

2026
Public Child Welfare Conference

Family is the Key Ingredient

October 21st – 23rd

Wilderness Resort
45 Hillman Road
Wisconsin Dells, WI 53965

The fee is $100
for in-person or
virtual attendance

Questions?
Contact Kim Eithun
at keithun@wisc.edu

Wisconsin Department of Children and Families

WCWPDS
Wisconsin Child Welfare Professional Development System

Conference Information

The 2026 Public Child Welfare Conference, sponsored by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, brings together national and Wisconsin experts to explore this year's theme, ***Families Are the Key Ingredient***. Through inspiring keynote presentations and practical workshops, participants will strengthen the knowledge and skills needed to partner with families, elevate family voice, recognize and address bias in decision-making, and build on family strengths to improve safety and well-being. Sessions will highlight effective family engagement, prevention-focused practices that help families remain safely together, and strategies that support child welfare professionals in meeting today's practice expectations.

Dates

Wednesday, October 21st
10:00 am - 4:00 pm

Thursday, October 22nd
8:30 am - 4:30 pm
Networking Reception 5:00 pm - 6:00 pm

Friday, October 23rd
8:30am - 4:00pm

Location

Wilderness Resort
45 Hillman Rd
Wisconsin Dells, WI

Registration Deadline: October 15th

There is a fee of $100 for both virtual and in-person attendance.
Advance registration is required to participate either in-person or virtually. Please register for the Register for the Wisconsin Public Child Welfare Conference by October 15th.

Registration is first-come, first-served. Cancellations must be received at least two weeks in advance of the conference. Otherwise, you will be responsible for paying the $100 conference fee.

Virtual Attendance

All conference presentations are being offered virtually via live Zoom meetings. Virtual attendees may participate via monitored chat as each presentation allows.

Conference Materials

Conference materials will be provided to attendees in electronic format only. These materials will be made available prior to the conference in the Whova app. Additional information and instructions will be sent to the email address provided as part of your registration.

Conference Information *(continued)*

Continuing Education Credits

Continuing Education Hours (CEH) for social workers will be offered to attendees for in-person and live virtual attendance. If you attend the entire conference, you will receive 19 CEHs, Credit hour tracking and reporting for this event is the responsibility of individual attendees. Conference organizers will maintain sign-in sheets through QR codes scanned in the rooms and virtual attendance logs for confirmation purposes.

Hotel Reservations

A hotel room block has been established with the Wilderness Resort at the state rate of $101.00/per night. In-person attendees are responsible for making their own lodging reservations. To do so, please call the Wilderness Reservation Center at 1-800-867-9453 and state that you are with **Leader #B09788.**

Reservations must be made prior to September 20th to receive the discounted rate. If applicable, please provide tax-exempt information prior to checking in.

Questions?

Please contact Kim Eithun at keithun@wisc.edu



Agenda at a Glance

Wednesday, October 21st

9:00 AM - 10:00 AM	Registration
10:00 AM - 4:00 PM	*Seminar Sessions (optional)*
12:00 PM - 1:00 PM	Lunch

Thursday, October 22nd

7:30 AM - 8:30 AM	Breakfast
8:30 AM - 8:45 AM	*Welcome*
8:45 AM - 9:30 AM	*The Intersectionality Between Child Welfare and Autism - Alexis Kramer*
9:30 AM - 10:30 PM	*If Family is the Key Ingredient, What Has to Change? - Theresa Green, Tammie King Johnson, Kate Luster*
10:30 AM - 10:45 AM	Break
10:45 AM - 12:15 AM	***Workshop A***
12:15 PM - 1:00 PM	Lunch
1:00 PM - 1:45 PM	*Holding Relationships as Sacred in Child Welfare - Brandy Hudson*
1:45 PM - 2:00 PM	Break
2:00 PM - 3:30 PM	***Workshop B***
3:45 PM - 4:45 PM	*Family Seeing and Family Finding - Kevin Campbell*
5:00 PM - 6:00 PM	Networking Reception

Friday, October 23rd

7:30 AM - 8:30 AM	Breakfast
8:30 AM - 9:30 AM	*DCF Updates*
9:30 AM - 10:15 AM	*How Poverty Became Neglect in the New Federal Law - Prudence Beidler Carr and Tracy Dumas*
10:15 AM - 10:30 AM	Break
10:30 AM - 12:00 PM	***Workshop C***
12:00 AM - 1:00 PM	Lunch
1:00 PM - 2:30 PM	***Workshop D***
2:30 PM - 2:45 PM	Break
2:45 PM - 3:45 PM	*Moral Injury: Understanding Healing and Building Resilience - Julie Collins*
3:45 PM - 4:00 PM	***Wrap-up***

Day 1 Agenda

Wednesday, October 21st

9:00 AM - 10:00 AM	**Registration**
10:00 AM - 4:00 PM *with lunch from 12:00 PM - 1:00 PM*	***Seminar Sessions***

Seminar Sessions – October 21st

Please choice one seminar workshop for the day.

