

# PRACTICE NOTES

For North Carolina's Child Welfare Workers

From the NC Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program

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*In summarizing research, we try to give you new ideas for refining your practice. However, this publication is not intended to replace child welfare training, regular supervision, or peer consultation, only to enhance them.*

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## Leaning into Crucial Conversations



North Carolina's Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP), our state's blueprint for strengthening its child welfare system, is organized around the following goals:

1. Strengthen all child welfare staff's ability to assess ongoing safety throughout the child/family's engagement with child welfare services.
2. Increase access to services for children and their families to keep children in the safest, least restrictive setting.
3. Develop and support a stable, competent, and professional workforce in child welfare.
4. Implement continuous quality improvement.

To help achieve all these goals, the NC Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) is striving to build the capacity of everyone in child welfare to identify and engage in crucial conversations.

### Crucial Conversations

In the field of child welfare meaningful, high-stakes conversations—with families, community members, service providers, and with each other—are the key to success. That is what a crucial conversation is: a discussion between two or more people where the stakes are

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high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong (Grenny, et al., 2022). Common examples of crucial conversations in our work include:

- Discussing child safety concerns with a parent
- Talking with someone you supervise who is experiencing burnout
- Speaking with a resource parent about doing more to support parent-child visits
- Talking with a child about a change in their permanent plan

Despite the importance and ubiquity of crucial conversations, there are signs that this is an area where workers, supervisors, and agency leaders need to improve. For example, local child welfare agencies have reported that staff were either avoiding difficult conversations or approaching them too forcefully. At the regional level, continuous quality improvement (CQI) teams have found a lack of skill in difficult conversations to be a root cause of many systemic challenges.

### **Renewed Emphasis**

To enhance the ability of staff at all levels to engage in crucial conversations, NCDHHS will soon offer “Empowered Conversations: Building Trust and Collaboration in Child Welfare.” This advanced-level, in-person, two-day training is designed to help child welfare professionals develop the skills needed to navigate the tough yet essential conversations that arise throughout the life of a case. Inspired by the bestselling book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* and tailored specifically for the child welfare context, this course emphasizes how intentional communication fosters trust, strengthens collaboration, and supports better family outcomes. While reading the book prior to attending the training is not required, it is recommended.

“Empowered Conversations” will debut in fall 2025. This issue of Practice Notes is both a preview and a supplement to this new course. In it, you can learn more about this course and the framework it teaches, hear how using this framework is already benefiting North Carolina child welfare professionals, explore tips from a crucial conversations expert, and much more. We hope you find it helpful.

## **Empowered Conversations: Building Trust and Collaboration in Child Welfare - Launching Fall 2025**

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Social Services (NCDHHS DSS) is excited to announce a new, advanced-level, in-person training course launching in fall 2025: “**Empowered**

### **Conversations: Building Trust and Collaboration in Child**

**Welfare.”** This two-day training is designed to help child welfare professionals—program administrators, supervisors, and front-line workers, to develop the skills needed to navigate the tough yet essential conversations that arise throughout the life

of a case. Rooted in the principles of crucial conversations and tailored specifically for the child welfare context, this course emphasizes how intentional communication fosters trust, strengthens collaboration, and supports better family outcomes.

### **What Is an Empowered Conversation?**

Empowered conversations are critical, sometimes uncomfortable discussions that move cases forward—both at the family and supervisor case staffing level.

“When workers can go deeper into the issues facing families and children, they’re better able to identify root causes and develop more effective solutions.”

These may involve highly sensitive topics, such as family dynamics, domestic violence, or substance use, and require not just technical knowledge but emotional intelligence and communication skills. No matter their role, child welfare staff must engage in these challenging

dialogues to build trust and collaborate effectively toward shared goals.

These conversations have always been difficult to navigate, but there has not been a course specifically dedicated to strengthening this skillset—until now.

### **Why Now?**

The need for this course has become increasingly clear. In 2019, the *CPS Assessments* curriculum was updated to include content on crucial conversations. As NCDHHS DSS Program Manager Crystalle Williams explains, “Case reviews and county feedback showed that workers were either avoiding difficult conversations or approaching them too forcefully. It was a case of too little or too much.”

“When we invest the time to plan and approach conversations with empathy and purpose, we build trust and strengthen collaboration. That’s how we create real, lasting impact.”

