NEWS | POSTED OCTOBER 13, 2026

National Disability Employment Awareness Month Spotlight: Leana McWood, Ph.D.

AUTHOR

Leanna McWood, Ph.D.

SRCD Disability Caucus, Chair | Assistant Professor
North Dakota State University
https://www.linkedin.com/in/leanna-mcwood-32643360/

Bio: Dr. Leanna McWood, (SRCD Disability Caucus, Chair) is an Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family Science at North Dakota State University where she directs the Disability and Adolescent Involvement Relationships and Sleep lab (Disability & AIRS Lab). She earned her PhD from Auburn University in 2020. Her research examines the inclusion of youth with disabilities in developmental science research and the resilience factors that promote well-being for adolescents in contexts of relational risk. She has received grant funding to develop best practices for a peer mentoring program that partners youth with and without disabilities, using both qualitative and quantitative methods to study socioemotional adjustment and program impact. She is also engaged in projects exploring the development of disability identity in adolescence and emerging adulthood. Dr. McWood is passionate about building inclusive communities for people with disabilities through both research and service to her community and profession. She formed the

Disability Caucus at SRCD and serves as the first Chair of the caucus.

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

A: Initially, I chose this field of study because I absolutely adored doing research and learning about development. In my undergraduate years at Miami University, I joined three research labs and engaged in research on several topics. I found every aspect exciting and decided to keep learning through further study. As I went through my training, I developed a deep appreciation for the interconnected ways that different experiences shape people socially, emotionally, and biologically. Moreover, I realized I could do research that would help identify ways to improve outcomes for people, especially young people, in contexts of greater risk.

Q: What are you most proud of in your career?

A: I am still early in my career, but right now I feel most proud of starting the Disability Caucus at SRCD. Over the past 10 years, I longed for that space to connect with other scholars doing work on disability-related topics or who were part of the disability community. Envisioning and creating that space has been an experience I will never take for granted. I have met amazing people through establishing this caucus. I love our meetings, collaborations, and conversations together and truly look forward to the work of planning events and dreaming up ideas and goals for the caucus. My biggest hope is that one day members of this caucus will look back on their careers and this little space I (and my amazing team) dreamed up will hold a special place for them, too.

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

A: I feel incredibly lucky to have had mentors throughout my training who believed in me, supported me, and pushed me to be a better scientist. I had an amazing mentorship team during my graduate training that included my advisor, Dr. Stephen Erath. I really appreciated that he allowed me to pursue my interests and goals while introducing me to excellent opportunities like working with the Child Development Project data for my dissertation. For my postdoctoral training, Dr. Mona El-Sheikh was the perfect mentor. I know that I can always reach out to her and she will offer advice, support, and cheer me on! The training she provided in sleep and development starting from childhood and continuing through early adulthood has been invaluable to my career. I am endlessly grateful to have mentors that helped shape me into the researcher I am today and who continue to provide mentorship.

Q: Outside of developmental science, what hobbies or activities do you engage in or enjoy?

A: Outside of developmental science, my biggest hobby is reading! I adore reading books, especially fantasy and horror novels. A big special shoutout to all of the book clubs I am in with friends who are dear to me. I love developing community and friendship so in my free time I also organize a lot of board game nights and get-togethers to celebrate holidays, milestones, or just see each other. Our field shows how important connection is, so emphasizing relationships with friends and family is something I invest a lot of time into. Finally, I love volunteering with local organizations whenever I have extra time or energy.