

2026 Region VI Head Start/Early Head Start
SOUTHWEST FALL CONFERENCE

Resilience in Action:

Leading Head Start Teams Through Challenge and Change

Weathering the Storm Through Collaborative Teamwork
Built on Trust and Innovation with a Mission Driven Focus

Norman, Oklahoma • October 13-16, 2026

Embassy Suites Hotel & Conference Center



Get event details at **REG6HSA.org**

QUESTIONS? Contact Laurie Gassaway at laurie.gassaway@mchsok.org

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REGION VI
HEAD START
ASSOCIATION

Serving Head Start Southwest



2026 Region VI Head Start/Early Head Start **SOUTHWEST FALL CONFERENCE**

October 13-16, 2026

Embassy Suites Hotel & Conference Center
2501 Conference Drive • Norman, Oklahoma

Book your room by September 22, 2026 by visiting:
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AGENDA at-a-glance

Tuesday, October 13

Noon – 3:30 pm	Board Meeting
5 – 7 pm	Opening General Session
7 – 8:30 pm	Reception

Wednesday, October 14

8 am	Coffee
8:30 – 10 am	Breakout Sessions
10:30 am – Noon	Breakout Sessions
Noon – 1 pm	Lunch on your own
1 – 2:30 pm	Breakout Sessions
3 – 4:30 pm	Breakout Sessions

Thursday, October 15

8 am	Coffee
8:30 – 10 am	Breakout Sessions
10:30 am – Noon	Breakout Sessions
Noon – 1 pm	Lunch on your own
1 – 2:30 pm	Breakout Sessions
3 – 4:00 pm	State Association Meetings
6 – 10 pm	Awards Celebration Dinner

Friday, October 16

8 am	Coffee
8:30 – 11 am	Closing General Session
11:00 am – 12 pm	2027 Regional Conference Announcement, Door Prizes and Safe Travels!

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Tuesday, Oct 13

9 am	Registration Opens
Noon – 3:30 pm	Board Meeting Sooner
3:30 – 8:30 pm	Exhibitor Gallery Oklahoma Foyer
5 – 7 pm	Opening General Session BIG Celebration/Kick Off Oklahoma E/F

Featuring:

Mister Stu
Speaker | Trainer | Consultant | Author

Children's Therapist &
Children's Mental Health Advocate



Stuart “Mister Stu” Perry, LCSW, ASDCS, is a nationally recognized expert in children’s mental health, author, and keynote speaker with nearly 15 years of professional experience helping kids and caregivers thrive. As an active child therapist, he brings a fresh, real-world perspective to his talks, drawing from his ongoing work with children and families in today’s rapidly evolving environment. A lifelong advocate for kids, Mister Stu combines his deep understanding of child psychology with relatable storytelling and practical strategies that resonate with caregivers, educators, and professionals. Known for his humor, motivation, and actionable insights, his presentations inspire audiences to turn challenges into opportunities and create environments where children flourish. Whether breaking down complex concepts or sharing real-life experiences, Mister Stu brings clarity, connection, and lasting impact to every event.

7 – 8:30 pm **Reception**

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Wednesday, Oct 14

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| 8 am | Coffee |
| 8 am | Registration |
| 8 am | Exhibit Gallery
Oklahoma Foyer |
| 8:30 – 10 am | Fostering Family Connections; Creating Partnerships that Change Outcome
<i>Rebecca Freedman, FirstDay Learning</i>
Oklahoma A |
| | Can AI Help Head Start Children to Find Their Words?
<i>Darshani Abeyrathna Herath Mudiyanseleg &
Min Junghyun, University of Oklahoma</i>
Oklahoma B |
| | Leading As a Change Capable Leader
<i>J. Renee Williams, Community Action Project, Tulsa</i>
Oklahoma C |
| | Who You Are Is What They Need:
Small Moments, Big Impact in Early Childhood
<i>Shayla Winrow, Sunbeam Family Services</i>
Oklahoma D |
| | Using Data to Strengthen Infant-Toddler Quality,
Workforce Supports, and Child Outcomes
<i>Cara Kelly & Kathleen Gallagher, University of Oklahoma</i>
Boomer |
| | Making Sense of Your Head Start Systems
<i>Amy Corkery, Founder, Early Edge</i>
Sooner |

Resilience in Action:

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**Weathering the Storm Through Collaborative Teamwork
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Wednesday, Oct 14

10 – 10:30 am

Break

10:30 am – Noon

Understanding Autism; Strategies to Promote Engagement and Participation

Rebecca Freedman, FirstDay Learning
Oklahoma A

How Head Start Leaders Can Get the Most Out of AI

Carolyn Heyliger-Graham, Learning Genie
Oklahoma B

**More Than a Book: Engaging Families and Building
Readers with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library**