Early feedback from the revision of the *CPS Assessments* course was positive. Yet over time, it became apparent that all job functions and all roles in child welfare, not just assessments, could benefit from training in this area.

Emi Wyble, NCDHHS DSS Regional Abuse and Medical Specialists Manager, says, “This course is not just for assessment staff. It will be good for everyone. There is a need to have a conversation about stopping a trial home visit, pending adoption, worker performance, stakeholder involvement, or a safety plan. The skills learned in this course will help staff feel prepared for all of those conversations and focus on staying in dialogue with families, even when things turn difficult. When we are able to stay in dialogue with families, we can work together to address concerns.”

Additionally, regional continuous quality improvement (CQI) teams have identified lack of skill in difficult conversations as a root cause of many systemic challenges. Holly McNeil, NCDHHS DSS CQI Lead, notes, “This has

always been an area for improvement, but in recent years, the need has grown. Many workers, regardless of age, struggle with face-to-face communication, especially in a post-pandemic workforce more accustomed to virtual interactions.”

These communication challenges impact the ability to build trust with families, collaborate within teams, and provide effective supervision. Avoiding difficult conversations may temporarily prevent conflict, but it also weakens relationships and delays progress.

### **Course Overview**

“Empowered Conversations” provides participants with tools to communicate effectively in high-stakes situations. The course supports

supervisors and staff in building the skills needed to prepare for, engage in, and follow through on difficult conversations, while strengthening trust and collaboration with families, colleagues, and teams.

During this course, participants will:

- Define what constitutes a “crucial conversation” in child welfare, identifying relevant scenarios
- Identify the role of self-awareness in navigating emotionally charged discussions
- Learn and apply at least five of the eight key communication skills through hands-on activities
- Practice using these skills in small groups with role-specific case scenarios
- Understand how to incorporate structured decision-making tools to transition conversations into concrete action steps

### **Supporting Better Outcomes**

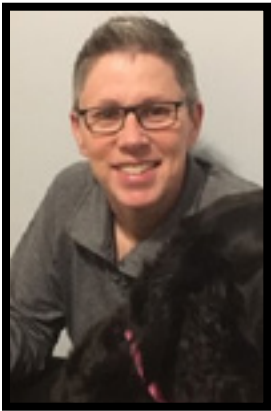
This training is designed not just to enhance individual communication skills but to improve systemic outcomes. McNeil highlights the broader impact: “When workers can go deeper into the issues facing families and children, they’re better able to identify root causes and develop more effective solutions.”

Crystalle Williams echoes this: “The bottom line is better outcomes for families. Trust and collaboration are built through conversation, and

we must improve our ability to engage families in a meaningful way to make accurate safety decisions.”

These skills are as critical for supervisors as they are for workers. Strong communication builds trusting teams, holds staff accountable to policy and best practice, and contributes to a more resilient workforce. As McNeil points out, “In our current staffing crisis, where it is difficult to find staff to fill all the necessary positions, supervisors are often hesitant to have conversations that they feel might cause a worker to leave. This may leave them with fewer vacancies, but also less effective staff.”

## Applying Crucial Conversations Skills in Child Welfare



Emi Wyble

Effective communication has always been an important part of good social work practice. Navigating difficult conversations requires a higher level of skill to partner with families to address concerns. As noted in “Empowered Conversations: Building Trust and Collaboration in Child Welfare,” the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of

Social Services (NCDHHS DSS) is launching a new course in fall 2025 to help strengthen this skillset.

To learn how a course rooted in crucial conversation skills and tailored for a child welfare audience can help, Practice Notes spoke with Emi Wyble, NCDHHS DSS Regional Abuse and Medical Specialists Manager.

When Wyble was with Wake County Health and Human Services, she was among a group of supervisors and managers who received specialized training to teach the skills from the bestselling book, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High*. Wyble says the training had a positive impact on the agency because “it provided practical skills for effective communication from day one, enabling us to apply these skills immediately in our conversations.” Wyble shared that in her experience, when leaders model these skills, staff are more likely to adopt them in their interactions

### Looking Ahead

The hope for “Empowered Conversations” is that staff and supervisors alike will leave with a renewed sense of confidence and competence in addressing difficult topics, while maintaining the relationships essential to both child and family safety and workforce stability.

