

# Family Support NEWS BRIEF

A publication of

 CENTER FOR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES



**Social Connections  
That Strengthen Us**

2025 Pennsylvania Strengthening Families Conference  
April 2-4 | King of Prussia

## Social Connections That Strengthen Us Pennsylvania Strengthening Families Conference Recap

In a time of uncertainty—both professionally and personally—this year’s conference theme, “Social Connections That Strengthen Us,” resonated deeply with participants. Keynote presentations, workshops, activities, and annual meetings created meaningful opportunities for connection and reflection.

Valerie Arkoosh, secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, welcomed over 260 participants. She emphasized the importance of working upstream, promoting family well-being before families face major challenges. She encouraged the use of PA Navigate, a tool connecting both families and staff to valuable resources. Secretary Arkoosh expressed gratitude to attendees for the essential work they do and acknowledged the many unknowns facing the health, human, and family services sectors today.

Constance Gully, CEO of Parents as Teachers (PAT), joined her on stage to offer further welcome and express

appreciation. She highlighted the reach of PAT—not only across the U.S., but in two U.S. territories and seven countries. Gully spoke to PAT’s collaboration with other national home visiting models and advocates to address family safety, access to services, and funding.

Workshops offered interactive presentations, skits, best practices, and more. Participants left sessions with new insights and practical takeaways, expressing gratitude for the shared knowledge and experiences.

Michael Huesca, CEO of Paternal Opportunities Programs & Services (POPS), delivered a powerful lunchtime keynote. He spoke candidly about his experience as a single father and how systems often overlook fathers’ vital roles. He urged programs to affirm and include fathers and spoke of his connection to indigenous roots—reminding us to honor those who came before us. His parting message: Kindness matters. Kind actions build connections—today and for the future.

Dr. Argie Allen Wilson, co-founder of Connections Matter, LLC, closed the conference with a heartfelt and inspiring talk on the power of human connection. She shared her personal journey from judgment to empathy, the importance of setting healthy boundaries, and the need for self-care—so we can show up fully for others and ourselves.

The PAT and Children’s Trust Fund (CTF) annual meetings were also well received. At the PAT Annual Meeting, Constance Gully extended her welcome, followed by Donna Hunt O’Brien, vice president of professional and program development. She explained updates to the “Born to Learn” curriculum and the improved organization and usability of PAT resources. She encouraged exploration of the Engage app, highlighting its one-to-one and group connection features. Currently, 37 Pennsylvania PAT programs are actively using Engage.

At the CTF Annual Meeting, Shante’ Brown, deputy secretary for OCDEL, expressed appreciation for grantees’ efforts in promoting family well-being and preventing child maltreatment. Paul DiLorenzo, president of the CTF Board, affirmed the board’s commitment to supporting grantees. Board member Lindy Keefe shared her appreciation for hearing directly from those doing the work.

Special thanks to Shileste Overton-Morris (director, Center for Schools and Communities (CSC)), Laura Saccente (assistant director, CSC), and Lisa Parker (special assistant to the OCDEL deputy secretary) for their leadership, coordination, and support throughout the event.

Connection-building activities included: Networking Games, Exhibit Scavenger Hunt, Relaxation Room, Social Connection Gifts, Networking Night Out at King of Prussia Mall, Parent-Child Activities, and book giveaways.

Finally, thank you to our generous sponsors: Global Wordsmiths, InMind, and Final Focus!

## Children’s Trust Fund (CTF) Corner

Many family support programs observed Child Abuse Prevention Month including activities such as community painting projects, group connections, and family activities.

The article, “[How can parents and caregivers be supported in developing a positive co-parenting relationship?](#)” discusses the important role of the primary adults in children’s lives.



## Parents as Teachers Place

### Help PATNC improve supports for families impacted by using substances!

Parents as Teachers National Center (PATNC) is partnering with Tufts Interdisciplinary Evaluation Research (TIER) to better understand how PAT programs are currently working with participants who have been negatively impacted by using substances.

As part of this project, TIER is conducting a survey that asks about:

- How programs work with families impacted by using substances.
- Challenges working with families impacted by using substances.
- Program supports needed to work with families impacted by using substances.

Your feedback will help PATNC identify ways to improve PAT program services for families impacted by using substances. If you have any questions about this survey [please contact Danyel Moosmann](#).

### Parents as Teachers Core Courses

#### [Foundational Course](#)

May 12-May 23, 9:00 AM

Instructors: Terry Wertman, Bethany Smith

#### [Foundational and Model Implementation](#)

May 12-May 23, 9:00 AM

Instructors: Terry Wertman, Bethany Smith

## Upcoming Events

### Family Support Webinars

**Engaged: Building Intentional Partnerships with Families**

**May 14, 1:00 PM**



## Family Support Team

Family Support at Center for Schools and Communities provides training and technical assistance to Parents as Teachers providers, Children's Trust Fund grantees, and the Strengthening Families Leadership Team.

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[Pennsylvania Children's Trust Fund](#)

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## Safe Kids Corner — Fire Safety

Home fires can start and spread quickly, so just a little bit of planning can make a big difference. Make sure to create a home fire escape plan and practice it regularly with your family.

### Hard Facts About Fire Safety

- In 2017, 268 children died in home fires.
- Nearly 87 percent of all fire-related deaths are due to home fires, which spread rapidly and can leave families as little as two minutes to escape once an alarm sounds.
- Fires are not just a problem in the United States. In 2017, more than 27,000 children around the world died due to a fire or burn.
- Working smoke alarms reduce the chances of dying in a reported home fire by 50 percent.

### Top Tips for Fire Safety

- 1. Check smoke alarms.** Make sure there is a working smoke alarm on every level of your home, inside bedrooms and near sleeping areas. Test smoke alarms every month and replace them every 10 years or when the battery is low.
- 2. Create and practice a fire escape plan.** Create a [home fire escape plan](#) with two ways out of every room. Choose a place to meet outside that is a safe distance away from your home.
- 3. Practice a home fire drill at least twice a year.** Practice a home fire drill with your family during the day and at night. Practice escaping in under two minutes. Sometimes that is all the time you will have to get out of the house safely.
- 4. If there is a fire, leave home immediately.** If there is a lot of smoke, get low and crawl out of the house as quickly as possible. Call 911 after you are a safe distance away from your home.

### Learn More

[Learn more fire safety tips.](#) You can also learn more about [preventing burns and scalds](#), [carbon monoxide poisoning](#) and [how to be safe around fireworks](#).

Source: [Safekids.org](http://Safekids.org)