Erin Bell, Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness
Oklahoma C

Discover Your Communication and Leadership Style

Dr. Bernadine Martinez, Power Your Potential Professional Development
Oklahoma D

**Bridging the Gap: Supporting Inclusion for Children
with Disabilities in Head Start Classrooms**

Cara Kelly, University of Oklahoma
Boomer

**Understanding Cognitive Development
Through Active Learning Schemas and Loose Parts**

Juanita Bostick & Leanne Condray, Crossroads Youth & Family Services
Sooner

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Wednesday, Oct 14

Noon – 1 pm

Lunch on your own

1 – 2:30 pm

Intentional Play; Play Interventions for Challenging Behavior

Rebecca Freedman, FirstDay Learning
Oklahoma A

Child Injury Prevention through Virtual Technology

Bob Renton, Charlie's House
Oklahoma B

The Power of Support: Coaching, Care, and Connection in Child Care

Lindsay Insomya, Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness
Oklahoma C

Leadership is about Becoming a Person of Influence

Dr. Bernadine Martinez, Power Your Potential Professional Development
Oklahoma D

**Shorter Reviews. Higher Stakes: Building Monitoring-Ready
Head Start Systems for FY2026 and Beyond**

Mark Davis & Yanick Goutier, The Non-Profit Connection, Inc.
Boomer

**Better Together: Building Lasting Partnerships
with Community Mental Health Agencies**

Chelsea Brown & Angela Martindale, Green Country Behavioral Health
Sooner

Resilience in Action:

Leading Head Start Teams Through Challenge and Change

**Weathering the Storm Through Collaborative Teamwork
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Wednesday, Oct 14

2:30 – 3 pm

Break

3 – 4:30 pm

**Learning to Dance in the Rain; Creating
Happy and Confident Head Start Programs**

Rebecca Freedman, FirstDay Learning
Oklahoma A

Head Start Hospitality: Appreciation, Belonging, and Connection

Sharon Jackson, Early Childhood Collective
Oklahoma B

Relax, Relate, Release! Somatic Strategies for Teacher Stress in the Moment

Krystal Johnson, Save the Children HS/EHS
Oklahoma C

**It's all about Relationships: How Responsive Caregiving Routines for Infants
and Toddlers Can Facilitate Individualized Learning and Development**

Amber Morabito, WestEd
Oklahoma D

**From Data to Decisions: How Head Start
Leaders Can Turn Numbers Into Action**

Mark Davis & Yanick Goutier, The Non-Profit Connection, Inc.
Boomer

**CONT Better Together: Building Lasting Partnerships
with Community Mental Health Agencies**

Chelsea Brown & Angela Martindale, Green Country Behavioral Health
Sooner

4:30 pm

FREE EVENING

Resilience in Action:

Leading Head Start Teams Through Challenge and Change

**Weathering the Storm Through Collaborative Teamwork
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Thursday, Oct 15

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| 8 am | Coffee |
| 8 am | Registration |
| 8 am | Exhibit Gallery
Oklahoma Foyer |
| 8:30 – 10 am | Connecting Program Communities through Humanly Compassionate Dialogue
<i>Janet Humphryes, MA, Coaching Potentials</i>
Oklahoma A |
| | Happy Teacher and Child Project: Ideas and Strategies to Promote the Holistic Well-Being of Head Start Teachers and Children
<i>Kyong-Ah Kwon, Amy Brandley, Anna Keltner, Junghyun Min, University of Oklahoma</i>
Oklahoma B |
| | Early Number Scaffolding Young Children's Numeracy Development Using a Research-Based Continuum of Early Number Knowledge and Skills
<i>Brian Mowry, Frog Street Press</i>
Oklahoma C |
| | Learning with Our Families
<i>Francisca Jensen, Mid-America Christian University</i>
Oklahoma D |
| | Creating the Conditions to Thrive: Leadership and Organizational Well-Being in Head Start
<i>Sarah Rahhal & Mili Flores, Sunbeam Family Services</i>
Boomer |
| | The Learn-Practice-Reflect-Plan Approach to Observing Quality from an Infant's Perspective
<i>Kerry Kriener-Althen & Bianca Reyes, WestEd</i>
Sooner |

Resilience in Action:

Leading Head Start Teams Through Challenge and Change

**Weathering the Storm Through Collaborative Teamwork
Built on Trust and Innovation with a Mission Driven Focus**

Thursday, Oct 15

10 – 10:30 am

Break

10:30 am – Noon

Making a Difference: Does Your Presence Have Meaning?

*Janet Humphries, MA, Coaching Potentials
Oklahoma A*

Leading with Clarity: Calm Communication for Confident Leadership

*Sharon Jackson, Early Childhood Collective
Oklahoma B*

**Hands-On with AI: Strengthening the Head Start Workforce Through
Technology-Integrated Professional Development**

*Min Junghyun, Casi Story, Darshani Abeyrathna Herath Mudiyanseleg, Kyong-Ah Kwon,
Weiyi Cheng, University of Oklahoma
Oklahoma C*

**Designing a Reggio-Emilia Atelier for Children Ages 0-5: How Head Start and
Early Head Start Teachers Plan Art and Nature-Based Provocations**

*Weiyi Cheng, University of Oklahoma
Oklahoma D*

Unlocking the Power of Parent Engagement

*Kenna Pruitt, Working Smarter Consulting
Boomer*

**CONT The Learn-Practice-Reflect-Plan Approach to Observing Quality from
an Infant's Perspective**

*Kerry Kriener-Althen & Bianca Reyes, WestEd
Sooner*

Resilience in Action:

Leading Head Start Teams Through Challenge and Change

**Weathering the Storm Through Collaborative Teamwork
Built on Trust and Innovation with a Mission Driven Focus**

Thursday, Oct 15

Noon – 1 pm

Lunch on your own

1 – 2:30 pm

Trauma Responsiveness: “I’m not the therapist others need!”