10:00 AM - 4:00 PM
with lunch 12:00PM - 1:00 PM

S - 1

Building Confidence in In-Home Safety Planning: A Collaborative Learning

Stefanie Getchell, Andrea Cleland, David Foley, Jennifer McBain, Allison Fern

Join this interactive seminar to explore the real-world questions, challenges, and successes emerging from Wisconsin's 2026 Safety Planning Learning Collaboratives. Through case discussion, peer learning, and facilitated dialogue, participants will take a deeper dive into topics such as engaging families, gathering meaningful information, and navigating personal bias and fear in safety planning. Attendees will also help shape future learning by identifying additional practice needs and strategies to strengthen in-home safety planning across Wisconsin.

S - 2

Family Circles: Strengthening Families Through Culture and Connection

Dr. Alton "Sonny" Smart, Hon. Ernie St. Germaine, Dr. Brian Jackson, Doreen "Kamewin" Wawronowicz

Discover how the Family Circle program, developed by Ernie St. Germaine and Dr. Alton "Sonny" Smart of the Lac du Flambeau Tribe, uses storytelling, tribal values, and cultural traditions to strengthen parenting and promote healthy, resilient families. Participants will explore how this culturally grounded approach supports positive youth development, prevents alcohol use, and reinforces the protective role of family and community.

Seminar Sessions – October 21st

(continued)

10:00 AM - 4:00 PM
with lunch 12:00PM - 1:00 PM

S - 3 Child Welfare Testimony (Limited to 30 participants)

Renee Spielbauer, Jenni Karas, Libby Mueller

Effective courtroom testimony is an essential skill for child welfare professionals. This interactive seminar will help participants strengthen their confidence in preparing for court, communicating clearly with attorneys and judges, and presenting legally relevant information. Through guided instruction and realistic testimony practice, attendees will gain practical experience and feedback to improve their effectiveness as witnesses.

S - 4 The Art of Facilitation: Building Skills for Effective Family Teaming

Paula Buege, Samantha Debias

Strong family teams depend on skilled facilitation that encourages collaboration, shared decision-making, and meaningful family participation. This interactive workshop will help participants develop the practical skills needed to facilitate family team meetings. Through discussion, demonstrations, and skill practice, attendees will strengthen their ability to guide productive conversations, manage challenging dynamics, and keep families at the center of the planning process.

S - 5 Parents Supporting Parents (PSP Implementation Sites Only)

DeAnna Cobun, Kat Kasmaule, Becki Hietpas, Brandy Hudson

This seminar brings together Wisconsin's Parents Supporting Parents (PSP) implementation sites to strengthen practice, share successes, and learn from one another. Participants will explore strategies to support parent partners, enhance collaboration with child welfare agencies, and continue to elevate lived experience as a catalyst for family engagement and system improvement. **This session is intended for PSP implementation sites.**

Day 2 Agenda

Thursday, October 22nd

7:30 AM - 8:30 AM	**Registration and Breakfast (provided)**
8:30 AM - 8:45 AM	***Welcome*** **- Wisconsin Department of Children and Families - John Elliott**
8:45 AM - 9:30 AM	***The Intersectionality Between Child Welfare and Autism*** **Alexis Kramer** This plenary invites participants to rethink child welfare by centering trust, connection, and dignity, showing how honoring relationships with parents and youth is the foundation for lasting safety, healing, and well-being.
9:30 AM - 10:30 AM	***If the family is the key ingredient, what has to change?*** **Theresa Green, Tammie King-Johnson, Kate Luster, and LaMikka James** This facilitated conversation brings together family, community, and organizational perspectives from people who lived through the same systems-change journey from very different seats.
10:30 AM - 10:45 AM	***Break***
10:45 AM - 12:15 PM	***Workshop A***
12:15 PM - 1:00 PM	**Lunch (provided)**
1:00 PM - 1:45 PM	***Holding Relationships as Sacred in Child Welfare*** **Brandy Hudson** This plenary invites participants to pause and reflect on a foundational truth of the work: lasting safety, healing, and permanency are built through trust, connection, and dignity.
1:45 PM - 2:00 PM	**Break**
2:00 PM - 3:30 PM	***Workshop B***
3:30 PM - 3:45 PM	**Break**
3:45 PM - 4:45 PM	***Family is the Key Ingredient - Family Seeing and Family Finding*** **Kevin Campbell - PALE BLUE DOT** This keynote will explore how lasting safety, healing, and well-being are rooted in meaningful family and community connections.
5:00 PM - 6:00 PM	**Networking Reception and Painting Experience**

