

31st Annual CAFAF Conference
May 1-2, 2026
Mystic Marriott

Fostering Enhanced Childhood Experiences



Annual Conference

“Fostering Enhanced Childhood Experiences”

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

FRIDAY and SATURDAY

8:00 a.m. - 8:45 a.m.

Registration and Breakfast

8:45 a.m. - 8:55 a.m.

Welcome and Announcements

9:00 a.m. - 10:30 a.m.

Workshop A

Snack Break

10:35 a.m. - 12:05 p.m.

Workshop B

12:05 p.m. - 1:35 p.m.

Plenary

1:35 p.m. - 2:45 p.m.

Lunch

3:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Award Ceremony and Dessert

CAFAF STAFF

Margaret Doherty
Executive Director

Diane Orlando
Program Director-Support and Advocacy

Vanessa Williamson
Program Director-Intake, Outreach and Training

Jennifer Bellamy **Torrington Area Liaison**

Sheree Breeden **Bridgeport Area Liaison**

Rochelle Callender **Training Program Coordinator**

Brian Candelora **Peer Network Coordinator**

Debra Candelora **Meriden Area Liaison**

Emily Churchill **Willimantic Area Liaison**

Samantha Heltke **New Haven Area Liaison**

Krystal Hernandez **Outreach Coordinator**

Deanna Martinez **Norwich Area Liaison**

Ebony Mitchell **Kid Hero Program Assistant**

Kyle Ohlund **Manchester Area Liaison**

Lisa Ortiz **Hartford Area Liaison**

Sheyla Ortiz-Caraballo **New Britain Area Liaison**

Dora Poma **Danbury Area Liaison**

Leslie Reyes **Norwalk Area Liaison**

Jennifer Rivera **Retention Specialist**

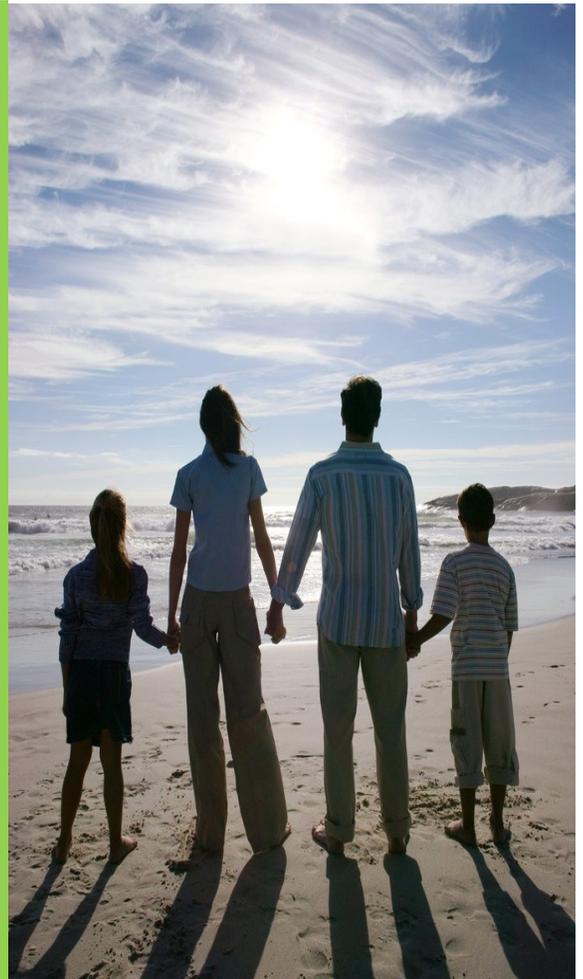
Amarylis Rodriguez **Kid Hero Program Assistant**

