

IGNITING CONNECTIONS SYMPOSIUM

2025 PROGRAM | SEPTEMBER 26, 2025



INTRODUCTION

Since 2021, the Virginia Tech Early Childhood Education Initiatives (ECEI) has proudly continued the legacy begun by the Alliance for Better Childcare Strategies to offer a day of professional development for early childhood educators in the New River Valley.

Like stars in a constellation, **each of you shines with brilliance, and together form a network that guides the learning and development of children throughout the New River Valley.** Individually powerful and collectively extraordinary, your shared strength and commitment make early care and education not only possible, but truly exceptional.

This year, as ECEI at Virginia Tech moves into its 5th year, we celebrate not only continued growth and collaboration, but also a shared mission. Early education and care professionals across our region are united in their dedication to providing compassionate, responsive care and education to our youngest learners. ECEI is honored to be part of this constellation of care, supporting the incredible and valuable work you do every day.

As we gather today, I'm reminded of a quote from Frances Clark:

"There would not be a sky full of stars if we were meant to wish on the same one."

Each of you brings your own light, perspective, and voice to this work. It is this diversity of skills and experiences that makes the early care and education community of the NRV so powerful.

To our outstanding planning team and the organizations you represent, thank you for helping make this day possible. To the educators, advocates, and leaders here today, thank you for your work and continued commitment to excellence.

May today spark fresh inspiration, meaningful connections, and renewed energy, so that together, we continue to shine brightly and stay true to our North Star: **ensuring that all children in the NRV have access to quality early care and education.**

With deep appreciation for your time, talent, and unwavering light,

KIM THOMASON
Early Childhood
Education Initiatives
Program Manager





SCHEDULE

7:45 AM – 8:30 AM: Registration, Light Breakfast and Resource Tables

8:30 AM – 8:40 AM: Welcome Remarks

8:40 AM – 9:40 AM: Keynote | Latham BC

5 Things You Need to Know About Kids

Jim Harris, MSW, Ed.D.

9:40 AM – 9:55 AM: Transition – Resource Tables

9:55 AM – 10:55 AM: Workshop I | Second Floor Breakout Rooms: Smithfield, Duck Pond, and Drillfield

Little Learners, Big Behaviors: What to Do and Why it Matters

Whitney Idol, Ph.D.

Leading with Hope & Optimism in Challenging Situations

Jim Harris, MSW, Ed.D.

Little Sprouts at Work: Growing Social-Emotional Skills in Infants and Toddlers

Margo Vaughan & Kathleen Wright

10:55 AM – 11:10 AM: Transition – Resource Tables

11:10 AM – 12:10 PM: Workshop II | Second Floor Breakout Rooms: Smithfield, Duck Pond, and Drillfield

Embracing the “Extra”: Supporting Young Children with Intense Learning Profiles

Margo Vaughan & Kathleen Wright

From Concern to Confidence: Navigating Common Childhood Illnesses Together

Sofia Abraham-Hardee, DO/PhD, FACOP, FAAP, CS, Yash Desai, Brielle Hanratty, Caitlin Weaver

Let Your Curriculum Be Your Guide

Marjorie Quesenberry

12:15 PM – 1:30 PM: 2025 Early Childhood Champion Awards Luncheon

1:30 PM – 1:45 PM: Transition – Resource Tables

1:45 PM – 2:45 PM: Workshop III | Latham BC

Make and Take: Little Blue Truck Makes a Friend

Margo Vaughan & Kathleen Wright

2:45 PM – 2:50 PM: Closing Remarks

2:50 PM – 3:00 PM: Evaluation, Certificates, and Resource Tables

WORKSHOPS

Keynote

Recommended for: All, **Preschool Educators, Directors, Infant & Toddler (ages birth-3)**

5 Things You Need to Know About Kids

Jim Harris, MSW, Ed.D. | Latham BC

In this keynote, you will laugh and learn while reviewing some of the children's most important developmental principles. You will hear about some of the most common misconceptions about children and discuss how they affect our ability to intervene effectively. Specific attention to children's core developmental needs and how they relate to challenging behavior will be covered. Together, we will also explore how to approach challenging behavior with children strategically from an instructional perspective.

