FAMILY & GROUP CHILD CARE CONFERENCE 2025

EMPOWERMENT-COMMUNITY-CONNECTION

Focus Groups Report

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SIGNAL CENTERS

OchsCenter

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INTRODUCTION

Under a contract with Signal Centers, Inc., the Ochs Center evaluates a variety of training programs offered through the Tennessee Child Care Resource and Referral Network (CCR&R). This report covers the findings from two focus groups conducted at the Family & Group Child Care Conference 2025, held in Brentwood Tennessee on May 30 and 31, 2025. The content of the focus groups covered questions about the quality, content, and delivery of training received by early childhood education professionals who provide care for children in their homes or group settings.

METHODOLOGY

Staff organizing the conference arranged time, meeting space, and refreshments for two scheduled focus groups. Potential participants were recruited through a link emailed to all professionals registered for the conference. The first 20 conference attendees who responded to the invitation were invited to participate in one of the two sessions; however, a total of 28 individuals ultimately attended the focus groups. Each participant received a $75 gift card as a token of appreciation for their time.

The sessions were facilitated by an experienced moderator and assistant moderator from the Ochs Center. Each focus group lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Participants were informed that the sessions would be recorded, but that their names would not be used in any reporting of the findings. Both groups reflected a strong distribution of participants in terms of years of experience, geographic location within the state, race, and gender.

FINDINGS

WHAT MAKES TRAINING ENGAGING?

The facilitator opened each session by asking participants to describe what makes training engaging. A range of responses emerged across both focus groups. Some participants emphasized the importance of energy and enthusiasm in delivery, while others noted they appreciated a balance between whole-group discussions and smaller breakout sessions. Many participants from both groups cited a recent Emergency Preparedness Training as a particularly engaging example. They explained that the training was effective because it required them to actively participate in the same activities that they would later need to teach children in the event of an emergency.

> *"As an example, we just recently attended the…Health and Safety summit in Memphis. I liked the way the presentation was…even though it was the same information, it was the way it was presented because we talk about EPP all the time.* ***All the time****. But the way they gave it to us, it made me go back and think of some things that we can edit or change. But that's the point of us going to the summits and the trainings. So even though it is repetitive information, but we may miss something. But like you just said, it go clean over your head because it's like blah blah blah blah blah. But the way that this summit was presented, it was so interactive, you couldn't do nothing. But here…if you didn't learn something from that, something was wrong with you. <laugh>."*[1]

Several participants noted that interacting with other providers during training made training much more engaging.

> *"Work with people who are experiencing the same things that you are experiencing and sometimes we all doing the same thing, but we may do it differently. So, you might get an idea. So…the overall thing is support."*

One participant indicated what made training **uninteresting,** and members of the group agreed.

> *"What makes it uninteresting is when they just stand there and just read verbatim what's on their paper, you have no, hardly no, interaction. They're just, it kind of feels like they're not sure what they're speaking about. So, they have to read the lines verbatim. So, if* ***you*** *fully don't understand it, how do you expect* ***me*** *to fully incorporate what you're speaking on?"*

Both focus groups discussed their experiences using the ProSolutions platform for training. While participants generally did not find the platform engaging, they acknowledged its convenience. It is especially useful when someone needs to complete an annual training requirement, and no relevant sessions are available on the CCR&R calendar at the needed time to meet the state's requirements. Another participant explained that

[1] Note: The quotes in this report are generally included verbatim from a transcript. Deletions and inclusions are marked with ellipses and brackets and are used for clarity only and not to alter the core meaning.

> *"...when you have a new hire, it's not in a cycle to come around again for three, four months for in person [training]. So, you need to get that person training on that topic."*

Several participants indicated that they knew of licensed providers who were paying to use ProSolutions for training and were not aware that CCR&R provided training at no charge.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE TRAINING

As expected, participants offered recommendations for improving training based on their views of what makes training engaging. They suggested incorporating more teacher modeling, interactive activities, and brain breaks into training sessions. In addition, they recommended that CCR&R offer beginning-, intermediate-, advanced-, and refresher-level sessions on specific topics to better meet the needs of professionals seeking instruction at different levels.