*Janet Humphries, MA, Coaching Potentials
Oklahoma A*

Margin Mastery: Leading with Space to Breathe

*Sharon Jackson, Early Childhood Collective
Oklahoma B*

**Why it’s Better to Eat Twinkies Together Than
Broccoli Alone: Self Care, Resiliency and Grit**

*Chris Zervas, Leadership Vision LLC
Oklahoma C*

**Building Your First Adult Atelier: Applying Adult Learning Principles
and the Reggio Emilia Approach To PD With EHS And HS Educators**

*Courtney Dewhirst, Erin Casey, Jen Murphy, and Kyong-Ah Kwon, University of Oklahoma
Oklahoma D*

**Active Supervision in Motion: Using Technology
to Strengthen Child Safety During Transitions**

*Jose Martinez, GoEngage
Sooner*

2:30 – 3 pm

Break

Resilience in Action:

Leading Head Start Teams Through Challenge and Change

**Weathering the Storm Through Collaborative Teamwork
Built on Trust and Innovation with a Mission Driven Focus**

Thursday, Oct 15

3 – 4:00 pm

Arkansas State Association Meeting
Oklahoma A



Louisiana State Association Meeting
Oklahoma B



New Mexico State Association Meeting
Oklahoma C



Oklahoma State Association Meeting
Oklahoma D

Texas State Association Meeting
Boomer

OKLAHOMA HEAD START ASSOCIATION
C/O



6 – 10 pm

Awards Celebration Dinner
Oklahoma E/F

Resilience in Action:

Leading Head Start Teams Through Challenge and Change

**Weathering the Storm Through Collaborative Teamwork
Built on Trust and Innovation with a Mission Driven Focus**

Friday, Oct 16

8 am	Coffee
8 am	Registration
8 am	Exhibit Gallery Oklahoma Foyer
8:30 – 11 am	Closing General Session/Door Prizes Oklahoma A/B/C/D/E

Featuring:



Wyletta Johnson is a doctoral candidate in General Psychology with an emphasis in Cognition and Instruction. She holds a Master's degree in Mental Health and Wellness and a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice. Wyletta serves as a Be Well Care Well Coach for Curricula Concepts, Inc. based in Arkansas. She is a mother to Darius and Tristan, and actively shares her family's journey with autism to raise awareness and celebrate neurodiversity.

WEATHERING THE STORM

***Resilience in Action: Leading Through Challenge
and Change with Purpose, Trust, and Hope***

Storms are inevitable, but resilience determines how we respond and how we grow. In this inspiring and heartfelt session, participants will explore what it means to weather life's storms with courage, collaboration, and a mission-driven focus. Through personal experiences navigating the autism journey, attendees will discover that challenges do not have to define us—they can develop us.

This presentation highlights the power of trust, teamwork, innovation, and unwavering hope in building resilient families, communities, and organizations. Participants will gain practical strategies for embracing change, leading through uncertainty, and creating environments where everyone can thrive. Through stories of perseverance and lessons learned along the autism journey, attendees will be encouraged to recognize that growth is possible in every season and that even in difficult circumstances, we can bloom where we are planted.

Resilience in Action:

Leading Head Start Teams Through Challenge and Change

Weathering the Storm Through Collaborative Teamwork Built on Trust and Innovation with a Mission Driven Focus

Session Descriptions

Fostering Family Connections; Creating Partnerships that Change Outcome

Rebecca Freedman, Co-Founder, FirstDay Learning

This session helps educators strengthen family partnerships by leading with a discussion around your program's benefits and barriers to parent/family engagement. Participants will learn practical strategies to build trust through everyday interactions, responsive follow-up, collaborative planning, and celebratory connection points. Educators will practice and gain skills in handling hard conversations on behavior and development.

Can AI Help Head Start Children to Find Their Words?

Darshani Abeyrathna Herath Mudiyanse, PhD Student, and Junghyun Min, University of Oklahoma

Each Fall, children who attended Head Start walk into a classroom, some are ready to tell stories and ask questions, others already struggling to express themselves. That gap is not about intelligence. It is about access to language-rich, responsive interactions, which research shows are distributed unequally by income and SES. We bring this question to the 2026 Southwest Fall Conference: can artificial intelligence tools help Head Start to address this expressive language gap before they enter the kindergarten? Emerging literature suggests that AI tools can be beneficial when used intentionally. A randomized controlled trial by Cheng and colleagues (2024) found that an AI chatbot using dialogic reading techniques supported children from low-income families by improving story comprehension and vocabulary development. Furthermore, Pelfrey et al. (2024) explained that AI-assisted speech processing can help measure children's expressive language in preschool classrooms.

During this session, participants will use child-friendly AI-assisted language tools to explore intentional classroom use. While research shows promise for supporting expressive language development, AI tools in Head Start classrooms must be culturally responsive, inclusive of children who speak languages other than English, and developmentally appropriate. This session provides an ELOF-grounded framework for selecting meaningful AI-supported language resources.

