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National Disability Employment Awareness Month Spotlight: Shana R. Cohen, PhD

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Bio: Dr. Shana Cohen is an Associate Professor in the Department of Education Studies. Her research focuses on multilingual and immigrant families raising neurodivergent children, with particular attention to how language, culture, and parents' beliefs about autism shape educational decision-making, parenting practices, and family experiences. As the daughter of Latino immigrants, Dr. Cohen's bilingual and bicultural upbringing has shaped her commitment to understanding and supporting the experiences of Spanish-speaking and Mexican heritage families.

Grounded in a Critical Sociocultural Approach and informed by developmental theory, Dr. Cohen challenges deficit-oriented perspectives on bilingualism and disability by highlighting the linguistic, relational, and community strengths that multilingual families bring to their children's development and education. Through mixed-methods research, she examines caregiver–child interactions, family routines, and families'

experiences navigating health and educational systems, with the goal of informing more culturally responsive approaches to autism identification, intervention, education, and policy.

Dr. Cohen brings a range of experiences as a clinician, early childhood special educator, advocate, and researcher. She teaches courses focused on neurodivergence, child development, and inclusive education. Across her research, teaching, and community-engaged work, she is committed to bridging scholarship, professional practice, and community knowledge to create more inclusive and responsive experiences for children and families in both home and educational settings.

Read here for more information about Shana's work!

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

A: I chose developmental science because I wanted to challenge the deficit framing embedded in traditional ways of defining and measuring children's learning and development. Developmental milestones can be useful, but when treated as universal benchmarks, they can position differences as deficits and overlook individual variability and the ways development is shaped by relationships, cultural artifacts, and environments.

This became personal after I had my own children. I remember worrying about whether they were meeting milestones at the "right" time and realizing how little those benchmarks captured the complexity of development. In graduate school, my mentors helped me think more contextually about how children and caregivers make meaning together and how families, communities, and cultural contexts shape development.

This perspective continues to guide my work today. I am interested not simply in whether a child meets a milestone, but in asking: How is this child developing? In what context? How do relationships, environments, and cultural artifacts shape development? And how can we build on families' strengths while supporting the many ways children learn, communicate, and grow?

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

A: My mentors in graduate school were instrumental in shaping how I think about development and the kind of scholar and mentor I wanted to become. They taught me to look beyond individual-level explanations and consider how children and caregivers make meaning together, and how families, communities, and cultural contexts shape development.

I was particularly influenced by Susan Holloway, Bruce Fuller, Barbara Rogoff, Jan Blacher, Marci Hanson, and Thomas Weisner. Their scholarship taught me to attend closely to children's everyday experiences,

relationships, and the systems in which families live. This perspective continues to shape how I mentor students. I strive to create an environment where students feel seen, supported, and encouraged to explore their own intellectual interests. I want students to develop confidence in their ideas, ask meaningful questions, and find their scholarly voices. I see mentorship as collaborative: when students bring emerging ideas, I work with them to explore possibilities and identify directions that feel meaningful to them.

Q: What advice would you give to a student beginning their Ph.D. studies in developmental science or a related field?

A: My advice to students beginning their Ph.D. is to approach every relationship and experience with intention. You will get out of your relationships what you put into them, and there is something to be learned from every experience; even a class that initially feels redundant or familiar. Some of the most meaningful learning and opportunities in an academic career come from unexpected places and relationships.

Relationship-building is a central part of success in developmental science and academia more broadly. Treat the people around you; with all levels of experience and from all walks of life with respect, kindness, curiosity, and humility. Be open to learning from others, and take the time to build genuine connections. Your academic knowledge will continue to grow, but the relationships you build along the way can shape your career, your perspective, and the kind of scholar and colleague you ultimately become.

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

A: Outside of developmental science, I enjoy hiking, skiing, traveling, reading, and cooking. Most of all, I love spending time with my family and cheering them on at their regattas and musical theatre performances. Whether we're exploring a new place, sharing a meal, or simply enjoying time together, these experiences are an important way for me to recharge, stay grounded, and make memories with the people I love.