> *"Yes. So, everyone is coming from different backgrounds. So, everyone is not new to childcare. Everyone's not new to education. I feel like the training should be tailored to, based off the person who needs the experience. So, for instance, I was already a teacher. I don't need some of those trainings, but I have to retake those trainings. I've already had the education in this field. So, for me to take something like classroom management, I already have that. So, at that point it just becomes, um, redundant. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. Because I know it already. So now I'm just sitting there, I'm not engaged and I'm waiting to get to the end. Versus you giving me something that can, uh, a little rigorous, something that I can use to go under my belt. Something else that I can know like this right here or coming here I can learn something new. I get to select which, um, session I want to go to, like water play. Okay. Well, yeah, there's something good for me, but I don't need to go and sit in, um, something like classroom management, you know, or things like that. So, I think like it needs to be tailored to, based off your experience in education."*

Three participants in one of the focus group sessions were unaware of the New Educator Academy and one suggested:

> *"I think it would be better if they have like a, I know it would probably take a lot, and I don't know if it would ever happen, but having like an in-person*

> *new hire session, um, for like a day or a weekend or something, um, I think that would help tremendously."*

The moderator explained how they could connect with their coach to learn more about the New Educator Academy. Another participant offered to serve as an informal mentor and exchanged contact information.

Several participants shared suggestions related to communication between CCR&R and family and group home providers. Some expressed concern that they did not receive information about all the training opportunities offered by CCR&R, while others felt overwhelmed by the volume of email messages they received. One new provider recommended that CCR&R include information about how to find training opportunities as part of the orientation for new providers. Many participants also requested a reduction in the number of training evaluation forms they are asked to complete.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE COACHING

Participants emphasized the importance of having a positive relationship with their coach. They particularly valued receiving immediate, on-the-spot feedback. Most reported having regular contact with their coach, though a few noted less frequent communication. Participants also appreciated that coaches schedule visits in advance and arrive, reliably, at the agreed-upon time.

> *"So, I like my coach always ask me questions like, do you remember this training? Tell me what did you like about it or what you didn't like about it. What you retain and what you would like to see? So yeah, some of 'em keep you on your toes. Accountability."*

> *"They've always asked my opinion, and they take that into consideration."*

> *"I like the relationship where they kinda, you have a ground where you meet where I'm at, where they're at, where I want to go, and they, then we develop a plan. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. Everybody's not in the same box."*

Participants agreed that all coaches should ensure providers receive consistent and accurate information. Several participants expressed that they missed the former mentoring program, noting that it helped them stay better informed and feel more connected to the broader support system.

> *"Like the CCC&R website? Yes. We just found out about that. Yeah. We just found out about that because we didn't even know how to [find] classes or anything. There's a lot of stuff that we heard from the few classes that we went to...People, how come we didn't [know about this], we weren't pulled up."*

Participants expressed frustration when the information provided by CCR&R coaches about rules did not align with guidance from DHS licensing staff. They recommended that the two groups collaborate more closely to ensure consistent messaging and guarantee a shared understanding of the regulations.

OTHER TRAINING TOPICS

Respondents suggested a range of training topics that they felt would be helpful for future training sessions or conferences.

- ✓ More Health and Safety
- ✓ Disaster Preparedness
- ✓ Lesson Planning
- ✓ Documentation Management
- ✓ Technology
- ✓ Specialization on working with children with developmental delays/special needs

SPECIALIZATION TRAINING PROGRAMS

The focus group moderator asked whether participants had taken part in the specialty training programs offered by CCR&R. Providers who had been in business for several years reported participating in at least one of the programs, and several had completed more than one.

> *"I like participating in the specialization...the reason being is, I say, specialization is like a reset for me. Checkpoints, even though they give you the same information, you can tailor it depending on what group that you're working with. And it's also [an] opportunity for you to network with other providers and get new ideas. And it's just you looking at it through a new lens. And at the last specialization they had, they asked me to speak and I, they gave the example, even though you've been in business for a while, things upgrade...How when they first started you had the two little things and then they have the new version...even though it's the same thing, you're just revising it. And that's what I use specialization for share*

> *points. Okay. They let me reevaluate how I'm doing my lesson plans since this is the topic that we're doing. So, I encourage everybody to participate. It's good information."*