Leading As a Change Capable Leader

J. Renee Williams, Senior Training Specialist, Community Action Project, Tulsa

Change is constant — and the way leaders navigate it shapes the culture, confidence, and resilience of their teams. In this focused, practical session, participants will explore the Change Cycle and learn how to lead with clarity and compassion during times of transition. We'll highlight what it means to be a change capable leader, one who stays grounded, communicates effectively, and balances people and process.

Attendees will leave with simple, actionable strategies to support staff through uncertainty, strengthen team resilience, and remain personally empowered while empowering others.

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Who You Are Is What They Need: Small Moments, Big Impact in Early Childhood

Shayla Winrow, IECMH Clinical Director, Sunbeam Family Services

In this session, participants will explore the 6 R's of trauma-informed practice: relational, relevant, repetitive, rewarding, rhythmic, and respectful through short, real-life stories that reflect the impacts of working in Head Start settings.

Rather than focusing on theory alone, this session is delivered through storytelling. Each story highlights a familiar moment, a tough transition, a child in distress, a stressful day, and invites participants to reflect on how their responses, tone, and presence impact both children and themselves.

Grounded in brain science, IECMH consultation principles and theory, this session explores a simple but powerful idea: children borrow our calm, our consistency, and our connection. "How you are" in those moments matters.

Participants will have space to reflect on their own practice and consider small, meaningful shifts that can support regulation, strengthen relationships, and create more predictable, calming environments.

This session is for any staff who want practical, realistic ways to care for children while also taking care of themselves in the process.

Using Data to Strengthen Infant-Toddler Quality, Workforce Supports, and Child Outcomes

Cara Kelly, Senior Research Associate, and Kathleen Gallagher, Professor & Director, University of Oklahoma

How can Head Start programs use their own data to drive continuous improvement while staying grounded in national context? This session highlights how a Head Start grantee leveraged multiple years of program data alongside national Early Head Start benchmarks to better understand classroom quality, workforce characteristics, and child development outcomes.

Participants will explore real-world strategies for aligning local data with national studies, interpreting findings across different measures, and translating insights into actionable program improvements. The session will highlight key findings, including strong classroom quality and workforce preparation, comparable child outcomes, and the importance of supporting educator wellbeing.

Designed with adult learning principles in mind, this interactive session will engage participants in interpreting sample data displays, reflecting on their own program data, and identifying opportunities to strengthen quality, staff supports, and outcomes for infants and toddlers.

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Making Sense of Your Head Start Systems

Amy Corkery, Founder, Early Edge

Head Start programs rely on multiple systems every day, yet for many teams those systems do not fully work together. Information lives in different places. Processes feel harder than they should. Staff rely on workarounds just to keep things moving.

This session offers a practical way to step back and understand how systems are functioning across tools, workflows, people and leadership expectations. Participants will learn how to recognize common signs of misalignment and what those signs reveal about how work is actually happening across the organization.

Participants will explore how leadership decisions, priorities and expectations influence day-to-day operations. The session will examine how misalignment can affect communication, accountability, organizational culture and overall effectiveness, even when teams are working hard and making progress.

Participants will leave with a clearer way to identify when systems are not working as intended and a practical tool they can use to strengthen alignment, improve communication and support more effective decision-making over time.

Understanding Autism; Strategies to Promote Engagement and Participation

Rebecca Freedman, Co-Founder, FirstDay Learning

This session gives educators practical strategies to improve safety and participation for autistic children, leading to improved outcomes for the entire classroom. Participants will learn all-day supports that reduce escalation, including regulation tools, predictable routines, and consistent adult responses. Educators will build routine-specific plans for three of the most commonly challenging parts of the day: arrival, meals, and whole group. Participants will practice minimizing unnecessary demands, simplifying adult language, and using clear if/then team agreements so responses stay consistent.

How Head Start Leaders Can Get the Most Out of AI

Carolyn Heyliger-Graham, Senior Partnership Manager, Learning Genie

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly moving from a theoretical concept to a practical leadership tool for Head Start programs. When used effectively, AI can help leaders reduce administrative burden, enhance communication, and generate innovative ideas for family engagement and program improvement.

This session introduces Head Start leaders to prompt engineering, the skill of crafting effective instructions for AI tools to generate accurate, relevant, and actionable outputs. Participants will learn real-world techniques to apply AI in everyday leadership tasks, including drafting newsletters, summarizing reports, generating grant language, and supporting staff planning. The session is designed for both beginners and those already experimenting with AI tools.

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More Than a Book: Engaging Families and Building Readers with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library

Erin Bell, Director of Early Literacy, Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is more than a free book program—it is a proven, scalable strategy for strengthening early literacy and deepening family engagement across Head Start and Early Head Start communities. In this session, participants will gain a clear understanding of how the Imagination Library works and how it can be leveraged to support school readiness and family partnerships.

Attendees will explore how consistent access to high-quality books in the home supports early brain development, language acquisition, and a love of reading from birth. The session will highlight how programs can integrate the Imagination Library into existing family engagement efforts, using each monthly book as a meaningful touchpoint between the classroom and home.

Participants will leave with practical, easy-to-implement strategies for using books to model reading behaviors, build routines, and strengthen relationships with families, along with clear next steps to increase enrollment and expand impact within their communities.