Marian Russo **Milford Area Liaison**

Open **Middletown Area Liaison**

Astrid Turmeque **Executive Administrative Assistant**

Emilio Vargas **Waterbury Area Liaison**



CAFAF Board

Joseph Montalvo **President**

Preston Oliver **Director**

Kally Moquete-Gonzalez **Director**

Miranda Davis, **Director**

Plenary

Carole Shaffer, BSW

Youth Law Center's Senior Director
of Strategic Initiatives



In 2012 after serving as Executive Director since 1994, and before that, as a Staff Attorney since 1981, Carole's work has focused on improving outcomes for foster youth. She has done this through developing better services for infants and young children in the child welfare system, working with faith communities to provide support and services for at-risk youth, and reducing the use of shelter care for foster youth, particularly for infants and toddlers. Carole co-created the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) project, which is focused on developing positive culture change within the child welfare system. She has also worked to improve access to community and family for youth in the juvenile justice system through introducing child welfare practices to probation departments in California. With Georgetown Professor Rachel Barr, Carole has developed a hands-on parenting project called *Just Beginning*, now being instituted in five facilities in California and one in Ohio. Also referred to as the *Baby Elmo Project*, *Just Beginning* provides at risk-youth with parenting tools to communicate and build relationships with their children, thus positively affecting the development of the baby and the father. Before joining the Youth Law Center, Carole worked at the ACLU of Louisiana.

Friday and Saturday

Plenary 12:05 p.m. - 1:35 p.m.

(1.5 CEUs)(T/C)

Fostering Relationships: How Foster Parents Can Support Successful Parent-Child Visits

Visits between children in foster care and their birth parents are some of the most important — and most vulnerable — moments in the reunification journey. They are also, too often, a source of conflict and misunderstanding between foster and birth parents.

Young children — especially those 5 and under — naturally form attachment bonds with their primary caregivers. When a child in foster care reunites with a birth parent, they may protest, cling, or withdraw, not because anything has gone wrong, but because they are encountering someone who has become less familiar in an unfamiliar situation. Birth parents may interpret this as evidence that the foster parent has alienated their child. Similarly, when children return home after a visit feeling stressed or dysregulated, foster parents may worry that something happened — when in fact, this too is a normal and expected response. These misunderstandings can breed mistrust and tension at a time when collaboration matters most.

Fostering Relationships (also known as ABC-V) is a 5-session intervention designed to change that dynamic. Using a structured, scripted curriculum, both foster parents and birth parents learn about attachment theory as part of the intervention, giving them a shared framework for understanding children's behavior. Foster parents then take on a new and meaningful role — serving as supportive coaches during birth parent visits, encouraging parents in real time by praising them when they follow their child's lead or offer positive reinforcement to their child. Rooted in the published literature on attachment and early childhood, this intervention transforms visits from a flashpoint into an opportunity for children, for families, and for the adults who care for them.

Learning Objective

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- Explain why parent-child visits are a common source of conflict between foster and birth parents and how children's attachment behaviors contribute to misunderstandings on both sides.
- Describe how attachment theory helps explain young children's reactions during and after visits with birth parents, including separation protest and post-visit stress.
- Explain the purpose and structure of the *Fostering Relationships* (ABC-V) intervention, including a 5-session format, target population of children ages 5 and under, and how it is delivered by child welfare staff.
- Describe how both foster and birth parents learning attachment theory creates a shared framework that can reduce conflict and build collaboration.
- Identify the foster parent's role as a supportive coach during visits, using a strengths-based approach to encourage birth parents and promote secure attachment interaction.

Friday and Saturday May 1-2, 2026

Workshops A 9:00 a.m. - 10:30 a.m. and Workshop B 10:35 a.m. - 12:05 p.m.

(1.5 CEUs)

Jo Ann Freiberg, Ph.D. and Pat Ciccone, C.A.G.S, L.P.C.

Growing Up in A Phone-Based World: What It Looks Like and What Can Be Done

This interactive and graphic workshop explores the reality that children are growing up differently today... from a play-based to a phone/device-based world. This is a public health crisis, and it has landed on our school, organization and home doorsteps and will only be solved through collaboration among parents/guardians, schools and organizations, public and private who can set standards and policy. Current research from myriad sources (e.g., The American Academy of Pediatrics, the Pew Research Foundation, Jonathan Haidt's, The Anxious Generation, etc.) are included to portray a very clear picture of both the problems and solutions. There is great damage to students' overall growth and development including but not limited to, physical, social, mental health, learning and behavior because of this significant transformation. The basic need for belonging and high-quality relationships and community for students has been grossly diminished by the pervasive use of smartphones, social media and unfettered access to the internet. This transformation, AKA "rewiring" is laid out and the necessary concrete steps and strategies that adults must take to help children of all ages mitigate the potential harms presented. Unless targeted head-on, this new reality will continue to impact overall health and well-being negatively. In addition, this new reality works against community and relationship building as well as diminishes social growth and academic achievement.