Workshop A – October 22nd

10:45 AM - 12:15 PM

A - 1

Putting Families First: Access Response Times and Safety Threats

Kayla DuBois and Jennifer McBain

Every CPS decision is an opportunity to put families first. Join us to talk about two initiatives that aim to clarify and streamline practice while centering families. Recent changes to Access response-time decision-making can provide more opportunity to thoughtfully plan the first contact with families. This new approach also serves as a platform for future revisions to the safety threat lists (i.e., present and impending danger threats). Bring your curiosity, your questions, and your expertise as we explore these important elements of CPS practice together!

A - 2

Building a Web of Support: Innovative Approaches to Substance Use and Mental Health Care

Jill Gamez and Jolee Buhr

Learn how Arbor Place is transforming substance use and mental health services in rural Wisconsin through innovative partnerships, technology, and coordinated community care. This session will explore strategies for strengthening referrals, improving access to treatment and recovery supports, and creating collaborative systems that help individuals and families receive the right services at the right time. Participants will leave with practical ideas for building stronger cross-system partnerships in their own communities.

Workshop A – October 22nd

10:45 AM - 12:15 PM

A - 4 Family Seeing

Kevin Campbell - PALE BLUE DOT

Family Seeing challenges professionals to move beyond seeing families through the lens of risk and deficits to recognizing their strengths, relationships, culture, and capacity for healing. Grounded in neuroscience, resilience, and the belief that human connection is essential for lasting safety, this session explores how changing our perspective can transform child welfare practice. Participants will leave with practical insights for partnering with families in ways that promote healing, dignity, and lasting well-being.

A - 5 Childhood Begins at Home: Supporting Family Success through Evidence-based Home Visiting

Terri Enters, Sharon Gilbert, Danielle Weary, Sarah Braaten

Learn how the Wisconsin Family Foundations Home Visiting Program supports children and families through evidence-based home visiting services that strengthen caregiver skills, promote healthy child development, and connect families with community resources across Wisconsin. Participants will also receive an overview of recent program outcomes and the innovative Recipe 4 Success parenting curriculum that uses cooking to build family relationships and parenting skills.

A - 6 Parents Supporting Parents: Building Hope Through Lived Experience

Elyse Harvey, Alyssa Hake, Brontae Hibbler, Meg Welch, Kayla Long, Jonisha Neita, Vanity Rabe, Tisha Butler

Discover how Wisconsin's Parents Supporting Parents (PSP) program empowers parents with lived experience in child welfare to support families currently involved in the system. Learn how agencies are implementing this evidence-informed model to strengthen family engagement, elevate parent voice, and improve outcomes for children and families.

Workshop B – October 22nd

2:00 PM - 3:30 PM

B - 1 Beyond a Seat at the Table: The Conditions That Make Family Partnership Possible

LaMikka James

Meaningful family partnership requires more than inviting families to participate; it requires creating the conditions where trust, psychological safety, transparency, and shared purpose can thrive. Through interactive discussion, real-world examples, and practical activities, participants will explore strategies for strengthening authentic partnerships that influence practice, policy, and systems change. Attendees will leave with actionable tools to create environments that value families as true partners in improving outcomes for children and families.

B - 2 Child Welfare Information System Feedback Session

Mitchell George and Alisha Brown

Help shape the future of the child welfare information system in Wisconsin by participating in this conversational feedback session around how the current system (eWiSACWIS) supports or challenges the work you do on a daily basis and how an updated system could better support the needs of children, families, and the child welfare workforce in Wisconsin.

B - 3 Using Data to Keep Youth in Care Connected to Families

Jack Tait and Jesse Brandner

In this workshop, we'll explore how data can help agencies prioritize kinship care and keep children in out-of-home care connected to their siblings. No data skills needed! All too often, data is simply used for reporting purposes. Instead, this workshop will focus on sharing practical, actionable steps for utilizing data on a day-to-day basis to drive practice. We'll discuss the benefits of kinship care, the common patterns of sibling separations, and how you can use data to ensure that keeping youth connected to their families is an organizational priority. You'll leave with clear and compelling information and strategies that you can implement at your own agency.

