2023
ALC Overview

Applied Learning Communities (ALCs)

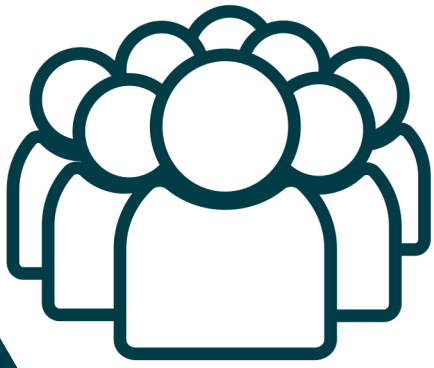
Strategic Quality Contacts: Making First Contacts With Families Count

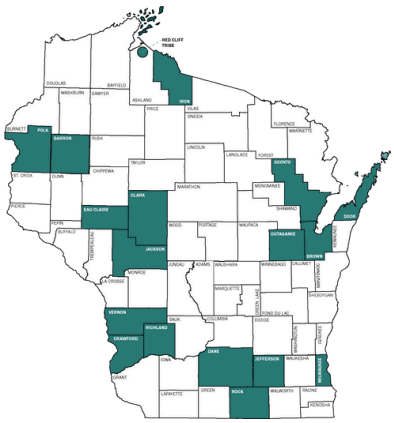
Annual Stakeholder's Report

In 2019 the Applied Learning Communities (ALCs) program launched in Wisconsin. The ALCs facilitate dialogue and resource sharing among Child Protective Services (CPS) professionals across the state. In recent years, a transfer of learning approach has invited supervisors and lead workers to examine a specific area of policy, consider supplementary skills CPS professionals might need to support the practice, develop learning materials, and use those materials in their agencies to train and skill-build with staff. Recommendations for improvements at the state and local level in policy, training, and eWiSACWIS are then made to the Department of Children and Families.

The 2023 topic was Strategic Quality Initial Contacts: Making First Contacts with Families Count. In 2023, 22 agencies applied, and 18 agencies enrolled, including 56 supervisors and designees.

56
supervisors
and designees





18 local
child welfare
agencies*
represented at the ALCs

* The use of local child welfare agencies indicates both county and tribal child welfare agencies.

Learning Design

The 2023 ALC topic of Strategic Quality Initial Contacts: Making First Contacts with Families Count was chosen to be inclusive of both Initial Assessment and Ongoing Services. The initial contact with a family is a pivotal moment as it sets the tone for the CPS intervention process.

The ALCs were delivered three times over the course of the year to provide choices in times and intensity to meet the scheduling needs of participants. Cohort 1 was held from March 14 - May 23, 2023, with 75-minute community huddles every other week. Cohort 2 was held from June 27 - July 11, 2023, with two 5-hour community huddles once a month. Cohort 3 was held from October 10 - December 19, 2023, with the 75-minute community huddles every other week. All three cohorts came together twice in January of 2024 to make recommendations to the Department of Children and Families.

The participants were granted 18 Continuing Education Hours (CEHs). The learning was delivered in asynchronous learning modules and Community Huddles. The Community Huddles provided an opportunity to review and discuss content. Parent Partners from the Parents Supporting Parents (PSP) Program were part of the facilitation team in the Community Huddles. The PSP model aims to empower parents with lived child welfare experience as mentors to parents currently within the child welfare system. The Parent Partners provided insight on both their personal experiences with the CPS system and insights they have gained supporting families currently in the system.

This year the Applied Learning Communities again provided a Transfer of Learning (TOL) experience. The TOL aimed to enhance the sharing of information and tools within the teams at each agency.

- Five asynchronous learning modules were utilized as part of the TOL experience.
- Twenty-five short, subject-specific modules were created and made available on the Wisconsin Child Welfare Professional Development System website.
- These modules can be accessed for unit meetings, individual learning sessions, or as a reference tool for the agency's staff.

Learning Objectives

Identify biases and their influence on decision- making in child welfare at first contact

Develop strategies to prepare for and implement quality initial contacts in both Initial Assessments and Ongoing Services

Learn methods to gather information regarding Parental/ Caregiver Protective Capacities

Build trusting and authentic relationships with families

Navigate challenging conversations in a way that enhances relationships and trust

Explore how to conclude the process of initial quality contacts with documentation, debriefing, and follow-up

Recommend quality improvements to implementation of initial quality contacts

Five Modules

The asynchronous materials and Community Huddles were divided into five modules.

