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Member Spotlight: Lenna Ontai, Ph.D.

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What interested you in becoming a developmental scientist?

From early elementary school I knew I wanted to work in a field that helped children succeed. For much of my life I envisioned being a nurse or a preschool teacher, primarily because as a first-generation college student, I believed that I was not equipped to get a graduate education. As an undergraduate student, I was introduced to developmental science through research assistant opportunities. Through these opportunities I grew a passion for scientific inquiry and the research process. I also met many amazing scholars who inspired me and showed me the possibilities of research to inform policies and conditions to impact the lives of children and families. This was my introduction to “applied developmental science” and

I immediately knew that was what I wanted to do.

What does SRCD mean to you?

SRCD has been my scholarly and professional home from the moment I entered graduate school. Through attendance at professional meetings, I get new inspiration and have opportunities to connect with other scholars in my field. I always leave meetings with knowledge of a new area of inquiry or a new way of approaching an existing question, reminding me of the dynamic and evolving nature of developmental science. It is also one of my primary sources of information on how the science is informing policy, and emerging opportunities for applications of developmental science to inform real world conditions.

Do you have a mentor or mentors who have been instrumental to your career and, if so, whom and how?

There are several colleagues who have been instrumental at various stages of my career. I had the opportunity to work as a lab manager for Dr. Dare Baldwin when I first graduated with my BS degree, and she was the first person who took the time to actively talk with me about my career goals and options for how to achieve them. At the time I did not see myself as someone who could be an independent researcher. She helped me identify my strengths and understand how they translate to conducting research and pointed me toward graduate programs that would train me to be an applied developmental scientist. During graduate school, I had an amazing team of mentors, including my primary advisor Dr. Ross Thompson, as well as my broader committee members, including Dr. Marcella Rafaelli and Dr. Gus Carlo. Despite me not being “their” students, both Drs. Rafaelli and Carlo took time with me to help me develop a well-rounded and balanced program of research which allowed me to think about how the parent-child relationship (which I focused on with Dr. Thompson) translated to other contexts. Since getting my degree, I have continued to seek professional mentorship from the amazing colleagues around me, to help me navigate academia, the evolving funding landscape, and the ever-challenging navigation of work-life issues. I consider the circle of colleagues I have available to turn to for mentorship and advice to be one of the things I value most about my career. The importance of mentors in my career has made me prioritize being a mentor myself. In this role I actively mentor undergraduate and graduate students. I particularly love working with undergraduates, especially other first-generation scholars like myself, who may not see the opportunities available to them that match their strengths.

What words of wisdom might you pass on to someone on their very first day after deciding to get a Ph.D. in developmental science or related?

The first thing I tell students I work with is to find a program and mentor that is a good fit “for them.” Think about what it is you want to be trained to do and the kinds of opportunities you want to have as the result of the degree. There’s nothing worse than spending years getting a degree that doesn’t position you to achieve the goals you have for yourself! Then apply to programs that match those goals. Finally, talk to potential mentors and find those individuals that you connect with and who inspire you.

What is something you learned in the last month?

I am in the process of writing a grant proposal that includes a new collaboration in an area of research which represents a new area for me. This collaboration has pushed me to think about my area of research in an entirely new way. In the process, I have been reminded how fun and inspiring it is to read and learn about different areas of research. Through this I have learned that the possibilities to be inspired and take your research in a new direction are boundless. On a personal note, I have also learned that being in the “sandwich” generation is very real! I have two small children and aging parents and the needs on both ends during COVID have increased, as they have for many others. In the past month I have had several situations with competing care demands between my children and my mom that have made me realize just how much pressure this brings to those, especially women, in my generation. So, I would like to acknowledge just how important research in this area is, and to those researchers in this area, I will rely on learning from your work in the years to come.