Participants who had attended multiple specialization programs noted that much of the content overlapped. While some felt that hearing the material more than once was helpful—allowing them to absorb new insights the second time around—others found the repetition less useful. There was general agreement, however, that they would be interested in additional training opportunities offered at a deeper or more advanced level. In answer to the question about attending a course that was a level higher one respondent answered:

> *"I mean, yeah. And the only reason I would say yes, I don't know if nobody else is because I think this is my third specialization. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. Fourth specialization. Like I explained to my coach this, this session, everything is repetitive to me. We've heard it every year. Like you may get something here or there that's different, but everything is the same thing. We keep hearing through each one. Right. Like infant May and Tolerance had some things that were strategically geared towards them, but then we still heard the same thing in preschool. Except for, you might have got things that was to them, but everything is the same. So, if you're saying level up, that's why I asked. What do you mean? Like, what is the difference gonna be? Well, that's true. Like I did Lena two, Lena two is the same thing as Lena one, to me it's no different. So why are we taking it if it's the same thing? Basically. That's why I was asking,"*

Another respondent finished her sentence:

> *"Especially if you've been in this business for years, you've already heard it over and over. So, leveling it up would be beneficial. I think that would help."*

There was a lengthy discussion about the relevance of some of the material shared in the administrator specialty training to family home providers. Several participants who had completed the training indicated that they felt the training was designed for center directors.

> *"I think if it could be more geared towards, um, family and group, I would've gained more insight because...there was a lot of things that just, I let just go over my head because it didn't have anything to do with me.*

Even though I was listening and following through and taking notes it, then I just left it. And on the other side of my page, I had the things that pertained to us. It's a lot on staff."

FEE BASED TRAINING

Several participants said that they paid for training from outside vendors when the CCR&R calendar doesn't fit their needs or there is a specialty content area of interest. A specific example was the need for CPR recertification. The recertification was needed by a specific deadline to meet licensing renewal. The CCR&R did not offer training in time to meet the deadline, so an outside vendor was used to provide training.

TRAINING DELIVERY

When asked about their preferred training delivery modality, one participant summarized the views of both groups: online training is acceptable for required refresher material, but all new content should be delivered in person. Several participants specifically emphasized that updates on DHS licensing changes should be conducted face-to-face rather than virtually.

Participants acknowledged the convenience of online training but noted that connectivity issues can hinder participation for some. There was a lively discussion about appropriate online behavior and etiquette. A consensus opinion was expressed that trainers should establish clear ground rules to ensure that the material is presented effectively and respectfully. Participants emphasized the importance of taking training seriously and maintaining a professional demeanor.

Opinions varied regarding the most convenient times for in-person sessions. Some preferred evening trainings to avoid closing their agencies early, while others wanted to preserve family time and therefore favored earlier sessions or Saturday trainings.

"I like in person better because you take more resources and like more stuff is taken back to the center."

"I'd rather in person, but maybe later times because like most of, for our, for our region, most of the time it's at six o'clock our class, but we don't close till six o'clock mm-hmm <affirmative>. So, it makes it hard for us to get to a class. So, like bump it to maybe seven."

> *"Really do not like the late trainings like six o'clock because I have three kids. So, once I get off at 5:30, I stay in another county. So, I have to drive there first. I pick the kids up from aftercare and I drive to another county. I gotta cook. I gotta make sure they do their homework, take baths, and the late trainings [are difficult]."*

THE CCR&R TRAINING CALENDAR

The older participants in the two groups prefer to receive the calendar via email as they once did. They have not gotten used to going to the website to check the calendar. If they could get used to using an interactive calendar, they would enjoy having filters that would allow them to choose by

- ✓ topic category,
- ✓ region,
- ✓ delivery mode,
- ✓ how often the training is required,
- ✓ level: basic, intermediate, advanced,
- ✓ Day of the week.

They suggested creating a training session on how to use the calendar.

ASSISTANT MODERATOR'S OBSERVATION

During the two focus groups, the assistant moderator observed supportive interactions between seasoned providers and newer providers who expressed questions that suggested they were facing challenges. She witnessed these professionals exchanging contact information, offering pats on the back, and sharing words of encouragement from the more experienced to the newcomers. She considered it heartwarming to witness these generous and uplifting exchanges.