“It’s about being intentional,” says Williams. “When we invest the time to plan and approach conversations with empathy and purpose, we build trust and strengthen collaboration. That’s how we create real, lasting impact.”

with families.

“I found these skills can be used with anyone,” Wyble says, “whether in personal relationships, community meetings, workplace interactions, with children, in faith communities, or with partners.”

### Maintaining Dialogue

For Wyble, one takeaway from the training was that crucial conversations are not about winning arguments but about maintaining dialogue, especially when disagreements arise. It is essential to stay engaged in discussions, particularly in critical areas like child welfare, where ongoing involvement is necessary. Staying involved means asking how we can continue sharing ideas and information, aiming for outcomes that satisfy both parties, even if neither gets everything they wanted. The ultimate goal is to ensure the safety of children.

Wyble believes “working in child welfare requires that frontline workers, supervisors, and leadership have the skills necessary to navigate challenging yet crucial conversations while building trust and strengthening collaboration and decision making.” Learning these skills helps people feel more prepared and more confident to stay in dialogue, even when addressing sensitive topics like the safety of a child with families or staff performance with workers.

### Key Skills

While there are many crucial conversation skills, the three that resonate most with Wyble are *Start with Heart*, *Learn to Look*, and *Make It Safe*.

The *Start with Heart* skill encourages individuals

to consider their own needs, the needs of others, and the relationship at stake before entering a conversation. An example shared in the new course involves a worker asking the questions below before going out on a home visit:

- *What do I really want for myself?* I want to maintain my relationship with the caretaker and engage her in making a plan for her child (rather than focusing on getting her to agree with my plan).
- *What do I really want for others?* I want the child to be safe and the family to remain together (rather than focusing on pushing her to admit that she has a problem with substances).
- *What do I really want for the relationship?* I want to partner with this parent so she will engage in honest, respectful conversations about her child's safety. I want her to feel heard (rather than trying to convince her that I am right and that she needs to stop using substances).
- *How would I behave if I really wanted these results?* To get these results, I remain calm and engaged so I can clearly and honestly share both what is working well in the family and what my safety concerns are. I would ask more questions and offer fewer suggestions (rather than trying to "win" the conversation by getting her to admit she has a problem and needs treatment).

The **Learn to Look** skill helps individuals recognize when a conversation is becoming crucial and allows them to adjust their approach accordingly. Wyble says, "If during a conversation a caregiver begins to yell, that is an opportunity for the worker to recognize the conversation has turned crucial. It is vital to maintain emotional safety." If emotions escalate, it can lead to a breakdown in communication. Recognizing signs of discomfort in oneself and others is essential for redirecting the conversation back to a productive dialogue. Wyble explains, "To me, *Learn to Look*

is a great skill when you get caught off guard, that all of a sudden, a conversation turned crucial." There are a couple of strategies that can help us stay in dialogue. One option is to go back to the *Start with Heart* questions. If that does not work, the worker could use another strategy to *Make It Safe*.

The **Make It Safe** skill is what you can do when you notice that emotional safety is at risk and you need to step back and rebuild safety. For example, to rebuild safety with a caregiver, Wyble suggests a worker say "First, let me apologize. I don't want you to hear that I think you're a bad parent. I do believe you want your child to be safe. There has been a concern raised that your child is young and staying home alone for extended periods. Can we talk about that?" Conversations stall if someone feels unsafe, preventing trust, collaboration, and ultimately, family and agency outcomes.

### **Learning and Using the Skills**

Wyble encourages anyone interested in learning more to start with the book *Crucial Conversations*. "I think the book does a really good job of showing you the tools. And then I would go to the class and see how that comes to life."

She also recommends picking out three or four skills that stand out to you. "Look at foundational skills, like *Make It Safe*. If folks don't feel safe, they're not talking. Even if that is a harder skill or takes longer, I would still focus on how to recognize when people don't feel emotionally safe and how to rebuild safety."

Social workers should also practice these skills with their supervisors—for example, by role-playing potential scenarios to prepare for difficult conversations. Wyble says, "It's essential to ensure staff are equipped to handle challenging discussions, especially when child safety is at stake. While the book offers numerous skills, becoming proficient in even a few can significantly improve communication and relationships."