Module 1: Preparing for Contact: Knowing Yourself

In the first module, participants focused on identifying and reducing unconscious bias in decision-making and assessing their response styles under stress. Participants learned that the cornerstone of a quality initial contact is self-reflection. Tools were provided to help CPS professionals understand their responses under stress and recognize how unconscious bias could influence their decisions. Emphasis was placed on the importance of creating psychological safety to reduce power imbalances and foster open communication. Local agencies shared responses on strategies to connect with families and navigate biases effectively.

One participant shared how their unit creates that psychological safety:

> ***"We talk as a unit about their biases being stronger when they are tired and overworked. We look to our team to help us identify those possible biases."***

By the end of this module, participants were able to:

- Understand that everyone has biases that can limit potential decision-making and affect interactions in child welfare.
- Uncover personal biases and stress response styles.
- Engage in discussions with colleagues to share insights and strategies.
- Develop actionable plans to reduce bias in agency decision-making.
- Consider how to create safety for oneself and families as part of the CPS intervention process.

This module aimed to equip CPS professionals with the necessary tools and insights to engage effectively with families, ensuring that initial contacts are conducted with empathy, awareness, and a commitment to overcoming biases. Due to the inherent power dynamic between a supervisor and a CPS professional or a CPS professional and a family, we discussed how to create psychological safety in an interaction to reduce the power differential and make it safe to share information. Agencies shared the efforts they have made to establish open communication channels by scheduling regular unit meetings as well as individual check-in. Supervisors shared how they work to promote empathy toward their workers experiences and perspectives. Modeling these behaviors, supervisors are setting the stage for CPS professionals to do the same with families.

Five Modules Cont.

Module 2: Setting the Stage for Synergy with Families

This module focused on equipping CPS professionals with the skills necessary to be emotionally and mentally prepared for engaging effectively with families. The module emphasized creating a climate where both CPS professionals and families felt safe. The insights from the Parent Partners were particularly helpful in understanding how the words and expressions set the stage for meaningful engagement. The Parent Partners shared how frightening it was to be in the situation, especially when the conversation first began. They provided suggestions on how the build trust such as being transparent about the CPS process, using active listening, and showing empathy. The importance of not making assumptions and validating the family's experiences were other insights shared by the Parent Partners. A sample explanation of the CPS professional's role and the CPS process was shared. Agencies reported the sample was used in unit meetings and CPS professionals honed how they describe their role and the CPS process.

A CPS supervisor shared how one of these tools were used in a unit meeting:

> ***"I used the example of how to describe the CPS decision-making process to a family and asked each person to share how they would describe their role. It gave us all ideas on the various ways we can put in plain language what we do."***

By the end of this module, participants were able to:

- Understand the importance of emotional and mental preparation for CPS professionals before initial contact with families.
- Recognize and address the high-stress environment faced by both CPS professionals and families during initial contacts.
- Describe the CPS process in plain language.
- Demonstrate how to notify an alleged maltreater of the allegations.
- Learn strategies to create a safe and open communication climate to mitigate fears and power differentials.
- Identify American Indian heritage and a child's tribal affiliation.

Five Modules Cont.

Module 2: Setting the Stage for Synergy with Families (Continued)

Quality initial contacts between CPS professionals and families set the foundation for achieving safety, permanency, and well-being for children, youth, and families. These visits provide the opportunity to engage in a collaborative relationship, conduct continuing safety assessments, and identify needed support. Discussion on the high stress environment for CPS professionals walking into unknown situations led to talk of how to balance knowing when to walk away from a situation and get additional support and how to bring down the tension and create a safe place for both the family and the CPS professional. Part of preparing for the visit is to think through possible reactions and emotions and identify a plan to react to the situation. Providing opportunities for training on creating psychological and physical safety for both supervisors and CPS professionals was discussed.

Parent Partners provided feedback on some of the things CPS professionals should keep in mind as they plan for the initial contact with a family:

> ***"When they introduce themselves, they should smile, have a warm expression on their face, shake hands, and speak in a calming voice. Then focus on being inquisitive or curious, stay neutral and do not become accusatory."***

> ***"Please slow down and make sure I understand. Let me know what you are going to do with the information you are asking about. I am scared. Help me understand what will happen next."***

Five Modules Cont.

Module 3: Engaging to Elicit Opportunities Related to Parent/Caregiver Protective Capacities

This module focused on developing the skills necessary for CPS professionals to effectively engage and collaborate with families in assessing child safety, identifying danger threats, and evaluating parental/caregiver protective capacities. The goal is to ensure the CPS professionals can gather relevant and sufficient information from the initial contact to identify potential protective capacities.