Discover Your Communication and Leadership Style

Dr. Bernadine Martinez, Founder/Trainer, Power Your Potential Professional Development

Leadership starts with understanding – of others and yourself. This engaging session is designed for early childhood leaders looking to enhance their communication and leadership skills through the power of the DISC assessment. By exploring your unique communication style and recognizing the styles of others, you'll discover how to build stronger, more effective connections with your team.

Participants will learn practical strategies to adapt their communication and interactions, foster a positive work culture, and address the individual needs of their staff. These skills not only improve daily workplace dynamics but also play a key role in boosting staff morale and retention. Join us to uncover how tapping into the insights provided by DISC can transform your leadership approach, create a supportive environment for your team, and ensure long-term success in your center.

Elevate your leadership. Keep your team inspired. Lead with understanding.

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Bridging the Gap: Supporting Inclusion for Children with Disabilities in Head Start Classrooms

Cara Kelly, Senior Research Associate, University of Oklahoma

Head Start programs are grounded in a strong commitment to inclusion, yet teachers and administrators often navigate challenges in translating policy into effective classroom practice. This session draws on qualitative research with Head Start educators to examine how inclusion is experienced on the ground and where gaps occur between policy expectations and daily practice.

Participants will explore key themes from educator perspectives, including challenges related to staffing, classroom ratios, access to specialized services, and the availability and effectiveness of professional supports. The session will highlight how these factors influence teachers' confidence, instructional practices, and their ability to support children with disabilities and challenging behaviors.

Using interactive discussion and real-world examples, attendees will reflect on their own program contexts and identify strategies to strengthen alignment between policy, supports, and classroom needs. The session will emphasize practical approaches to improving professional development, coordinating supports, and fostering inclusive environments that benefit all children.

Understanding Cognitive Development Through Active Learning Schemas and Loose Parts

Juanita Bostick, Education Coordinator, and Leanne Condray, Education Coordinator, Crossroads Youth & Family Services

Participants will gain a greater understanding of how children learn and discover practical ways to incorporate natural materials and loose parts into learning environments to enhance cognitive development.

This interactive session explores how young children develop cognitive skills through active learning, play, and exploration. Participants will gain a deeper understanding of cognitive development in both infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children while examining the role of loose parts, heuristic play, and active learning schemas in supporting children's thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and discovery. Through real-life examples, hands-on activities, and collaborative discussions, educators will learn how to create engaging learning environments that encourage curiosity, investigation, and meaningful learning experiences. Participants will leave with practical strategies for recognizing and supporting children's cognitive development through intentional classroom practices and open-ended materials.

Intentional Play; Play Interventions for Challenging Behavior

Rebecca Freedman, Co-Founder, FirstDay Learning

We know children learn best through play, but how do we facilitate play to prevent challenging behavior? This session will look at play interventions that are actionable and easy to implement. Strategies to build trust, facilitate negotiation and engage in sensory play with children displaying challenging behaviors will be shared.

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Child Injury Prevention through Virtual Technology

Bob Renton, Director of Operations, Charlie's House

Charlie's House is known for its Kansas City based safety demonstration house, and resources to raise awareness of household safety risks for children. To broaden reach and impact, the Virtual Safety Experience (VSE) was created.

The FREE, interactive, multilingual app-based platform provides an interactive resource designed for caregivers and home visiting professionals. It educates and offers tips to mitigate risk with measures any parent or caregiver can enact without undue expense or difficulty.

Direct links and embedded resources provide users education and injury prevention guidance that outreach workers can easily access while in the home to support parents and caregivers as they create a safer environment for their children.

This interactive presentation will discuss leading injury modalities specific to the State. The VSE will then be demonstrated on a 55" touchscreen monitor, exactly like its used on mobile devices, or laptops in the home.

Shorter Reviews. Higher Stakes: Building Monitoring-Ready Head Start Systems for FY2026 and Beyond

Mark Davis, Lead Consultant, and Yanick Goutier, Consultant, The Non-Profit Connection, Inc.

Federal monitoring has shifted, and Head Start leaders can no longer afford to prepare for reviews at the last minute. With FY2026 monitoring placing sharper emphasis on focused review questions, shorter on-site timelines, child safety, fiscal integrity, eligibility and enrollment, governance, and quality implementation across service areas, programs must be able to demonstrate that their systems work before reviewers arrive.

This interactive session will help Head Start and Early Head Start leaders understand how to build monitoring-ready systems that connect governance, fiscal oversight, ERSEA, ongoing monitoring, program management, child safety, and comprehensive services. Participants will examine the practical implications of the FY2026 monitoring approach, identify common risk areas that lead to findings, and learn how to strengthen documentation, internal communication, follow-up, and cross-service-area accountability. The session is designed for leaders who want to move beyond "review preparation" and build a culture of continuous readiness, operational excellence, and measurable compliance.

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Better Together: Building Lasting Partnerships with Community Mental Health Agencies

Chelsea Brown, Clinical Director, and Angela Martindale, Chief Performance Officer, Green Country Behavioral Health

This session focuses on the connection and collaboration potential between community mental health agencies and HeadStart Centers. The session outlines the working partnership between our staff at Green Country Behavioral Health in Muskogee, OK and our multisite HeadStart programs, highlighting ways community mental health initiatives have complimented the goals of HeadStart programs to build more sustainable partnerships within their communities.

