

Bringing Research to Life: Meeting Children’s Educational Needs Through Stakeholder Collaboration

Member Q&A With Lorena Aceves

Family Science Impact highlights how NCFR members are making a difference through their Family Science career and showcases their career journeys. See more about the many careers and professions of Family Science at nconf.org/family-science-careers

Name:

Lorena Aceves, Ph.D.

Current Job Titles:

Research Scientist, Child Trends

Tell us a bit about your current work and why it’s important.

At Child Trends, I’m focused full time on research projects related to K-12 education. While education is my predominant topic, I think about my work using a systems approach, which is where Family Science comes in: Kids don’t just exist in the silo of education, they exist in a family system that impacts how they navigate their educational system. Day to day, my work tasks can depend on where I’m at in the cycle of each of my projects. Some days I’m running focus groups or having check-in calls with funders. Other days, I could be strictly writing because I’m working on a proposal with a team.

Beyond my research area, I’m able to work on different aspects of other projects, like providing technical assistance to funders and collaborating with people at academic institutions. We respond to calls put out by funders, including the U.S. government and other stakeholders, and compete for funding to address the issues or research questions they’ve identified. Lately, the federal government has put out a lot of calls to address equity, so that’s one of my focus areas. It’s pretty fun to come together with others who have different areas of expertise

and show funders the team we can offer and what we can do. It’s even more exciting when we’re funded to do the work and see the research come to life. I think that’s what’s so important — that we’re addressing timely, real-life needs, which is very different from academic spaces.

Another important aspect of my job that I really enjoy is working directly with state and local governments, school districts, families, and communities. For example, one school district we’re working with is addressing how to engage their students’ families, who speak five different languages. The district only has so much bandwidth, but representatives want to make sure that the families can be engaged in their children’s education. We’re working on strategies to make sure these families have a voice in the programs the school district is working to implement.

What was your path to your current role? What shaped or influenced that path?

I was always interested in knowing how my family context mattered — for instance, in motivating me to earn a Ph.D. when my brother and cousins pursued avenues other than higher education. That set the stage for my interest in educational outcomes among Latinx youth, in the context of their family.

As a student, I loved connecting with people at the NCFR Annual Conference who were doing this kind of work. Then, learning

about theoretical models in Family Science and in developmental science made me think about how I could marry the two areas in my work.

I started my Ph.D. intending to become a professor, but halfway through graduate school, I realized that didn’t seem like a good fit for me. Through that kind of questioning, I did internships during graduate school at the U.S. Department of Education that showed me other career paths. I was a federal policy postdoc with the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD), which allowed me to spend two additional years learning about federal government work and more career paths. Ultimately, I decided that I wanted to work somewhere like Child Trends, where I could focus on research — doing analyses, writing reports, and conducting focus groups. While I loved federal service, a lot of federal work is administrative, and I was looking for somewhere where I could still be “in the weeds.”

How do you use Family Science knowledge or skills in your current work?

Again, I approach my work from a systems perspective. Sometimes people only focus on the school, or they only focus on the family. But there has to be an intersection between the two. The child might be at that intersection, but it’s not the child’s responsibility to inform the family about what’s going on at school or vice versa.



Lorena Aceves



If the child is growing in a healthy family system, they'll thrive in school, and if school representatives understand what the home base looks like, they're better able to support the child's needs at school.

What is most rewarding or makes you proudest about the impact of your work?

I find it so exciting to work on something happening in real life, like partnering with school districts on how to engage families instead of thinking about the issues only from a theoretical perspective. It's about understanding the real-life issues that families and schools are facing and creating solutions together.

I also like investing in up-and-coming Latinx scholars. I have a network of people I've met at conferences over the years, and I also host a writing and support group pretty regularly. I love having that space for folks, especially if they're the only Latinx individual in their program, or so they can come to somebody

about professional issues or really about anything related to being a Brown person pursuing a Ph.D.

What do you wish you would have known along your education or career path?

I think the only thing I wish I had known earlier was just how many options there are career-wise. That's why I make it a point to let people know that the skillset we gain in graduate school can extend beyond academia. We're not always told that. I actually have an enormous spreadsheet of all the kinds of organizations where you can work with a Ph.D. (bit.ly/AcevesResourcesNCFR). I always share it and tell people to just take a look. Even if you know you want to go in academia, I think it's still worthwhile to learn what else is out there; you could find organizations to collaborate with, or you might change your mind at some point or need more flexibility because of personal circumstances.

What do you want the world to know about your work or about Family Science?

Again, one aspect of my work that I'm so passionate about is using research to address timely, real-life issues. Make sure you're passionate about what you're doing and that it fills your cup; if it fills your cup, it's going to fill everybody else's cup, as well. But it's also important to note that your passion can change. I feel like a lot of people struggle when their passion changes or they need to adapt it a bit. But if you feel it in your heart and soul, it's going to go so far. ✨

Dr. Aceves has also created these resources to help others explore and navigate academic and non-academic career paths:

- *Podcast: Vida de PhD* (bit.ly/AcevesPodcastNCFR)
- *Resources: Discovering the Right Fit: Academic and Non-Academic Careers* (bit.ly/AcevesResourcesNCFR)