Workshop I – Choose one session

Little Learners, Big Behaviors: What to Do and Why it Matters

Whitney Idol, Ph.D. | Smithfield

In this workshop you will explore the “why” behind common behaviors in early childhood settings and gain effective, developmentally appropriate strategies for guiding children with empathy and confidence. You will learn about proactive approaches to support self-regulation, reduce challenging behaviors, and foster a classroom culture rooted in respect, safety, and connection. You will leave with research-informed tools, fresh perspectives, and a renewed sense of purpose in shaping young children's social-emotional development.

Leading with Hope & Optimism in Challenging Situations

Jim Harris, MSW, Ed.D. | Duck Pond

It is easy to lead and motivate when things are going well, but the true measure of leadership is what you can do during challenging times. There is no shortage of challenging situations in our area! In this workshop, you will learn how your beliefs and intentional behaviors help create hope and optimism in challenging times. This is not a “rah-rah” motivational talk — this is real information for real, challenging times.

Little Sprouts at Work: Growing Social-Emotional Skills in Infants and Toddlers

Margo Vaughan & Kathleen Wright | Drillfield

Just like plants need sunlight, water, and nurturing care, infants and toddlers need emotional support to grow into socially connected, self-aware little humans. Using the metaphor of a “Garden of Feelings,” participants will learn how to support emotional development through everyday moments—like diaper changes, mealtime, and drop-off transitions. In this garden-themed workshop, participants will dig into age-appropriate strategies, based on an evidence-based model, to help little ones recognize feelings, build secure relationships, and manage emotions.

WORKSHOPS

Recommended for: All, **Preschool Educators,**
Directors, Infant & Toddler (ages birth-3)

Workshop II – Choose one session

Embracing the “Extra”: Supporting Young Children with Intense Learning Profiles

Margo Vaughan & Kathleen Wright | Smithfield

Early childhood classrooms are increasingly diverse—not only in language and background, but in learning and behavior. Among this diversity are children who exhibit heightened curiosity, emotional intensity, high energy, deep sensitivity, or complex thinking. Without appropriate support, these children are at risk of being misunderstood, mislabeled, or excluded. Participants of this workshop will leave with an actionable toolkit for implementing proactive practices that balance structure and flexibility and help create an engaging classroom where all young children can learn and thrive.

From Concern to Confidence: Navigating Common Childhood Illnesses Together

Sofia Abraham-Hardee, DO/PhD, FACOP, FAAP, CS, Yash Desai,

Brielle Hanratty, Caitlin Weaver | Duck Pond

Caring for children means responding to unexpected health concerns in real time, especially when it comes to fevers, coughs, and the decisions that have to be made at many levels. In this workshop, we'll explore some of the most common and confusing health issues early childhood educators face, using practical examples, interactive discussion, and real-world scenarios. Participants will rotate through three stations designed to prompt conversation, dispel myths, and spark new ideas for navigating health-related decisions in childcare settings.

Let Your Curriculum Be Your Guide

Marjorie Quesenberry | Drillfield

Using a curriculum in your classroom should be more reliable than wishing on a star. Engaging infants and toddlers can be quite the task when you are also trying to accomplish day-to-day activities. This workshop will have be part of discussions on curriculum, big-picture ideas, and the cycle of inquiry in the context of infant and toddler classrooms. Participants will learn how to use routines and daily activities to teach and engage children in developmentally appropriate ways. Whether you are familiar with how to use the curriculum or are just starting off, we will dive deeper together.