Session participants will conceptualize potential partnerships within their own communities with their community behavioral health centers and see the benefits of coordinated care for children and their families.

Learning to Dance in the Rain; Creating Happy and Confident Head Start Programs

Rebecca Freedman, Co-Founder, FirstDay Learning

Science confirms happiness and confidence are factors that affect outcome. But how do we keep a burnt out workforce happy and confident? Through compelling storytelling we'll address the critical need to support the early childhood workforce, and emphasize simple, practical methods for cultivating happiness and confidence among staff and families.

Head Start Hospitality: Appreciation, Belonging, and Connection

Sharon Jackson, Consultant/Coach, Early Childhood Collective

Head Start programs thrive when children, families, and staff feel welcomed, valued, and connected. Inspired by principles from *Unreasonable Hospitality* by Will Guidara, this session explores how intentional leadership practices can strengthen workplace culture, deepen relationships, and create a greater sense of belonging across the program community.

Participants will examine how small acts of care, thoughtful communication, and proactive support can have a lasting impact on staff morale, family engagement, and organizational culture. Through discussion, reflection, and practical examples, leaders will consider how hospitality extends beyond customer service to become a leadership philosophy rooted in dignity, trust, and connection.

This session will provide actionable strategies for creating meaningful experiences for staff and families while maintaining high expectations and program excellence. Participants will leave with ideas they can immediately apply to foster stronger relationships, support retention efforts, and cultivate a culture where people feel seen, valued, and inspired to contribute.

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Relax, Relate, Release! Somatic Strategies for Teacher Stress in the Moment

Krystle Johnson, Mental Health Advisor, Save the Children HS/EHS

Relax, Relate, Release is an interactive session that equips Head Start educators, and staff supporting educators with quick in the moment somatic strategies to manage stress and stay regulated in the classroom during those difficult moments. Participants will learn how stress shows up in the body and practice quick strategies- such as breath work, grounding, and movement to stay regulated in the classroom. This session aligns with Head Start performance standards regarding positive teacher-child interactions, social-emotional well being, staff competencies, and staff wellness.

It's All About Relationships: How Responsive Caregiving Routines for Infants and Toddlers Can Facilitate Individualized Learning and Development

Amber Morabito, PITC Curriculum Manager, WestEd

Routines serve as the daily curriculum for infants and toddlers, as they spend up to 80% of their time engaged in activities such as diapering, feeding, and napping. This session will explore the Program for Infant/Toddler Care's approach to responsive and respectful caregiving practices that promote learning and development while honoring the routines and values children experience at home.

From Data to Decisions: How Head Start Leaders Can Turn Numbers Into Action

Mark Davis, Lead Consultant, and Yanick Goutier, Consultant, The Non-Profit Connection, Inc.

Head Start programs collect more data than ever, but many leaders still struggle to turn that information into timely decisions, stronger systems, and measurable outcomes. This session helps leaders move beyond compliance reporting and use data as a practical leadership tool for improving program performance.

Participants will learn how to identify the data that matters most, connect data across service areas, ask better leadership questions, and use trends to guide planning, monitoring, staffing, enrollment, family engagement, and continuous improvement. The session will also show leaders how to use data to tell a stronger program story to boards, Policy Councils, staff, funders, and reviewers.

Connectiong Program Communities through Humanly Compassionate Dialogue

Janet Humphryes, M.A., Founder-Coach-Consultant, Coaching Potentials

Today's challenges create an increasing need to develop our conversational abilities, enabling us to unite rather than divide. This session will focus on developing conversational skills leading to connection: composing self, revealing intentionality and commonality, suspending judgment to traverse differences, deepening understanding through establishing clarity and taking an educative stance, using inquiry to enhance reflection, etc. Join us in enhancing these skills to foster human connection and understanding in your program community!

Resilience in Action:

Leading Head Start Teams Through Challenge and Change

Weathering the Storm Through Collaborative Teamwork Built on Trust and Innovation with a Mission Driven Focus

Happy Teacher and Child Project: Ideas and Strategies to Promote the Holistic Well-Being of Head Start Teachers and Children

Kyong-Ah Kwon, Professor, University of Oklahoma; Amy Brandley, Wellness Coach, University of Oklahoma; Anna Keltner, Specialist, Institute of Childhood Education; Junghyun Min, University of Oklahoma

Early childhood teachers play a critical role in shaping children's development, yet both teachers and children face challenges to their well-being. Many educators experience high levels of stress and limited access to support, while many children have developmental and behavioral needs and benefit from well-engaged teachers who sustain positive interactions. These challenges are especially prevalent in Early Head Start (EHS) and Head Start (HS) settings (Kwon et al., 2025).

Drawing on the Happy Teacher Project, this interactive session introduces a holistic, research-informed, and practical approach to supporting educator and child well-being as interconnected processes. We will briefly introduce the Happy Teacher Wellness intervention, which has been shown to improve teachers' holistic well-being and the quality of teacher-child interactions in EHS/HS settings. Participants will engage in hands-on activities, guided reflection, and coach-guided strategies such as stress-reset routines, empathetic listening, mindfulness, and relational check-ins.