Workshop B – October 22nd

2:00 PM - 3:30 PM

B - 4 Keeping Children Safe without Absolute Sobriety

Nichole Nidey and Amanda Eleazer

Discover how the EMPOWER Project is transforming care for pregnant and parenting individuals affected by substance use by partnering with people who have lived experience. This session explores how reducing stigma, challenging assumptions, and engaging families as partners can improve provider training, practice, and policy. Participants will gain insights for creating more compassionate, effective, and family-centered systems of care.

B - 5 Supporting Neurodivergent Families: From Understanding to Action

Alexis Kramer

Neurodivergent families are often misunderstood within the child welfare system, particularly when neurodivergence intersects with race, culture, and other identities. Drawing from her lived experience as a black mother and advocate with autism, Alexis Kramer will explore how bias, trauma, and misconceptions can influence child welfare decisions and outcomes. Participants will gain practical strategies for creating more equitable, neurodivergent-affirming practices that strengthen partnerships with families.

B - 6 Re-Thinking Prevention Innovations in Child Welfare

Ann Villenuve, Eric Calvino, Jelena Jones, Stephen Bedwell, Scott Griffiths, Dana Johnson

Today's Prevention is a huge amalgam of ideas, concepts, services, and funding. Innovation - even bigger! Each of us can lead from the seat we are in in BIG ways, with a prevention-and-innovation mindset. This session will focus on specific innovation prevention efforts occurring throughout the state to support youth and families in CPS and YJ systems, community outreach, and seeking solutions to prevent deeper involvement of families, from a local perspective. A panel and descriptive how-tos will be provided.

Day 3 Agenda

Friday, October 23 rd

7:30 AM - 8:30 AM	**Breakfast (provided)**
8:30 AM - 9:30 AM	***DCF Updates*** **Shelby McCulley, Penny Nevicosi, Emily Campbell, LaMikka James, Angela Krueger -Department of Children and Families**
9:30 AM - 10:15 AM	***How Poverty Became Neglect in the New Federal Law*** ***Prudence Beidler Carr and Tracy Dumas*** This session explores practical strategies to help youth services professionals manage stress, set healthy boundaries, and sustain themselves in challenging roles.
10:15 AM - 10:30 AM	**Break**
10:30 AM - 12:00 PM	***Workshop C***
12:00 PM - 1:00 PM	**Lunch (provided)**
1:00 PM - 2:30 PM	***Workshop D***
2:30 PM - 2:45 PM	**Break**
2:45 PM - 3:45 PM	***Moral Injury: Understanding Healing and Building Resilience*** ***Julie Collins*** Learn how to prevent burnout by strengthening relationships, sharing the work, and using your influence to tackle tough, long-standing challenges together.
3:45 PM - 4:00 PM	**Wrap-Up**

Workshop C – October 23rd

10:30 AM - 12:00 PM

C - 1

C-1 The Adolescent: What Every Child Welfare Professional Should Know

Dr. Natalie Saragosa-Harris

Adolescence is a period of remarkable brain growth that shapes decision-making, relationships, emotions, and resilience. Drawing on findings from the landmark Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study®, Dr. Natalie Saragosa-Harris will explore how brain development influences adolescent behavior and what these insights mean for supporting youth affected by trauma and adversity. Participants will gain practical strategies for responding to teens in ways that promote healthy development, connection, and positive outcomes.

C - 2

Understanding Problematic Sexual Behaviors in Youth: Assessment and Safety Planning

Dr. Valerie Gonsalves

When youth display problematic sexual behaviors or concerning sexual interests, professionals and caregivers need practical, evidence-informed strategies to respond effectively. In this session, forensic psychologist Dr. Valerie Gonsalves will explore assessment, intervention, and safety planning approaches that promote accountability, reduce risk, and support healthy development. Participants will gain practical tools for making informed decisions while balancing child safety, treatment needs, and family well-being.

C - 3

Strengthening Families Through Community: The Promise of Family Resource Centers

Claire Ackerman, Becca Elbert, Marilyn Huckenpoehler, and Joshua Mersky

Family Resource Centers are a cornerstone of Wisconsin's child abuse and neglect prevention efforts, connecting families to resources, parenting supports, child development opportunities, and community partnerships. This session will explore Wisconsin's innovative investment in Family Resource Centers and share emerging findings from the groundbreaking Strong and Stable Families evaluation. Participants will gain practical insights into how community-based prevention can strengthen families, build protective factors, and improve outcomes for children.