> ***"It is a shock to have someone knock on your door and say there has been a report. Showing me you are human helps me be more transparent. It says you see my struggles. It might just be a comment like, 'I don't know how you do it. I have a toddler, and it is exhausting. You have three kids and are doing it alone.'"*** *- A parent partner*

By the end of this module, participants were able to:

- Develop skills to engage parents and caregivers in the assessment process.
- Learn techniques to sort relevant and sufficient informtion and identify parent/caregiver protective capacities during initial contacts.
- Differentiate between strengths and parent/caregiver protective capacities.
- Explore examples and exercises to enhance engagement with families in assessing protective capacities
- Describe ways to demonstrate empathy, genuineness, and respect.
- Communicate support and partnership.

In this module, participants explored the skills necessary to identify safety threats and potential protective capacities through observation, questioning, and interaction with the family. The Parent Partners shared strategies for involving parents and caregivers in the assessment process, emphasizing collaboration. Discussion regarding the difference between strengths and protective capacities as well as examples, exercises, and sample questions were shared. Scenarios were used to apply the skills in identifying protective capacities. Counties provided tools they use focusing specifically on how to engage parents and caregivers in the assessment process and gathering relevant information. They focused on asking open-ended questions and observing interactions to gain insights. Supervisors shared how they conduct both individual and unit meetings to coach gathering and assessing the information to process the observable danger, the vulnerable child, the out-of-control behaviors, the immediate need, and the severity (OVOIS).

Five Modules Cont.

Module 4: Centering Family Voice: Elevating Partnership During Difficult Conversations

This module focused on the critical role of centering the family's voice in the initial contact. Participants explored techniques for navigating challenging discussions to build strong working relationships with family members. Emphasizing the importance of a strength-based approach, this module highlighted how seeing families' resourceful, strong, and resilient attributes can lead to better decision-making and holistic planning.

By the end of this module, participants were able to:

- Understand the key elements of meaningful conversation, active listening, and allowing time for conversations.
- Learn strategies for navigating turning points during challenging discussions
- Be open and curious about what is happening for the family.
- Be aware and carefully tend to the power imbalance.
- Seek solutions together
- Be mindful of your feelings and biases.

Discussions on how a strength-based approach to supporting families at the initial contact provided a lens to see the resourceful, strong, and resilient attributes families have to help gain insights and information to support strong decision-making and holistic planning. Supervisors and lead workers shared questions they ask and techniques they use to help CPS professionals to be open and curious about the family's perspective. This approach also requires having conversations around challenging topics. Participants learned the seven steps of courageous conversations and how to recognize when then conversation isn't going well, navigate the turning points, and ensure the conversations can be used to strengthen not break relationships. There were several strategies presented to keep conversations focused. Discussion also took place regarding the supervisor's role in and the importance of the CPS professional's opportunity to debrief difficult conversations that likely occurred a part of an initial contact. Similarly, discussion took place regarding the CPS role in and the importance of parents and other caregivers to do the same with someone they know and trust.

A participant said: ***"It's really about building new habits."***

Five Modules Cont.

Module 5: Putting It into Action: Documenting, Debriefing and Follow-up

In this module, participants explored how to conclude the process of quality initial contacts with documentation, debriefing, and follow-up on the initial visit.

By the end of this module, participants were able to:

- Clearly describe the observations, parent/caregiver perspectives, and decisions made during the initial contact.
- Evaluate the strengths, obstacles, and insights gained from family visits.
- Enhance the ability to offer feedback to improve the quality of interactions.
- Integrate elements of supportive supervision in consultations to reduce work-related stress.

CPS professionals are responsible for accurately and objectively recording information related to the safety and well-being of children and families. In the discussion, emphasis was placed on including the family's perspective in assessments, decision-making, and documentation related to this initial contact using the person's words, stories, goals, and feedback. Supervisors shared methods for providing feedback on documentation, including using reflective questions and promoting open communication. Discussion was had on the various roles a supervisor has in supporting the initial contact. The administrative role ensures the objectives of the agency are met. The educational role coaches and assures the professional development needs are met. The supportive supervision helps to create an affirming workplace. A poll taken in the huddles shows the majority of the supervisor's time is spent in supportive supervision.

A CPS supervisor said:

> ***"I talk with my workers about the stories we tell ourselves about the families we see and the words we use to describe their behavior because once they are written, they follow the family for a very long time." A CPS supervisor***

Recommendations

Participants completed an activity to recommend improvements to agency operations, practice standards, the automated information system (eWiSACWIS), and training to improve implementation of initial contacts with families. These recommendations were compiled and distributed to all three cohorts. All three cohorts then came together to discuss and decide the recommendations to move forward to the Department of Children and Families for consideration.

