

Announcing the 2026 Recipients of the Small Grants for Early Career Scholars

Driven by its [Strategic Plan](#), the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) recognizes the importance of capacity building for early career scholars seeking to establish their research programs, especially considering the limited funding available for conducting exploratory work. The Small Grants Program for Early Career Scholars addresses this need within developmental science by supporting pilot or small-scale research projects proposed by members who completed their doctoral degree within the last five years.

The Small Grants Program celebrates its eighth year by awarding up to \$7,500 USD to each of the nine selected projects, directly supporting a diverse group of early career researchers from institutions in the United States, Nigeria, Turkey, and Australia. The 2026 projects were selected from a highly competitive pool of 114 applications and cover many research areas and topics, including children's and adolescents' caregiving for the family, postnatal experiences on infant neurocognitive development, mental health literacy amongst Black youth, emotion regulation during social media use, and others. To read more about each proposal, see the biographies of the awardees below.

SRCD thanks all 36 reviewers involved in the selection process and congratulates the 2026 Small Grant recipients: Jeffersson Brasil Pires Dos Santos, Wendy De Los Reyes, Delin Deng, Boyun Kim, Kelly Kohler, Chinedu Ononiwu, Shuang Quan, Jean Sack, Gamze Turunc Bayrakdar, Jo Wrigglesworth

Read more about this year's Small Grant projects and researchers!



Jeffersson Brasil Santos, Arizona State University

“SEPA-YTW-Brasil: Cultural Adaptation and Pilot Test of a Virtual HIV Prevention Intervention Among Youth Identifying as Transgender Women in Brazil”

Dr. Jeffersson Santos (He/They) is a postdoctoral research scholar in the Edson College of Nursing and Health Innovation at Arizona State University. Dr. Santos partners with community organizations and health systems in the United States and Brazil to conduct community-engaged, mixed-methods research advancing interdisciplinary and technological solutions for HIV prevention among vulnerable populations, particularly sexual and gender minority youth. The 2026 SRCF Small Grants Program for Early Career Scholars will support two aims: (1) translation and cultural adaptation of the SEPA-4-TW intervention (Salud/Health, Educación/Education, Prevención/Prevention, Autocuidado/Self-Care for Transgender Women) into Brazilian Portuguese for youth identifying as transgender women aged 15–24 years (SEPA-YTW-Brasil), and (2) pilot testing the acceptability, appropriateness, and feasibility of SEPA-YTW-Brasil as a virtual HIV prevention intervention addressing HIV pre- and post-exposure prophylaxis, treatment as prevention (U=U), mental health, substance use, and intimate partner violence.

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Wendy de Los Reyes, Claremont McKenna College

“Exploring Student Action-Research and their Adult Allies: A Pilot Study”

Dr. Wendy de Los Reyes is an Assistant Professor of Psychological Science at Claremont McKenna College and the Director of the AMPLIFY Lab (Advocacy, Mentorship, and Participatory research with Latine Immigrant Families and Youth). Her research explores how youth resist and navigate structural inequities, as well as create change through supportive relationships (e.g., mentors, parents, peers). She grounds her work in cultural-ecological systems theory to conceptualize development as an ongoing reciprocal process between the individual's characteristics and those of their surrounding environments, from their immediate context (e.g., family, school) to broader policies and societal influences.

This theoretical grounding informs how she examines youth-adult relationships within youth-serving settings, such as schools and community organizations, shaped by macro-level contexts (e.g., racism, adultism, xenophobia). Her SRCF funded project explores how Advanced Placement (AP) Capstone course sequences give students opportunities to conduct youth participatory action research (YPAR), an approach in which young people study social issues in their local contexts, with scaffolding from adults, and determine action to address them.



Delin Deng, Vanderbilt University

“Linguistic Alignment and Educational Belonging in Children with Autism”

Dr. Delin Deng is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Psychology and Human Development at Vanderbilt University and will join the Human Interaction Lab in the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences at Utah State University as a Postdoctoral Fellow in July 2026. She received her Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of Florida and conducts interdisciplinary research at the intersection of developmental science, communication, and speech-language pathology. Her research focuses on speech and language development in neurodevelopmental disorders, including autism and Down syndrome, using computational and acoustic methods to study communication in naturalistic settings. The SRCF Small Grant for Early Career Scholars will support the project Linguistic Alignment and Educational Belonging in Children with Autism, which examines how speech convergence between autistic children and their teachers or peers relates to academic engagement and social inclusion in classroom environ



Boyun Kim, Utah Tech University

“Early Childhood Education Workforce’s Landscape: Between Policy Implications, Effectiveness, and Neighborhood”

Dr. Boyun Kim is an assistant professor of Early Childhood Education (ECE) at Utah Tech University. She received her Ph.D. in Early Childhood Education with a concentration in research methodology from Oakland University in Michigan. Her research focuses on advancing a thriving ECE teacher ecosystem that supports both child development and community well-being by examining the macro-level impact of policies in the ECE environment, the meso-level influence of neighborhood factors, and the micro-level dynamics of teaching practices. She is also curious about the economic value of the ECE teacher workforce. She has a strong interest in quantitative methodology. With support from the 2025 SRCF Small Grant for Early Career Scholars, she will evaluate the impact of teacher workforce policies and differences in neighborhood factors to understand workforce trends and identify key driving factors, eventually creating a sustainable, high-quality, and stable ECE workforce.