## **Workers Reflect on Benefits of Crucial Conversations Skills**

The course "Empowered Conversations: Building Trust and Collaboration in Child Welfare" teaches skills for building trust, navigating conflict, and supporting families with empathy and accountability. To learn how child welfare

professionals are integrating these skills into their daily practice, *Practice Notes* spoke with Ashli Malone, Child Welfare Specialist in Investigations with Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services, and Amy Walker, Permanency Planning

Worker with Yadkin County Human Services. Both named specific skills taught in “Empowered Conversations” that have enhanced their ability to notice and respond to emotional cues, create and restore safety, and stay grounded during tough conversations.

### **Skill #1: Start with the Heart**

For Malone, *Start with the Heart* has become a foundational practice. “I use it a lot because I want myself and the families to feel comfortable,” she explains. Before entering conversations, she takes a moment to ask herself the *Start with the Heart* questions: *What do I really want for this family? For myself? For our relationship? How will I behave if I really want these things?* This grounds her, allowing her to focus on connection rather than control, especially in complex domestic violence, substance use, or mental health cases. Walker says she also spends time before conversations planning how she wants them to go and identifying questions that may arise and ways she can offer support.

By starting with how they want themselves and families to feel supported and heard, Malone and Walker prepare not just with resources but with the right mindset. This inner alignment helps them engage from a place of authenticity and empathy, paving the way for trust and collaboration.

### **Skill #2: Learn to Look**

Both Malone and Walker credit the *Learn to Look* skill with improving their emotional self-awareness and ability to read a room. Malone shares, “I know I don’t feel safe when my hands get sweaty and cold and my heart races. That’s my sign to step back.” Recognizing these signs in herself allows her to manage her responses before they escalate. She also watches for cues in families—such as withdrawal, anger, or apathy—that may indicate they feel unsafe.

Walker says the *Learn to Look* skill helps her be more observant of verbal and nonverbal cues, her own as well as those she is talking to. Identifying early indicators allows workers to slow the conversation down and shift their approach before things spiral. It allows them to remain present and compassionate, even during heated or emotional encounters.

### **Skill #3: Make It Safe**

A particularly challenging interaction shows how

simple yet powerful the *Make It Safe* skill can be. Malone says that during one initiation, “As soon as I said I was with CPS, the mom cursed me out.” Rather than reacting defensively, Malone paused the conversation and offered to connect a little later. This gave both parties time to reset, and the mother ended up calling Malone back. “On my way to the home visit, I asked myself the *Start with the Heart* questions. When I arrived, I was able to stay calm and acknowledge the mom’s feelings. She ended up apologizing to me.” Malone’s non-reactive, empathetic approach helped the mother feel safe enough to collaborate and the case was quickly resolved.

Walker shared a *Make It Safe* example from court. At a one-year custody hearing, she recommended changing a child’s permanent plan from reunification to adoption. She says, “Looking back, I didn’t fully acknowledge the parents’ struggles. I’m glad the judge didn’t agree and allowed the family to continue with the plan for reunification.”

Walker later apologized to the family for quickly jumping to change the plan. Apologizing is one way to reestablish safety within a conversation, and part of the *Make It Safe* skill. After this exchange, Walker recommitted to working collaboratively. “Since then, communication has been fantastic,” she says. “Using *Make It Safe* helped restore trust and move us forward.”

### **A Message to Fellow Child Welfare Workers**

Both Malone and Walker emphasized that crucial conversation skills are not just useful; they are essential. Whether in assessments, permanency planning, or supervision, these tools equip social workers to enter emotionally charged situations with clarity, compassion, and confidence.

Malone reminds colleagues, “Families are the experts in their own lives. We may come in with badges and clipboards, but empathy is what builds rapport.” Walker adds, “Unconscious bias can easily cloud our perception. These skills help us recognize our own influence and make conversations about partnership, not power.”

For child welfare professionals, crucial conversation skills are more than a toolkit. They are a mindset that sees families not as problems to be fixed, but as partners worth listening to and fighting for.

## Successful Leaders Model Crucial Conversations

In child welfare, engaging in meaningful, high-stakes conversations is critical to our work with families, community members, and service providers. Integrating the crucial conversation framework into child welfare leadership practice strengthens communication, models accountability, and fosters a culture rooted in psychological safety and shared purpose. *Practice Notes* spoke with Kim Bailey, Program Manager with Onslow County Department of Social Services (DSS), to understand how she has crucial conversations with her teams and what she sees as the benefits of having them.