Local Recommendations

1. Facilitate self-awareness and identification of biases and their influence on decision-making in initial contacts.

- Commit at the local level to increase self-awareness of implicit biases its influence on decision-making at the initial contact (e.g., facilitate discussions in supervision and with peers about the topic).
- Engage colleagues in debriefing discussions related to decision-making to check biases.
- Use unit meetings to identify and address barriers and challenges to improve the effectiveness of engaging families in initial quality contacts.

2. Provide an agency culture that promotes physical and psychological safety to support CPS professionals in engaging in quality initial contacts.

- Commit at the local level to create a climate in which individuals feel safe to express their thoughts and concerns without fear of negative consequences.
- Model behaviors that promote openness, empathy and support.
- Encourage debriefing of stressful situations for feedback about the experience and support in handling future situations.
- Use unit meetings to identify and address barriers and challenges to improve the effectiveness of engaging families in initial quality contacts.

3. Use the tools and desk guides for initial quality contacts to support CPS professionals in engaging families in the initial contact.

- Compile tools and resources to provide reminders of the requirements and suggestions for quality initial contacts.
- Discuss in unit meetings to encourage continued growth and sharing of ideas.

State Recommendations

1. Streamline the standards by combining them for improved access.

Combining the Safety Standards with Access & Initial Assessment and Ongoing Standards would make it easier to find pertinent information.

2. Add the requirement to inform parents/caregivers of the Initial Assessment process.

Standards require explaining the CPS process to foster parents, but there are no requirements to do the same for parents/caregivers. Add the requirement to inform parents/caregivers of the Initial Assessment process.

- Policy for Foster Parents: XVIIB. Responsibilities of Each Agency: The requesting Local Child Welfare agency must: Inform the foster parent(s)of the allegations and explain the Independent Initial Assessment process to them. (inside the box)
- Policy for Primary Caregiver: Outside of the box under Role of the CPS Initial Assessment Professional: The role of the CPS professional: Explain the Initial Assessment process to the family including the purpose of the interview(s) and any needed collaboration with other agencies (e.g., law enforcement, regulatory agency).

3. Gather resources and training for supervisors to support CPS professionals experiencing distressing situations.

The nature of child protection services often exposes CPS professionals to high-stress situations (e.g., entering homes where there may be active drug manufacturing or firearms), emotional trauma, and challenging environments. Creating a climate in which individuals feel safe to express their thoughts and concerns without fear of negative consequences provides opportunities to discuss challenges CPS professionals are facing and find solutions together. Providing supervisors and agency leadership with the skills and knowledge they need to develop a culture of psychological safety that can build resilience for CPS professionals and agency leadership.

4. Create desk guides.

Desk guides provide concise, accessible information that outlines the responsibilities for the given topic. Desk guides are a reference tool that enhances efficiency, ensures consistency, and improves the quality of service delivery. The desk guides should include best practices. Desk guides can be regularly updated to reflect changes in policies, procedures, or best practices.

Suggested guides are:

- Initial Quality Contacts
  - Initial Assessment
  - Ongoing Services which would include the case transfer process from Initial Assessment
- Reviewing a Protective Plan for supervisors
- Assessing Safety at initial contact

eWiSACWIS Recommendations

1. Remove the word limit in the boxes in eWiSACWIS.

The word limit in some of the boxes in eWiSACWIS are too confining. Sometimes it is not even enough space to get the social history adequately documented.

2. Make space for the non-household parent.

Add functionality to and/or enhance standards related to the Initial Assessment process to better recognize a non-household parent as part of the initial contacts made with family members. Initial contact with the non-household parent stages important information to be gathered as part of the Initial Assessment to understand how the parents are attending to child safety.

Alignment with the 2023 Learning Collaborative: Building Effective Partnerships

The 2023 ALC and the 2023 Learning Collaboratives aligned their topics to support the workforce in having numerous opportunities to explore quality initial contacts. The Learning Collaborative provides a short video blog, reflective questions, and facilitated discussions on the practice implications for quality initial contacts. Please see Appendix A for a detailed description of the Learning Collaborative topics.

Appendix A

2023 Learning Collaborative: Building Effective Partnerships

The 2023 Learning Collaborative is a chance for child welfare professionals from prevention, child protective services, and youth justice services to watch a video blog, reflect on questions in a worksheet, and participate in a facilitated discussion around building partnerships and holding courageous conversations. The monthly Learning Collaborative topics aligned with the topics in the ALCs, but different content was created for the Learning Collaboratives. Anyone can attend the Learning Collaboratives, regardless of their agency's participation in the ALCs. The Learning Collaboratives are an opportunity for Child Welfare professionals to dive deeper into a particular topic with less time commitment.