Workshop C – October 23rd

10:30 PM - 12:00 PM

C - 4 Uncovering Bias in Child Welfare Case Notes: Leveraging Neutral Language Processing to Transform Practice

Dagene Brown and Tracy Rohrdanz

Drawing on real-world examples from Illinois DCFS data, this session will examine why identifying bias is vital to promoting justice and equity. Participants will explore how natural language processing tools enable agencies to systematically review case notes, highlight problematic language, and implement corrective measures. This workshop will demonstrate how technology can drive meaningful change, helping child welfare agencies recognize and mitigate bias in real time for more equitable outcomes.

C - 5 First Placement Project (FFP): An Initiative to Increase Initial Placement With Relatives and Like-Kin

Kayla DuBois, Kristie Buwalda, Jessica Nehmer, Alisha Brown, Laura Doebereiner, Stacy Gennett, Sue Ader, Nicholas Stabenow-Schneider

This First Placement Project (FFP) is an initiative facilitated by DCF to support local child welfare agencies in their work to increase the number of children and youth placed with relatives and like-kin at the point of initial placement into out-of-home care. A total of 21 counties, all sizes and representing every region of Wisconsin, are participating in the project and have chosen strategies to implement throughout 2026, with the common goal of keeping children within the community of people who know and love them. Join us to hear about the approaches agencies are taking and the lessons learned along the way! We hope you leave inspired to take your own steps toward our collective goal in Wisconsin to place children and youth with relatives and like-kin from the start.

Workshop D – October 23rd

1:00 PM - 2:30 PM

D - 1

Relationships are the Intervention

Brandy Hudson

Strong relationships with parents and caregivers are among the most powerful tools that child welfare professionals have to improve outcomes for children and youth. This interactive workshop explores how everyday interactions, professional decisions, and system dynamics influence family engagement and relational safety. Participants will identify practical strategies to strengthen partnerships, preserve family connections, and align practice with the values of family-centered child welfare.

D - 2

Beyond the Case File: Ethical Storytelling in Child Welfare

Ivory Bennett

Youth Voices Rising empowers young people with lived experience in foster care and the justice system to share their stories, influence policy, and inspire change. Participants will learn practical strategies for setablishing ongoing consent, protecting privavy, preservinf context, respecting boundaries, providing meaningful support and compensation, and reporting outcomes back to storytellers. Through a collaborative scenario activity, participants will identify potenital reisks within a storytelling request and practice building a safer, more ethical process. Attendees will leave with concrete questions, safeguards, and commitments they can apply within training, communications, advocacy, research, and organizational practice.

D - 3

Old Drugs, New Threats

Melissa Moore

One of the most dangerous public perceptions is “I did it when I was a kid, and I turned out fine.” Fast forward a few decades…where we find some of the most popular trends filling headlines and flooding socials are in classes all their own. Novel and reimagined products and devices pose new threats to the next generation of teens and young adults. Awareness is only part of the solution, but it will take the entire community to address this growing trend. Attend this session to learn more about the latest in the growing youth drug trends, products, and devices; what works (and perhaps more importantly, what doesn’t) in prevention; how to engage the community (& your coalition); and walk away with the soundbites that will help you in your efforts.

Workshop D – October 23rd

1:00 PM - 2:30 PM

D - 4

Family Teaming in Action

Tess Brodsky, Jessica Nehmer

This workshop will introduce participants to Family Teaming as defined in DCF Ongoing Services and Youth Justice standards, redefine engagement strategies, and explore how to implement it at the local agency level.

D - 5

Why MI? The Future of Wisconsin Child Welfare Practice - Start Using It Today!

Kristie Buwalda, DeAnna Cobun, Angela Krueger, Coy Haas, Angela Clements, Michelle Rushton, Laura Doebereiner

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a powerful model for engaging with children, youth, and families, used in child welfare agencies across the nation.

This session will provide information about the upcoming Motivational Interviewing pilot, which will launch in 2027. We will provide an overview of how MI aligns well with the Wisconsin Child Welfare Model for Practice and the addition of MI to Wisconsin's 6-year prevention plan, which is required by the Family First Prevention Services Act. Participants will get a sneak peek at the web-based training module designed specifically for child welfare in Wisconsin and hear from people with experience in motivational interviewing, whether as youth, parents, or child welfare professionals. Participants will leave the session understanding how Motivational Interviewing will be rolled out in Wisconsin, along with ideas for how they can start using MI in their personal and professional lives.