Learning Objective

By the end of this workshop, participants will have a better understanding of:

- The impact of devices/smart phones on children aged birth - high school.
- The impact of social media on children aged elementary - high school.
- The recommended interventions and guidelines for healthy growth and development in a device-rich world.

Raenette G. Riddick, LMSW

Untangling Roots: Honoring Hair, Identity, and Advocacy for Children in Care

This course will provide a comprehensive exploration of the intersection between ethnic hair care and racism equipping participants with skills to promote awareness, advocacy and cultural appreciation.

Learning Objective

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- Understand the history of hair discrimination faced by Black and Brown communities.
- Foster understanding of the cultural significance of ethnic hair and how hair care connects to identity, self esteem and heritage in Black and Brown communities.
- Be able to promote a positive self-image in children by helping them take pride in their natural hair and culture.
- Explore resources that can be used to continue learning and improve ethnic hair practices.

Marcus Stallworth, LMSW

Social Media and Technology. Is It Making Us Less Social?

In today's world, technology plays a critical part in our day-to-day lives. It allows us to stay connected, share information, and access resources at the push of a button. Although there are many benefits, there can also be some drawbacks. If not used properly- and in moderation- it can create challenges regarding safety, vulnerability, and overall wellness. Please join us in having an interactive discussion designed to highlight how social media and technology can be used in meaningful and responsible ways.

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- Recognize the pros and cons of technology.
- Understand ways that technology can be an asset in personal and professional capacities.
- Become familiar with current social media trends that can pose risk and harm and social isolation.
- Acquire resources that can help safeguard yourself and family members with usage.
- Learn information regarding current and proposed laws in Connecticut regarding media literacy.

Rachel Ellis, MSW

Safe to Tell, Safe to Heal: How Caregivers Can Respond to Disclosure

This workshop is designed to support foster and adoptive caregivers in recognizing and responding to disclosures of sexual harm in a way that promotes safety, trust, and healing for children and youth. The session will provide developmentally appropriate guidance on how sexual harm may present, including behavioral, emotional, and relational warning signs that caregivers may observe across different age groups.

Participants will learn how children typically disclose sensitive experiences, including both direct and indirect disclosures, and why a caregiver's initial response plays a critical role in a child's sense of safety and long-term healing. The workshop will emphasize trauma-informed, caregiver-friendly strategies for responding calmly and supportively, reducing shame, and reinforcing belief and protection without conducting an investigation themselves.

The session will also cover practical next steps following a disclosure, including maintaining emotional safety, understanding reporting responsibilities at a general level, and accessing supportive resources. Throughout the presentation, the focus will remain on empowering caregivers with concrete tools they can use immediately to foster environments where children feel safe to share difficult experiences.

The content will be educational and prevention-focused, presented in a sensitive and accessible manner appropriate for caregivers. No graphic material will be included. The overall goal is to increase caregiver confidence, strengthen protective relationships, and support enhanced childhood experiences through safety, connection, and informed caregiving.

Juliette Cole, LPC

Self-Care for Foster Parents & Caregivers

The training will explore six domains of self-care—physical, emotional, mental, social, spiritual, and practical—and introduced evidence-informed self-regulation, boundary-setting, and coping strategies for both daily routines and crisis situations. Participants will develop individualized self-care plans and identify available support systems, including respite care and peer support. Emphasis will be placed on increasing caregiver resilience, sustaining long-term placements, and improving overall well-being to enhance the quality of care provided to children in foster placements.