Bailey has nine years of experience overseeing Intake and Assessments in Onslow County. She has worked in multiple capacities within child welfare, including as a social worker and social work supervisor. These experiences give her a deep understanding of the field. Bailey emphasizes that one of the most valuable aspects of child welfare is relationships. She emphasizes that clear communication is a necessary foundation for building strong relationships with both staff and families.

### Building Confidence, Accountability, and Psychological Safety

Bailey acknowledges that understanding different types of communication is a key element of her leadership style. She values having clear norms of communication within her team. One such norm is normalizing mistakes in practice.

"Don't be afraid to make a mistake," she says. "We're all human, and that's how we learn. Recognize and reiterate that this is a safe place for them. Everyone needs a place where they can say the things they need to say and then pick your head up, dust yourself off, and move on."

Bailey models clear communication through consistent case staffing check-ins and weekly supervision with her staff. This helps her learn more about their individual needs. She provides support based on the supervisor's needs. In turn, she expects supervisors to model their support for front-line workers in the same manner. She stresses the importance of knowing each member of her team well and creating a safe atmosphere for open communication.

Bailey recalls having to engage in one of the

most difficult conversations of her career with a former supervisor who was experiencing burnout. "We all have trauma, and we all have parts of us that lead us to this career path," she says. "Sometimes that unresolved trauma can creep up on us. We see so much of the bruised and broken that we can't pretend that it doesn't have an impact on us...I think I saw, or heard someone say, 'Expecting us not to be impacted by trauma is like walking through water and expecting not to get wet.'"

A key principle and skill from the crucial conversation framework is *Choose Your Focus*. This skill is about being sure you hold the right conversation. Bailey approached this situation not as a disciplinary concern, but as a supportive conversation. The outcome was a mutual understanding that the best decision was for this supervisor to leave the agency. "I hated that because she was a stellar supervisor," Bailey says. She believes this conversation, though hard, was necessary for the care of the individual, the families we serve, and the organization.

Bailey also uses crucial conversations to build supervisor capacity. When meeting with a supervisor, rather than offering all the answers, she encourages critical thinking by welcoming their ideas, questions, and perspectives. This promotes autonomy and confidence in decision-making. That approach, combined with an open-door policy, supports two-level decision-making.

Bailey values her deep connection with supervisors and social workers. They seek her input and collaborate in joint staffing. She emphasizes the importance of balancing high expectations with psychological safety. She creates a space where staff feel empowered to speak up, make mistakes, and grow, while at the same time holding them accountable to be transparent and compassionate in their decisions.

### Training and Development Bolsters Internal Practices

Internal training sessions on crucial



Kim Bailey

conversations, combined with leadership coaching and ongoing professional development, have strengthened communication across Onslow County DSS teams. Having trainers on staff has helped reinforce crucial conversation skills throughout the department. Bailey also highlights her team’s internal policy presentations, which feature a social worker presenting to their peers. She believes that this enables social workers to be accountable to learn and share policy in a more interactive format. While Onslow County DSS has offered various training to promote holistic approaches to child welfare, crucial conversations have provided a consistent, actionable framework that supports day-to-day communication and leadership.

### Final Thoughts

When asked what advice she would offer to other program administrators, Bailey emphasizes the importance of self-reflection, recognizing personal biases, and leading with a clear plan for change. She encourages leaders to give credit where it is due, involve staff in decision-making, and lead with transparency, vulnerability, and accountability. For Bailey, the heart of effective leadership rests in relationships. Crucial conversations provide the language and structure to develop those relationships with intention and care.

