

[NEWS](#) | POSTED JULY 15, 2026

Teaching Committee Spotlight: Lucía Alcalá, Ph.D.



Lucía Alcalá, Ph.D.

Dr. Lucía Alcalá is Professor of Psychology at California State University, Fullerton. She received her Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from the University of California Santa Cruz with an emphasis on cross-cultural studies. Previously, Dr. Alcalá worked as Postdoctoral Fellow at CINVESTAV in Merida, Yucatan Mexico, where she conducted ethnographic research with Yucatec Maya children and families. She has over 10 years of

experience teaching courses in early childhood development and cognitive development.

Her teaching and research is focused on how children develop the initiative to help at home and in the community, as active contributors of their own development focusing on the role of cultural values and expectations across communities (Maya, Mexican-immigrant, and European American). Additionally, she explores how these experiences at home contribute to children's executive function skills and learning processes. She has published multiple peer-review articles, presented at national and international conferences and has collaborated with Indigenous community organizations in Mexico.

Dr. Alcalá's scholarly achievements have earned her several awards, including the SRCD's Latinx Caucus career excellence award, and fellowships like the US Fulbright Scholar (2022). She has received multiple grants, including from the National Science Foundation. Dr. Alcalá is dedicated to mentoring undergraduates, junior faculty, and graduate students and has received multiple awards as faculty advisor of distinction and several research grants to support student mentorship in research.

Q: Why did you decide to choose developmental science as a course of study or career?

A: I came to developmental science as a nontraditional student and as a parent. During my undergraduate years, I had two children, and my very personal desire to become a better parent drew me to questions about childrearing and parenting practices. As I studied these topics, I began to recognize a tension between the parenting approaches emphasized in U.S. settings and the practices I knew from my own Mexican community.

I was born into a farming family and raised in a small rural town in Mexico, where childhood involved both expansive, community-based play and meaningful responsibilities through daily chores. After moving to the United States, I was struck by how different children's everyday lives could be, and I often felt out of place. When I became a young parent in a predominantly White, middle-class community, those feelings intensified: it became clear that my own parenting instincts and practices did not always align with those of my host community.

During graduate school, I had my third child. This further grounded my interest in developmental research, as my children have been a constant source of inspiration and, in many ways, my most important teachers. Thank you, Alex, Mariana, and Isabella!

These experiences ultimately helped me see childrearing not as a set of "right" or "wrong" practices, but as a reflection of cultural values, family resources, histories with formal schooling, and the broader ecological contexts in which children and families are embedded. Developmental science gave me the tools to study those contextual processes with rigor and to ask better, more culturally grounded questions about children's

development and well-being.

Q: What motivates you to continue to pursue your field of study?

A: What sustains my work is an ongoing sense of intellectual urgency: the more I learn about development, the more questions I have about how context, culture, and everyday experience interact to support children's well-being. Development is dynamic, relational, and deeply shaped by the environments children inhabit, and there is always more to understand.

After graduate school, I moved to the Yucatán Peninsula to continue my research. Although it was my first time in that region, I felt an immediate sense of belonging. I found extraordinary colleagues, and the generosity and openness of the communities profoundly shaped both my scholarship and my parenting. With the support of a postdoctoral fellowship, I was able to immerse myself (and my family) in Yucatec Maya communities and learn from their sophisticated childrearing approaches, particularly the ways they respect children's autonomy, support children as active contributors to family life, and provide guidance that is both structured and responsive.

I remain deeply grateful to the families who have shared their lives and knowledge with me. I have maintained close relationships with these communities and continue to prioritize collaboration in ways that align with and support their goals. This commitment to reciprocity, community partnership, and culturally grounded developmental science continues to motivate my work.

Q: What is the most innovative and fun activity or assignment you have done in your class?

A: I am intentional about helping students connect developmental concepts to social justice and the real-world conditions that shape children's lives. I approach developmental psychology through a social justice perspective, inspired by mentors who modeled how the field can be taught with both intellectual rigor and social responsiveness.

One example: when teaching Kübler-Ross's framework for understanding grief, I ask students to consider its limits by applying it to cases involving missing and murdered Indigenous women in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. How can someone move toward "acceptance" when they do not know what happened to their loved one?

To ground this discussion, I use a brief NPR story in which Carolyn DeFord, a member of the Puyallup community, describes learning about her mother's disappearance in 1999. The story helps students engage emotionally and ethically with the topic, while also strengthening their ability to evaluate how well our theories capture lived experience. To ensure accessibility, I also provide a printed transcript for students with hearing-related accommodations.

This short but powerful addition consistently deepens the learning moment: it helps students see the relevance of developmental science, recognize the field's boundaries, and take greater ownership of their learning, while also

building their awareness of social justice issues that intersect with development.

Q: What advice would you give to students or early career educators about teaching developmental science or related fields?

A: Be brave, and do not let the field's limitations narrow your teaching or your research. Developmental science is strongest when it is willing to question its assumptions, broaden whose experiences count as evidence, and remain accountable to the communities it aims to understand.

Early career educators bring valuable knowledge shaped by their lived experiences, identities, and community ties, and that knowledge can deepen students' learning and expand our field. I encourage new educators to remain open to new approaches, seek mentorship and support, and trust their own voice. There is no single "correct" academic path. Our students benefit most when they learn from scholars who are willing to be bold, reflective, and committed to building a more inclusive developmental science.