her graduate work focused on investigating racial and ethnic equity issues in the implementation of elementary education policies. She earned her M.A. from George Mason University as well and her B.A. in Neuroscience from Franklin and Marshall College. Read about Tanya's fellowship experience.

2021 - 2022 SRCD State Policy Fellows

SRCD State Policy Pre-Doctoral Fellows



Clarissa Corkins, M.S.

Clarissa Corkins is a SRCD State Policy Pre-Doctoral Fellow in the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE), Department of Curriculum and Instruction. At OSDE, Clarissa is currently working on the development of a Programs of Excellence rubric as part of the larger Champions of Excellence Initiative which seeks to help schools take stock of their current practices, celebrate successes, and share their wisdom with others in the field. She will be working to expand the rubrics into the early childhood realm, working with stakeholders across the state to bridge best practices in early childhood settings with the realities of the public-school context. Clarissa received her B.S. in Elementary Education and her M.S. in Early Childhood Education both from Kansas State University. Clarissa is in her third year of the Ph.D. Human Development and Family Science program at Oklahoma State University. She has worked with Dr. Amanda Harrist as her advisor and mentor including work on the Families and Schools for Health (FiSH) project looking at the psychosocial aspects of childhood obesity. Her research interests focus broadly on supporting teachers to impact positive child development. Specifically, her current interest emphasizes social and emotional teaching practices, implementation, and beliefs in early childhood and elementary classrooms. She also is investigating the intersection of teacher preparation programs and novice teacher practices. Read about Clarissa's fellowship experience.



Eleanor Fisk

Eleanor Fisk is a SRCD State Policy Pre-Doctoral Fellow in the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood (OEC). Eleanor is working in the OEC's division of Research, Planning, and Technology under the supervision of Dr. Rachel Leventhal-Weiner. Eleanor's main projects at the OEC include launching a new data request process and supporting evaluation of programs funded by the American Rescue Plan. Eleanor is also a fourth-year PhD student in the department of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Connecticut, under the mentorship of Dr. Caitlin Lombardi. Eleanor's research interests are broadly in contextual influences on development across the early childhood years, including early education, home environments, and socioeconomic disadvantage. Her recent research projects have examined associations between social emotional and cognitive skills across preschool and kindergarten entry, and early care and education characteristics during the toddler years as a potential mechanism for reducing income-based gaps in children's school readiness skills. Previously, Eleanor received her BA in Psychology from Middlebury College and then worked as a preschool teacher, where she first started thinking about the role policy can play in the day-to-day of young children and the adults who care for them. Read about Eleanor's fellowship experience.

SRCD State Policy Post-Doctoral Fellow



Alex Busuito, Ph.D.

Dr. Alex Busuito is a SRCD State Policy Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Center for Perinatal and Early Childhood Health, Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDoH). Their work at RIDoH includes initiatives to increase access to Family Home Visiting services for at-risk children and families, including securing Medicaid funding for and evaluating families' engagement with home visiting programs. Dr. Busuito completed their clinical internship at Brown Medical School and received their Ph.D. in Child Clinical Psychology from the Pennsylvania State University. As a graduate student, Dr. Busuito was a Doris Duke Fellow for the Promotion of Child Wellbeing and a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow. They also spent nearly ten years as a community mental health clinician, working primarily with trauma-exposed children and caregivers. Dr. Busuito's research seeks to identify mechanisms that perpetuate the transmission of poverty and trauma-related risk from caregivers to children. Dr. Busuito is dedicated to leveraging developmental and clinical science to shape policy solutions that target sources of intergenerational disadvantage in order to enhance child wellbeing. Read about Alex's fellowship experience.



Cassandra Simons Gerson, Ph.D.

Dr. Cassandra Simons Gerson is a SRCD State Policy Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) in the Division of Early Childhood. She is currently working with various stakeholders at MSDE to create a five-year plan to evaluate Maryland's progress towards meeting the goals set out in their strategic plan for advancing early learning. She is also conducting analyses of administrative and test score data to describe the school readiness of Maryland's kindergarteners. Cassandra is a developmental psychologist and received her Ph.D. and M.A. in applied developmental psychology from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and her B.A. in Psychology from The University of Delaware. Her research focuses on how family and environmental factors, in particular parent and teacher beliefs and behaviors, influence children's social-emotional development and early learning. Prior to joining MSDE, Dr. Simons Gerson was a Postdoctoral Associate at the University of Maryland's Center for Early Childhood Education and Intervention (CECEI), where she worked on research and evaluations examining the implementation of the District of Columbia's Early Head Start - Child Care Partnership, the influence of child care teacher mental health and wellbeing on classroom quality, and the early education experiences available to young children with disabilities in Maryland. Read about Cassandra's fellowship experience.



Lillie Moffett, Ph.D.

Dr. Lillie Moffett is a SRCD State Policy Post-Doctoral Fellow in the California Department of Education, Opportunities for All Branch. Dr. Moffett received her Ph.D. in Education and Psychology from the University of Michigan where she specialized in preK curricula targeting the development of young children's math and executive functioning skills. As a recipient of an IES Fellowship in Causal Inference in Education Policy Research, she has also served as a collaborator with the Boston Public Schools Prekindergarten Program on child-level classroom observations of instructional experiences from preK to second grade. And as an NSF Graduate Research Fellow and ACF Head Start Dissertation Grant recipient, she has also gained experience working closely with Child 360 preschool coaches in Los Angeles, and supporting Head Start teachers on their administration of the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) assessment. During her fellowship period she will be working on several projects related to California's rollout of universal preK programs, updating learning standards for prek, and expanding the use of preK math and literacy assessments in California. As a Los Angeles native, her ultimate goal for this fellowship and beyond is to continue to leverage research-informed policies and practices to improve the quality of public preK programs in California. Read about Lillie's fellowship experience.