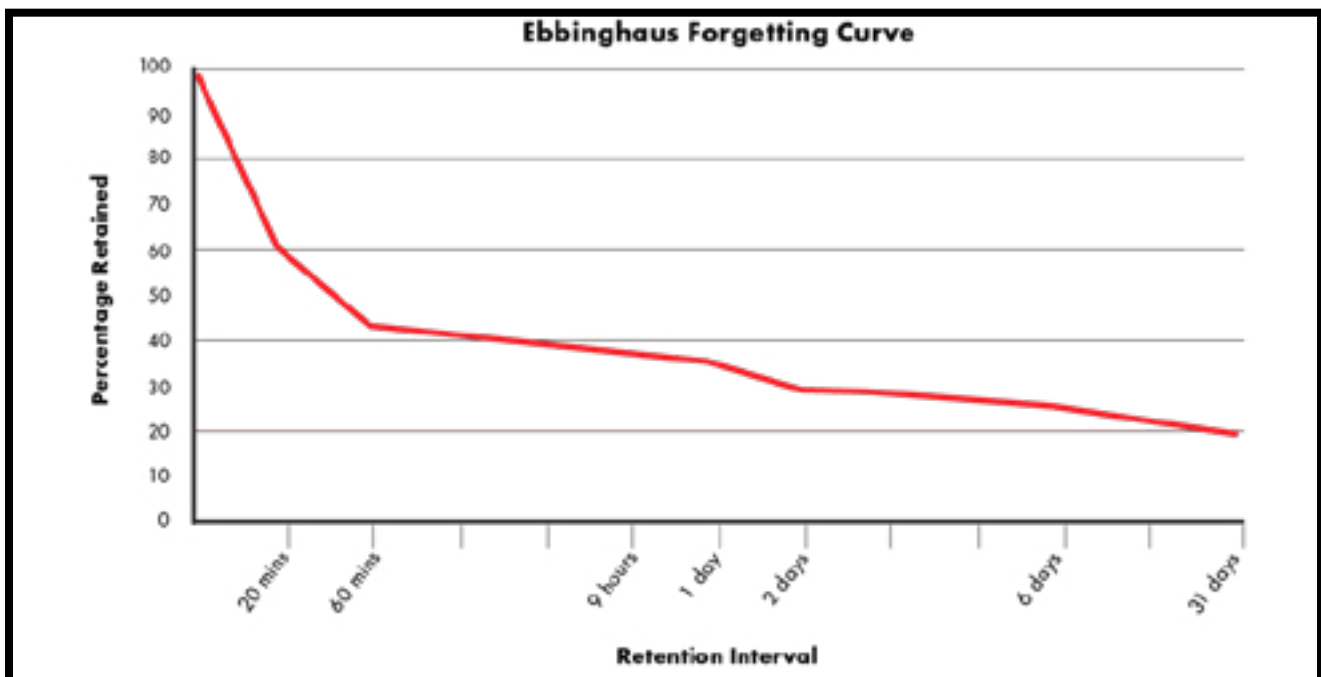
## How Can Agencies Make the Most of Training?

Learning transfer happens when you apply what you learn in training to your work. In a perfect world, training would be a “one and done” affair: everyone would leave training ready to put new knowledge and skills into action.

Yet as the figure suggests, that is not how our brains work. Created in the 1880s by German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus and replicated by Murre and Dros in 2015, the forgetting curve is a model that shows that without intervention, most newly acquired knowledge is lost in the first few days, after which the rate of loss tapers off. According to the curve, half of new information is forgotten within a day, and 75% within a week.

Although there are things we can do to hang on to—and use—what we learn, training alone is not enough. If agencies want learning transfer, staff must practice, reinforce, and strengthen new behaviors in the job setting **over time**. Transfer of learning is a gradual process (Brittain, 2014).

This is why the development of North Carolina’s child welfare workforce is a joint effort. At the state level, the NC Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) creates and offers high-quality courses that focus on the things child welfare professionals need to succeed—for example, how to have crucial conversations. At the county level, local child welfare agencies take



the lead by helping staff bridge the gap between training and real-world practice.

## **Supervisors Are Key**

When it comes to transfer of learning, county child welfare supervisors are the key. They are in the best position to coach staff, model desired behaviors, reinforce learned information, and create the kind of environment workers need to practice and receive feedback.

Following are specific actions supervisors can take to combat the forgetting curve and develop effective workers:

### **1. Create a Transfer-Friendly Environment**

**Cultivate a learning culture.** Transfer of learning flourishes in an environment where workers are willing to say, *I don't yet know how to do X, but I'm working on it. I'm getting better. Admitting this requires vulnerability.*

In a learning culture, people feel safe. They are confident they will be supported and treated with respect if they ask a question or admit they don't know how to do something.