Workshop III

Make and Take: Little Blue Truck Makes a Friend

Margo Vaughan & Kathleen Wright | Latham BC

Join us for a "Make and Take" activity where we will revamp a children's book and turn it into an engaging learning tool that can be used in classroom activities. Participants will take a children's book and create an interactive version that will facilitate deeper engagement for children, promoting better learning outcomes in areas like literacy and emotional development. This hands-on activity aims to encourage creativity, literacy, and playful learning.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER



Jim Harris, MSW, Ed.D.

Owner of Opportunities Consulting Services,
Director of Marshall University's Interdisciplinary Behavioral Health Center,
Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Work

Dr. Jim Harris has had several roles in health and human services as an early interventionist, parent educator, educational consultant, university instructor, and behavioral health therapist. He has presented at various conferences from the local to the international level on behavioral intervention, parenting, positive behavior support, trauma-informed practices, organizational change, and more. Dr. Harris has also worked with multiple public and private entities, including the Fred Rogers Company, the United States Department of Education, and the United States Department of Justice. He uses his practice approach to complex topics to help people better understand themselves and the people they support in their lives.

WORKSHOP SPEAKERS



SOFIA

ABRAHAM-HARDEE

Associate Dean for Clinical
Affairs and Associate Professor
for Pediatrics, Edward Via
College of Osteopathic Medicine
– Virginia (VCOM-VA)

Background:

- Ph.D. in international health education - Virginia Tech
- Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DO) - Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine
- Pediatric internship and residency - Geisinger Medical Center
- Board-certified pediatrician

Professional Focus and Expertise:

- Faculty lead for a regional initiative providing educator-focused health education through collaborative coffee chats discussing topics like managing common childhood illnesses
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YASH DESAI

OMS III Student at the Edward
Via College of Osteopathic
Medicine – Virginia (VCOM-VA)

Background:

- Fourth-year medical student - Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine
- Works with Dr. Sofia Abraham-Hardee and Dr. Harsha Bhagtani, discipline chair and associate professor for pediatrics

Professional Focus and Expertise:

- Has lead the VCOM Coffee Chats for two years, connecting educators and medical professionals to discuss real-world pediatric health topics in a supportive setting
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BRIELLE HANRATTY

OSM II Student at the Edward
Via College of Osteopathic
Medicine - Virginia (VCOM-VA)

Background:

- Second-year medical student - Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine
- Works with Dr. Sofia Abraham-Hardee and Dr. Harsha Bhagtani, discipline chair and associate professor for pediatrics

Professional Focus and Expertise:

- New addition to the VCOM Coffee Chats team, looking forward to continue the initiative as it progresses over time

WORKSHOP SPEAKERS



WHITNEY IDOL

Associate Professor,
Early Childhood Special
Education, Radford
University

Background:

- Experience as a special education teacher, behavioral consultant, and crisis intervention specialist/trainer
- Active member of several national special education organizations and has presented at their conferences, including:
 - Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP, U.S. Department of Education)
 - Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)

Professional Focus and Expertise:

- Research focus in crisis interventions, behavioral intervention and teacher preparation practices
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**MARJORIE
QUESEBERRY**

Director, Rainbow Riders
Childcare Center SMLC

Background:

- Associates in Applied Science in Human Services - New River Community College
- Associates in Early Childhood Education Specialization - New River Community College
- Certificates in Early Child Development and Child Development, Infant and Toddler
- 16 years of experience working in various center classrooms

Professional Focus and Expertise:

- Focus on expanding quality early education access in Montgomery County through Early Head Start partnership
 - Presenter at NAEYC and VAAEYC conferences
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MARGO VAUGHAN

Coordinator of Early
Childhood at the Training
and Technical Assistance
Center of Virginia Tech

Background:

- Bachelor of Arts in Special Education - Radford University
- Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction - Radford University

Professional Focus and Expertise:

- Focus on developmentally appropriate practices by supporting behavior and social-emotional growth, individualized instruction, and relationship-based learning

WORKSHOP SPEAKERS



CAITLIN WEAVER

OSM II Student at the
Edward Via College of
Osteopathic Medicine -
Virginia (VCOM-VA)

