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Dr. McDonald received her Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Houston in 1994. Currently, she is Associate Dean for Research in Southern Methodist University's Dedman College of Humanities and Sciences, and is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology. Dr. McDonald has spearheaded efforts to document the prevalence of children's exposure to intimate partner violence, to understand short- and long-term effects of violence on children, and to develop and evaluate treatments for children exposed to violence.

Dr. McDonald's research has focused heavily on understanding how specific child adjustment problems, such as aggression and antisocial behavior, are associated with exposure to family conflict and violence. In addition, she studies how children perceive and understand violence in their lives, and factors that help protect children from the adverse effects of exposure to violence. Understanding how violence exerts its detrimental effects is central to developing effective interventions for children in violent families. To that end, another focus of Dr. McDonald's research has been the development and evaluation of interventions to assist children exposed to frequent and severe violence at home. In particular, Project Support, a program developed by Dr. McDonald and her colleague Dr. Ernest Jouriles, is nationally recognized as one of very few programs that have been rigorously evaluated and found to be effective in reducing mental health problems among children in severely violent families. Dr. McDonald's more recent work also includes a focus on understanding how violence at home during childhood increases the risk of dating violence and sexual assault during adolescence and young adulthood, and working to develop programs to help mitigate that risk.

Dr. McDonald's research has been funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Institute of Justice; the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism; the Centers for Disease Control; and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice. Her work has been widely published in scientific journals and presented at professional conference, she is consultant to academic departments and social services agencies around the country, and is regularly invited to conduct workshops and training on evidence-based programs for children exposed to family violence.