No one likes to feel incompetent. But as former trainer and current Statewide CQI Lead Holly McNeill points out, "Feeling incompetent is part of the process. You start out not knowing, but with effort and support you come out the other side. It's how we learn new things. And we need to learn new things! Our field is ever-changing."

**Send clear, positive messages about training and continuous learning.** Emphasize the importance of continuous learning and encourage all workers to stay engaged with ongoing professional development opportunities. One of the best ways to do this is for supervisors to attend training themselves and be seen applying what they have learned.

**Know what your staff are learning.** Supervisors cannot assess or support learning transfer if they do not know what staff are being taught. Supervisors need a detailed understanding of the courses their staff are taking, either through study of course materials or, preferably, by taking the current version of those courses themselves.

McNeill advises, "If it has been years since you have taken a course, take it again. You have to complete 24 hours of training a year anyway. Our work is evolving all the time. Supervisors have a responsibility to stay caught up."

### **2. Actively Support Transfer**

**Set clear expectations.** Sending staff to training is an investment. Supervisors must ensure staff know what they must do before, during, and after training so that investment is not wasted. Supervisors should make their expectations clear prior to training, ideally using the course-specific transfer of learning tools described below.

**Debrief soon after training.** When staff return from training, talk to them about what they learned and how they intend to apply it. For instance, a supervisor might say, *Tell me what you learned. How can I support you in applying what you learned? Do you remember talking about X in training? Here, let's look over the materials to see what they say about it.*

**Observe and provide feedback.** Observe workers' performance to identify areas where additional training or support may be needed. Consider using the "[Track Training Skill Development Observation Guide](#)." Regular formal and informal feedback also helps staff identify areas for improvement and refine their skills.

**Facilitate discussion and practice.** Create opportunities for staff to discuss their training, practice their skills, and reflect on their experiences. McNeill reports that in some agencies, everyone who completes training must present a piece of what they learned in a team meeting. "This is a fabulous practice," she says, "because it reinforces what that person has learned and it reinforces information and best practices for others, even those who have already had that training."

### **3. Use Your Resources**

There are many tools available to help child welfare supervisors in North Carolina facilitate transfer of learning. This includes the following:

- [Supporting New Workers During Pre-Service Training: Guide for Supervisors](#). This guide, designed to be used in weekly supervision meetings, makes it easy for supervisors to check on a worker's progress, offer guidance and feedback, and make adjustments to a worker's training plan if needed. Although it is focused on pre-service training, this guide can be adapted for use with all workers
- *Transfer of Learning (TOL) Tools and Course Workbooks*. NCDHHS provides a single web page where supervisors can find workbooks

and TOL tools for pre-service training, Track training, and job-specific courses. TOL tools can help supervisors guide discussions, plan activities, and identify areas for further learning. To access this page, click [here](#).

- *Individualized Training Assessment (ITA)*. Accessible through the NCDHHS learning site [NCSWlearn.org](https://www.ncswlearn.org), the ITA allows North

Carolina county child welfare supervisors and workers to discover their training needs based on current job responsibilities, identify their highest priority training, and find a list of the required, recommended, and elective courses offered by NCDHHS.

## Resilience Aids Crucial Conversations

Resilience is the capacity to bounce back from adversity. But it is also more than that, it is the ability to maintain clarity, emotional regulation, and purpose under pressure. When the stakes are high, our fight-or-flight instincts kick in. Without resilience, we risk shutting down, lashing out, or avoiding crucial conversations.

Resilience helps us stay grounded. It gives us the strength to navigate discomfort, absorb feedback without being defensive, and respond instead of reacting. It transforms emotionally charged interactions into opportunities for connection and growth. When we are resilient, we take the time to pause, listen actively, and consider the other person's perspective. That can help us see the bigger picture and stay curious instead of combative.

Understanding the connection between resilience and effective work with children and families, Buncombe County Health and Human Services (BCHHS) has created CARE Tyme. To learn more about this resiliency-boosting program, which stands for Communication Around Recent Events (Tyme is not an acronym), Practice Notes spoke with Buncombe's Alexis Danciu, who helped found the program, and Anna Meyer, who facilitates it.

### CARE Tyme

According to Danciu, a Quality Assurance and Performance Specialist with BCHHS, the idea for CARE Tyme arose when she and others were being trained in critical incident stress management so they could support first responders. During the training, it became obvious to everyone that child welfare and other social work staff also experience critical incidents and need support.