The session emphasizes that teachers' well-being shapes children's emotional climate, engagement, and learning. Participants will explore how everyday interactions, relationships, and classroom routines can support both teachers and children, and will leave with practical tools, a personalized plan, and strategies to foster co-regulation, connection, and well-being.

Early Number Scaffolding Young Children's Numeracy Development Using a Research-Based Continuum of Early Number Knowledge and Skills

Brian Mowry, Consultant and Program Author, Frog Street Press

This session examines the research-based progression of number sense skills outlined in numerous state and national early childhood standards designed to support deeper knowledge of the number system. After viewing video-taped examples of children progressing through this continuum, participants will explore hands-on activities appropriate for scaffolding, play, and numeracy centers.

Learning With Our Families

Francisca Jensen, Associate Faculty of Early Childhood Education, Mid-America Christian University

In this session, the participant will engage in active learning opportunities to collaborate with engaging parents in extending their child's learning at home.

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Creating the Conditions to Thrive: Leadership and Organizational Well-Being in Head Start

Sarah Rahhal, CEO, and Mili Flores, Community Director, Sunbeam Family Services

Head Start is built on the understanding that relationships shape development—and that truth applies not only to children, but also to families, staff, and the leaders who hold complex systems together. In today's workforce environment, leaders are navigating chronic stress, staffing shortages, regulatory pressure, and growing mental health needs across every level of their organizations.

This session explores how early brain development (birth–5) and adult nervous systems are deeply interconnected, and why that connection matters for leadership in Head Start programs. Drawing on neuroscience, trauma-informed practice, and real-world leadership experience, the presenters will examine how organizational well-being is created through everyday leadership practices, not just individual self-care or clinical interventions.

Participants will be invited to consider how leadership behavior, communication, structure, and decision-making shape the emotional and psychological conditions in which staff work—and how those conditions directly affect program stability, relationships with families, and outcomes for children. Through practical examples and grounded strategies, leaders will leave with tips to strengthen staff well-being, increase resilience, and support sustainable, high-quality Head Start systems.

This session is designed for leaders who care deeply about their teams and want to lead in ways that support both people and the mission for the long term.

The Learn-Practice-Reflect-Plan Approach to Observing Quality from an Infant's Perspective

Kerry Kriener-Althen, Assessment and Research Director, and Bianca Reyes, Research Associate, WestEd

What does quality care mean to you? What does it look like to babies? How do you know if a program assessment aligns to your values and reflects Early Head Start (EHS) expectations for safe, nurturing learning environments that support infants and toddlers as curious, motivated learners who thrive through meaningful relationships?

Through this active-learning session, participants will engage in the Learn-Practice-Reflect-Plan approach and strategies to explore and understand program quality indicators for infant/toddler care. Participants will be guided to explore specific indicators and walk away with strategies they can implement as they continue to refine their practice.

The session is designed to support multiple learning styles, including presentation, peer-to-peer discussion, video, and large group discussion. Participants will practice strategies that they can immediately implement themselves or with others in their settings to gain greater knowledge and confidence with infant/toddler program quality assessments.

This engaging session is appropriate for all audiences and levels of experience who are interested in learning more about high quality infant/toddler care.

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Making a Difference: Does Your Presence Have Meaning?

Janet Humphries, M.A., Founder-Coach-Consultant, Coaching Potentials

How does our own sense of mattering impact the children in our programs? Research from the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard says how we show up for children, or not, can have a huge positive effect on children's lifelong health and well-being. We will explore what mattering means and how we can cultivate it throughout the 'social soil' of our programs, thus creating full mattering systems! Join us in creatively considering possibilities for systemic change leading to more purposefully aligned – and retained – program staff at all levels!

Leading with Clarity: Calm Communication for Confident Leadership

Sharon Jackson, Consultant/Coach, Early Childhood Collective

Clear communication builds confidence—both yours and your team's. In this interactive session, we'll explore how calm, intentional communication strengthens relationships, reduces misunderstandings, and creates a culture of trust. Directors will leave with tools and language strategies to lead with focus, foster clarity, and guide their programs with confidence and grace.

Hands-On with AI: Strengthening the Head Start Workforce Through Technology-Integrated Professional Development

Min Junghyun, Graduate Research Assistant, University of Oklahoma; Casi Story, PhD Student, University of Oklahoma; Darshani Abeyrathna Herath Mudiyanse, PhD Student, University of Oklahoma; Kyong-Ah Kwon, University of Oklahoma; Weiyi Cheng, PhD Student, University of Oklahoma

As artificial intelligence (AI) continues to reshape professional landscapes, early childhood educators face new opportunities and questions about how these tools fit into their practice (Thakkar et al., 2024; Yang, 2022). This session takes a professional development approach to explore how Head Start educators can purposefully integrate AI tools—including Claude, Gemini, and ChatGPT—into their daily work to support instructional practices and educator well-being.