Background:

- Second-year medical student - Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine
- Works with Dr. Sofia Abraham-Hardee and Dr. Harsha Bhagtani, discipline chair and associate professor for pediatrics

Professional Focus and Expertise:

- New addition to the VCOM Coffee chat team excited to continue connecting educators and medical professionals to discuss pediatric health topics
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KATHLEEN WRIGHT

Coordinator of Early
Childhood at the Training
and Technical Assistance
Center of Virginia Tech

Background:

- Master of Science in Communication Sciences and Disorders - Radford University
- Master of Science in Educational Leadership - Radford University
- Certificate in Autism Studies - Radford University
- ASHA-certified Speech Language Pathologist, with 25 years of experience in Virginia public schools

Professional Focus and Expertise:

- Supports teams in creating inclusive classrooms with a focus on language, early literacy, and social-emotional development

EARLY CHILDHOOD CHAMPION AWARDS



The Annual Early Childhood Champion Awards is sponsored by the Community Foundation of the New River Valley's First Steps Initiative.

These awards recognize and celebrate amazing early educators, child development specialists, family service providers, librarians, leaders, advocates, and organizations who have positively impacted the lives of the NRV's children.

First Steps selects five award recipients overall, including three honorees, one runner-up, and one early childhood champion of the year. Each receives a cash prize made possible by the Community Foundation of the New River Valley.

Past Champions

2024



**SETH ZAKI
& CONNOR FARRELL**
YMCA at Virginia Tech
Blacksburg

2023



ANGIE MUNCY
Milestones Childcare
Floyd

2022



**SHANNON
MARSHALL MURY**
Virginia Tech Child
Development
Center for Learning
& Research

2021



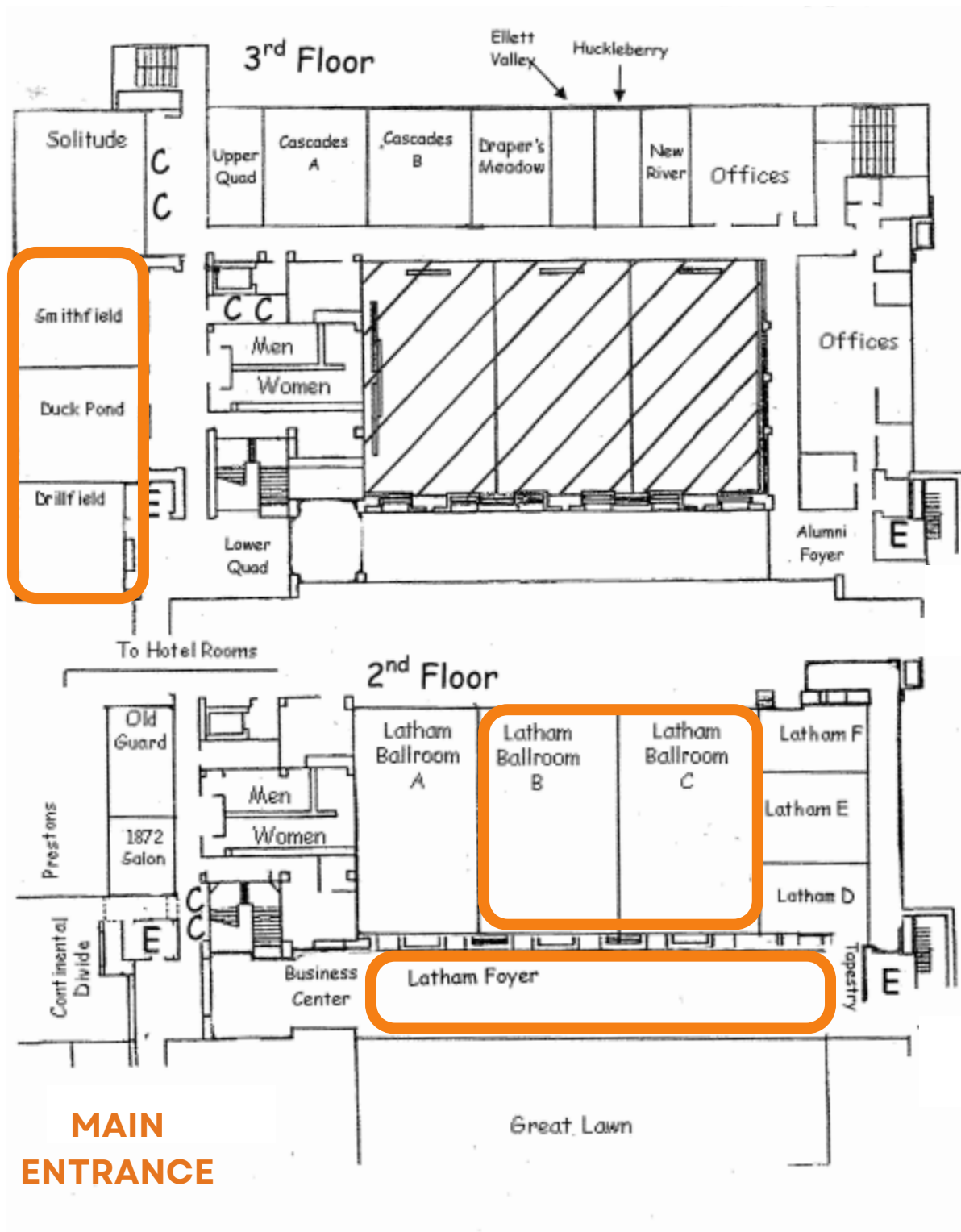
**LESLIE BLEVINS
GRAHAM**
Imagination Station
Pearisburg