Like critical incident stress management, CARE Tyme initially focused on supporting staff through

### Psychological Safety

To express what is affecting them and how others can help, staff need to feel psychologically safe. This includes feeling free to speak up without fear of retribution. Safety is essential for crucial conversations to take place. When people trust that they can express dissent, worries, or give honest feedback without negative repercussions, communication deepens and collaboration strengthens.

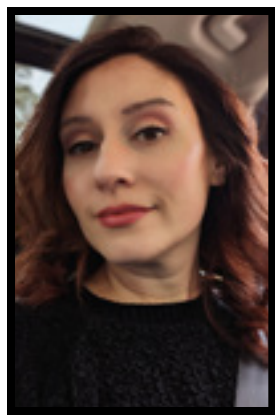
Leaders can create environments of psychological safety by taking the following steps:

- Monitor staff well-being
- If an individual appears to be struggling, consider having a crucial conversation with them in which you acknowledge any behaviors of concern and reassure them you are there to support them
- Make it clear you know their work affects them emotionally and ask how they want to be supported
- Encourage staff to support each other and provide space/time for that
- Balance case assignments (i.e., all staff should receive cases of varying degrees of difficulty)
- Encourage staff to take breaks, time off, and seek out support from clinicians if needed
- Celebrate and thank staff regularly

(National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2011)

specific incidents. However, because child welfare staff are significantly impacted by the secondary trauma, the program evolved to also focus on supporting staff experiencing cumulative stress.

BCHHS offers two CARE Tyme groups, one for children’s services and one for adult services. Both aim to provide a safe, confidential space where staff can connect with peers and receive support for processing experiences affecting them. In each meeting, participants are asked how they can be better supported. The goal is for staff to feel better and more positive after each meeting. Groups meet once or twice a month, depending on need/demand.



Anna Meyer

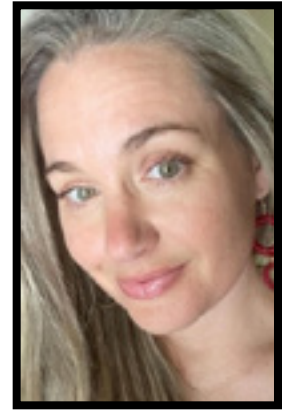
Anna Meyer, Neutral Facilitator and Resiliency Coordinator with BCHHS, facilitates the groups. Like Danciu, Meyer is trained in the Reconnect for Resilience model, which teaches trauma-informed skills to help individuals and communities build resilience and manage stress. Modeling those strategies, Meyer works to ensure staff feel physically and psychologically safe enough to participate in CARE

Tyme groups, during which they discuss ideas to support physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. CARE Tyme group activities can include mindfulness exercises (deep breathing, stretching) and guided visualization; reading poetry; sharing online resources; and engaging in other stress relieving activities (e.g., massage, interacting with puppies from a local shelter).

Buncombe County Health and Human Services surveys staff agency-wide about resiliency. Staff are asked about their stress level, work satisfaction, if they feel safe at work, and what

impacts their stress level (i.e., caseloads, peer relationships, supervisors, etc.). The agency uses this data to inform what it does to support staff.

Meyer and Danciu admit investing time in CARE Tyme is not always easy. When staff workload increases, it can be difficult for them to prioritize self-care/attending a group. Also, it can be challenging to facilitate meetings when things come up that cannot be resolved in the group (e.g., larger systemic child welfare issues).



Alexis Danciu

Even with occasional challenges, Meyer says, “What we’re doing is being seen and recognized as valuable... Other departments within Buncombe County Government have called us to assist in supporting their staff. It feels really good.”

Danciu says she has appreciated it when staff have reached out to her directly, because it means they trust her and know they can ask her for support. Most of all, she has appreciated seeing staff who attend a group being more at peace, laughing, and positive.

Feeling resilient does not make crucial conversations easier, but it makes us better prepared to handle them with intention and care. It gives us the courage to show up, the strength to stay present, and the wisdom to create meaningful dialogue—even when we are uncomfortable.

If you would like to contact Alexis Danciu or Anna Meyer with Buncombe County Health and Human Services, you can email them at [dl-resiliencycoordinators@buncombecounty.org](mailto:dl-resiliencycoordinators@buncombecounty.org).

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