The session will also introduce The Happy Teacher, a newly developed well-being app created by the Happy Teacher Project team at the University of Oklahoma (PI: Kyong-Ah Kwon). The app includes an AI Coach feature designed to support early childhood educators' professional growth and holistic well-being. Participants will learn how AI can support tasks such as developing classroom management plans aligned with Head Start Performance Standards, engaging in AI-guided reflective practices, and creating individualized strategies to support children's learning and development. By the end of the session, participants will leave with practical skills and increased confidence in using AI tools to support their professional practice and well-being.

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Designing a Reggio-Emilia Atelier for Children Ages 0-5: How Head Start and Early Head Start Teachers Plan Art and Nature-Based Provocations

Weiyei Cheng, Doctoral Student, University of Oklahoma

Many Early Head Start and Head Start educators who work with children ages 0-5 have heard of the Atelier in the Reggio Emilia approach but struggle to translate the idea into everyday classroom practice. An Atelier is a welcoming and inspiring space where children explore a wide variety of natural and man-made materials through in-depth, intentional artistic expression, designed to meet children where they are developmentally. This session shares real art and nature-based provocations from the University of Oklahoma Institute of Child Development Atelier Workshop, which also align with the developmental domains from the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework. Participants will see photographs and short video clips of real children working with loose parts, including pinecones, clay, dry flowers, paint, and light. Watch real teacher-child interactions, such as how teachers respond to a nonverbal infant pointing with clay, how teachers extend a toddler's repeated action of decorating clay, and how teachers ask open questions to a preschooler using clay. See how each provocation design began, and how we chose nature- and art-based materials that invite children to experimentation, intuition, and spontaneous creativity for free expression of ideas through art. Documentation as a tool makes observation visible, gives voice to children and their thinking, and identifies how to proceed.

Unlocking the Power of Parent Engagement

Kenna Pruitt, Chief Operating Officer, Working Smarter Consulting

Engage Head Start parents in vital program activities using successful “marketing” strategies from programs nationwide.

Trauma Responsiveness: “I’m not the therapist others need!”

Janet Humphries, M.A., Founder-Coach-Consultant, Coaching Potentials

What is trauma and why is it now something we need to address in early childhood? Simple strategies for supporting the awareness of trauma will be presented and practiced. Join us in gaining an understanding and awareness of trauma, dismissing the idea that only mental health professionals can address it, and learn some skills staff can use to respond to those most in need!

Margin Mastery: Leading with Space to Breathe

Sharon Jackson, Consultant/Coach, Early Childhood Collective

Directing an early childhood program requires constant energy and attention—often at the expense of your own well-being. This session introduces the concept of margin—the space between your load and your limit—and explores simple, powerful ways to reclaim time, energy, and calm so you can lead with clarity and confidence.

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Why it's Better to Eat Twinkies Together Than Broccoli Alone: Self Care, Resiliency and Grit

Chris Zervas, Member and President, Leadership Vision, LLC

Anxiety levels are measuring the highest of all time. Is it impacting your team's performance at work? Change influences all of us differently, yet you can find effective ways to manage instability and help your colleagues. Come discover:

- Proven ways to ease unrest
- How to help others on your team deal with their anxiety
- When change is thrust upon you, how to grow and adapt"

Building Your First Adult Atelier: Applying Adult Learning Principles and the Reggio Emilia Approach to PD with EHS and HS Educators

*Courtney Dewhirst, Associate Professor of ECE; Erin Casey, Associate Professor of ECE;
Jen Murphy, Director of Institute of Child Development; Kyong-Ah Kwon, University of Oklahoma*

An atelier, or studio, is a materials-rich space and a way of working where learners wonder, collaborate, problem-solve, and express ideas in many forms. Step inside a Reggio-inspired atelier through photos, videos, and stories from a team of educators who built atelier spaces for both young children and the adults who teach them. See how the children's atelier invites exploration through loose parts, natural materials, light, and open-ended provocations, and how the adult atelier mirrors that environment to operationalize adult learning principles, asking educators to engage in the same inquiry, hypothesis-testing, documentation, and reflection that the Reggio approach asks of children. Examine a two-year-long study of an interdisciplinary, standards-based, Reggio-inspired exploration that grounds adult learners' work in the atelier. Identify components that translate directly to Early Head Start and Head Start coaching, mentoring, and staff training. Work in small groups to begin sketching your own adult atelier, whether as a dedicated room, a mobile cart, or a rotating set of materials that travels between centers. Leave with a draft action plan, a list of low-cost starter materials, and concrete strategies for staff development that mirror the kind of learning you want children to experience.

Active Supervision in Motion: Using Technology to Strengthen Child Safety During Transitions

Jose Martinez, Solution Advisor, GoEngage by Cleverex Systems

Transitions are one of the highest-risk times of the day for child supervision challenges in Head Start and Early Head Start programs. From classroom changes and playground transitions to restroom breaks and bus loading, maintaining active supervision requires constant visibility, communication, and accountability.

This session explores how programs can strengthen active supervision practices using technology-supported workflows, real-time visibility tools, and improved staff communication strategies. Participants will learn practical ways to reduce risk, improve accountability, and support compliance efforts—especially during high-movement periods throughout the day.

Through real-world examples and operational strategies, attendees will also see how tools like digital child tracking, transition accountability workflows, and real-time monitoring dashboards can support safer, more organized supervision practices across classrooms, centers, and transportation environments.