A short video, generally around ten minutes is posted on the WCWPDS website on the first Wednesday of every month. Participants can watch the video at any time that is convenient to them. A short worksheet with prompts to guide reflection and analysis as well as application to practice, is posted with each video.

Participants apply the concepts throughout the month in their daily practice. They take note of the successes and challenges and record questions on the concepts. Comments are encouraged to be submitted on the website or emailed to guide the live group discussion.

Each month there are two opportunities to participate in live discussions on the last Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday morning of each month. The facilitator prepares discussion questions and summaries on the monthly topic. Participants are given opportunities to share successes, ask questions, and respond to polls on the topic. Each of the facilitated discussions are recorded and posted on the WCWPDS website. Participants can go back and review topics, use in discussions at their agencies, or view when they are not able to attend.

Appendix A (continued)

Here is the general outline of the topics presented in 2023 with links to the materials posted.

March Defining Quality Contacts

April Centering Parental Voice During Engagement, Assessment, Exploration, and Adjustment

May Engage in Self-Care

June Knowing Yourself; Approaching a Crucial Conversation

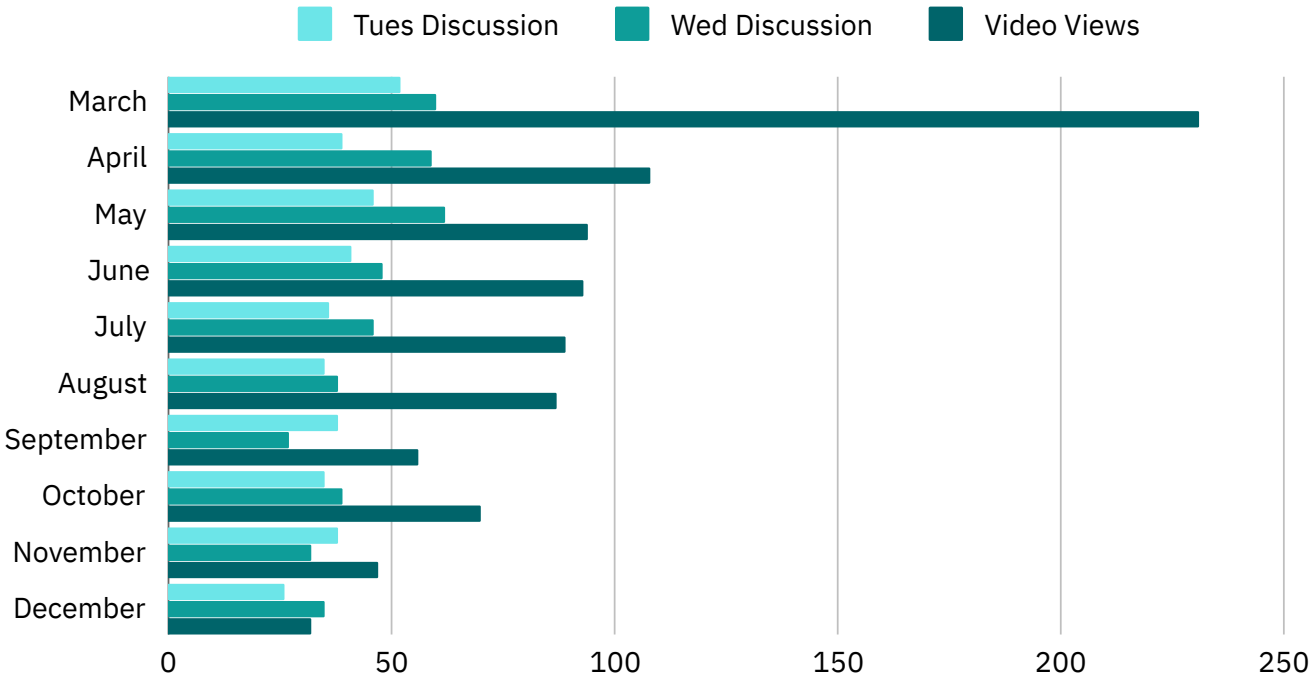
July Start by Raising the Issue, Make It Safet to Share

August Recognizing When the Conversation Isn't Going Well

September Seek to Understand

October Gathering Information; Protective Capacities vs. Strengths

November Watch Your Words; What You Say vs. What They Hear

December Provide Feedback; Purposeful vs. Hurtful

Attendance is taken at each facilitated discussion and participants receive one CEH for each hour attended. There were 312 individuals that participated at least once in the facilitated discussions. Below is a chart with the number of views of the videos and attendance at the Learning Collaboratives. Please note that several agencies view the video in a group.