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- 1 Identify common sources of stress, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress experienced by foster parents and caregivers.
- 2 Recognize personal warning signs of caregiver fatigue and emotional overload related to foster care responsibilities.
- 3 Differentiate between self-care myths and effective self-care practices specific to the foster care experience.
- 4 Describe at least six areas of self-care (physical, emotional, mental, social, spiritual, and practical) and how each supports caregiver well-being.
- 5 Apply practical self-regulation and coping strategies to manage stress in both daily routines and crisis situations.
- 6 Demonstrate the importance of healthy boundaries in sustaining long-term foster care placements and caregiver wellness.
- 7 Develop a personalized self-care plan that includes daily, weekly, and emergency strategies tailored to individual needs and circumstances.
- 8 Identify support systems and resources available to foster caregivers, including respite care and peer support.
- 9 Increase confidence in prioritizing self-care without guilt, recognizing it as a necessary component of effective caregiving and committing to at least one actionable self-care step to implement following the training.

Marcia Anderson, Ph.D., LMSW and Paul Gressly, LMSW

I Am An Adoptive / Guardianship Parent...What Do I Need to Know About Subsidized Post Adoption vs. Guardianship and The DCF Post-Adopt College Program?"

This workshop will be broken up into two parts. The first will cover everything subsidy and what parents should know once approved in court for Subsidized Adoption / Guardianship. For the first part, workshop will discuss what to expect and next steps, when you become a subsidized adoptive parent, or you are a relative who just received a Subsidized Transfer of Guardianship (STOG). This workshop will highlight specifics regarding post-subsidized procedures and the important things that parents should know as they begin to receive a subsidy from DCF. The second part of workshop will cover important information that should be known about the DCF Post-Adopt College Program. Topics include: eligibility, tuition assistance, allotment per year, requirements of the program, residing off campus and support systems for a successful college journey.

Workshops At A Glance

Friday and Saturday May 1-2, 2026

Workshops A 9:00 a.m. - 10:30 a.m. and Workshop B 10:35 a.m. - 12:05 p.m.
(1.5 CEUs)

Workshop Title	Presenter	Room	Credit*	CEC's
"Growing Up in A Phone-Based World: What It Looks Like and What Can Be Done"	Jo Ann Freiberg, Ph.D. and Pat Ciccone, C.A.G.S, L.P.C.	Salon A	T/C	1.5
"Social Media and Technology. Is It Making Us Less Social? "	Marcus Stallworth, LMSW	Salon B	T/C	1.5
"I am an Adoptive / Guardianship Parent... What Do I Need to Know About Subsidized Post Adoption vs. Guardianship and The DCF Post-Adopt College Program?"	Marcia Anderson, Ph.D., LMSW and Paul Gressly, LMSW	Salon C	T/C	1.5
"Self-Care for Foster Parents & Caregivers"	Juliette Cole, LPC	Salon D	T/C	1.5
"Safe to Tell, Safe to Heal: How Caregivers Can Respond to Disclosures"	Rachel Ellis, BSW	Salon E	T/C	1.5
"Untangling Roots: Honoring Hair, Identity, and Advocacy for Children in Care"	Raenette Riddick, LMSW	Salon F	T/C	1.5

Credit * T/C Trauma and Crisis Intervention

**Continuing Education Credits with
National Association of Social Workers**
Approval Pending

All registrants who would like to receive CE units/credits, will need to sign in and sign out of every session. NASW is very strict about their requirements.

Please listen to room monitors, be sure to sign in and sign out with the following information:

- **Your name as you want it to appear on your approved credits**
- **The time that you signed in**
- **The time that the class/workshop ended**
- **The number of hours requested for that class/workshop**

If you have questions, please see the CAFAF staff at the Registration Table.

Thank you!



Connecticut Alliance of Foster and Adoptive Families, Inc.

CERTIFICATE OF TRAINING

This Certificate Verifies the Attendance of (Participant's name)

31ST ANNUAL CAFAF CONFERENCE "FOSTERING ENHANCED CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES"

May 1-2, 2026
The Mystic Marriott Hotel and Spa
Groton, CT

Executive Director

Margaret Doherty

Conference Chairperson

Vanessa Williamson

Friday, May 1, 2026

Workshop Session A

Workshop Session B

Plenary

Place validation sticker next to attended session(s).

Saturday, May 2, 2026

Workshop Session A

Workshop Session B

Plenary

Place validation sticker next to attended session(s).