"I am proud of the work we do as early childhood educators and hope to inspire future educators to enter this very important field. The work we do lays the foundation for how a child learns throughout their lives." -2022 Champion, Shannon Marshall Mury



The
**COMMUNITY
FOUNDATION**
of the New River Valley

FLOOR PLAN OF THE INN





THANK YOU

TO OUR RESOURCE TABLE SPONSORS:

Child Care Aware of VA

CCA of VA is dedicated to enhancing and supporting the child care workforce, it provides child care programs with training and technical assistance services, including free classes for all providers to meet licensing requirements. For more information, visit <https://vachildcare.com/providers/>

EO

EO's mission is to research, pilot, and scale innovative solutions so that people and communities can thrive. For more information, visit <https://www.eoco.org/our-work/early-childhood-care-education>

Montgomery-Floyd Regional Library

The MFRL serves the people of Montgomery and Floyd counties providing high-quality services, wireless and computer access, programs, and online resources such as ebooks, audiobooks, music, movies, both for educators and students. For more information, visit <https://www.mfrl.org/>

New River Community College

NRCC's programs in Early Childhood Development are designed to prepare highly-skilled graduates for employment in a variety of early childhood settings, and to update and enrich the capacities of those already employed in the child development field. For more information, visit <https://www.nr.edu/ecd>

NRV CARES

NRV CARES aims to educate the community about the existence of child abuse and its traumatic effects, as well as support local children and families. For more information visit <https://www.nrvcares.org/community-education>

NRV Chapter of the Virginia Association for Education of Young Children

VAAEYC serves Virginia early educators with local public policy support, accreditation support, professional development, and connections. For more information, visit <https://vaaeyc.org/home/local-chapters/>

Radford University

Radford University's School of Teacher Education and Leadership prepares future educators to support diverse learners from early childhood through secondary education. For more information, visit <https://www.radford.edu/education-human-development>

The Community Foundation of the NRV - First Steps

Established in 2016, First Steps is a network of agencies and individuals working to support young children and families in the New River Valley. For more information, visit <https://cfnr.org/first-steps/>