Kelly Kohler, University of California, Los Angeles

"Adaptation of a Trauma Informed, Preventive Intervention for Families of NICU Graduates"

Dr. Kelly Kohler is a Clinical Psychology Postdoctoral Fellow at UCLA Semel Institute's Division of Population Behavioral Health. She received her Psy.D. in Clinical Psychology from Pepperdine University in 2025. Dr. Kohler's research centers on promoting the well-being and resilience of families who have faced early childhood attachment disruptions due to acute stress and trauma. Specifically, she examines attachment-based methods of supporting families with infants hospitalized in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). The 2026 Small Grant for Early Career Scholars will support her project of evaluating the efficacy and feasibility of adapting a manualized, short-term intervention that promotes parent-child attachment following discharge from the NICU. Through this project, Dr. Kohler aims to serve vulnerable families who have faced early medical adversity by reducing barriers to meaningful mental health support.



Chinedu Ononiwu, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

“Parental Exposure to Disney Animated Films, Parent-Guided Play, and Early Cognitive and Social-Emotional Development among Urban Nigerian Toddlers.”

Chinedu Richard Ononiwu is a lecturer in the Department of Broadcasting, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria, and a Visiting Scholar in the School of Psychological Sciences at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. He holds a PhD in Film and Multimedia Studies from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. His research interests focus on audience reception and engagement with media messages (particularly fake news), representation in film, as well as the influence of media exposure on child development.

Chinedu is a member of the International Association for Media and Communication Research and the Society for Research in Child Development. He is currently collaborating with Dr. Frankie Fong, a lecturer in the School of Psychology at Victoria University of Wellington, on the SRCD Small Grant-funded project aimed at examining the link between parental exposure to Disney animated films, parent-guided play, and toddlers’ cognitive and social-emotional development in Nigeria as an underrepresented African context. The project further investigates factors that shape the mediating role of Nigerian parents, building on

findings from Chinedu's earlier research. <https://journals.uj.ac.za/index.php/jcsa/article/view/3443/2372>

The SRCD Small Grant provides critical support for participant incentives, data collection, and observational equipment. Through this partnership, the project is expected to generate evidence that would contribute to global scholarship and inform evidence-based parenting and child development practices in Nigeria and beyond.

Linkedin Account <https://ng.linkedin.com/in/chinedu-richard-ononiwu-ph-d-a97435107>.



Shuang Quan, Juniata College

“Leveraging Conversational AI in Supporting Children’s Literacy Development”

Dr. Shuang Quan is an Assistant Professor of Education and Director of the AI in Education Lab at Juniata College. She received her Ph.D. in Innovation in Curriculum and Instruction from Fordham University. Her research explores how emerging technologies can support children’s language and literacy development in home and classroom contexts. Working closely with pre-service teachers and families, her work focuses on

developing responsive, individualized AI-enhanced learning tools that support early readers, especially children from diverse backgrounds and with diverse learning needs. The SRCDC Small Grants Program for Early Career Scholars will support her research on how conversational AI, particularly multimodal AI with visual representations and pragmatic cues, influences children's literacy outcomes, engagement, and learning retention.



Jean Sack, University of Minnesota & Laura Pareja-Conto, McGill University

“Moral Agency in the Context of Structural Inequities: Adolescents’ Critical Consciousness Development in Colombia and the United States”

Jean Sack is a Post-Doctoral Research Associate in the Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota. She received her PhD in Educational Psychology at the University of Illinois. Her research explores how youth and non-parental adults interpret and navigate their interactions, with the aim of strengthening culturally responsive, developmentally supportive relationships. Grounded in her experience as a teacher and educational leader in urban U.S. schools, her work builds on efforts to create opportunities for adolescents to address social inequities through restorative justice and civic engagement. Laura Pareja-Conto is a doctoral student at McGill University in Montréal, Canada. She was born and raised in Cartagena,

Colombia, which has motivated her to study how Colombian adolescents construct meaning around and engage with issues of equity, justice, and harm. Her research interests also include trauma-informed care and restorative justice. The 2026 Small Grant for Early Career Scholars will support Laura and Jean in studying how young people in Colombia and the U.S. make sense of structural inequities and find ways to question and challenge oppressive structures within schools and society at large. The ultimate goal of this project is to further research on the development of critical consciousness across varying sociopolitical contexts.



Gamze Turunc Bayrakdar, Kadir Has University, Türkiye

“Changing Family Roles under Acculturative Stress: Parentification and Adolescent Outcomes in Forced Displacement”

Dr. Gamze Turunç is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Kadir Has University. She earned her Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from Koç University. Her research focuses on child and family well-being in vulnerable contexts, with particular emphasis on parenting, gender-related family processes, child development, and psychosocial adaptation among refugee and conflict-affected populations. The project

that will be funded by the 2026 SRCF Small Grants Program for Early Career Scholars builds on this line of work by examining how maternal acculturative stress may influence refugee adolescents' psychological, behavioral, and cultural adaptation outcomes through parentification processes, while exploring social support as a potential protective factor. The project aims to advance understanding of family adaptation and adolescent development in refugee contexts.

X (Twitter): [@GamzeTurunc1](#)



Jo Wrigglesworth, Deakin University

“Exploring biological mechanisms of pubertal development”

Dr Jo Wrigglesworth is an Associate Research Fellow in the Deakin Lifespan Institute, School of Psychology at Deakin University, Australia. She earned her PhD at Monash University studying a neuroimaging-based biomarker of ‘Brain Age’ in elderly populations. Her current research focuses on epigenetic markers in childhood and adolescent ADHD, and how these associate with structural neurodevelopment. The 2026 Small Grant for Early Career Scholars will support research on examining epigenetic processes (DNA methylation) in pubertal development. Applying bioinformatics to epigenetic data, representing DNA

methylation levels of more than 600,000 sites measured across the entire epigenome, she will contribute novel evidence to better understand the biological underpinnings on pubertal development.