

Family Encouragement Conference 2026

Schedule of Events

JUNE | 8:15^{AM}
27TH | 2:30^{PM}

Hosted at
Cedar Springs Presbyterian Church





Aloha!



Acceptance. Love. Ohana. Hope. Advocacy.

Today is a day for you — a chance to connect, relax, learn, and be encouraged.

We see you. We recognize the heart, strength, and dedication it takes to care for someone with special needs. This journey is not always easy, but you are not alone. We're here to cheer you on, walk alongside you, and celebrate the important work you do every day.

Take a deep breath. You're in a place where you're understood, supported, and valued.

The Power of Aloha: Finding the Hellos in the Goodbyes



Mary Donnet Johnson



Keynote Speaker:

Mary Donnet Johnson: Playwright, Public Speaker, Workshop Leader

We are excited to present Mary Donnet Johnson as our keynote speaker. A long-time friend, supporter, and member of the Knoxville disability community, Mary offers the perfect set up to a day full of insight, inspiration and nourishment of body and soul. With her signature sense of humor and relatable stories, Mary gently invites us to see the ways in which we can all embrace the hidden gifts that lie within even the most challenging situations.

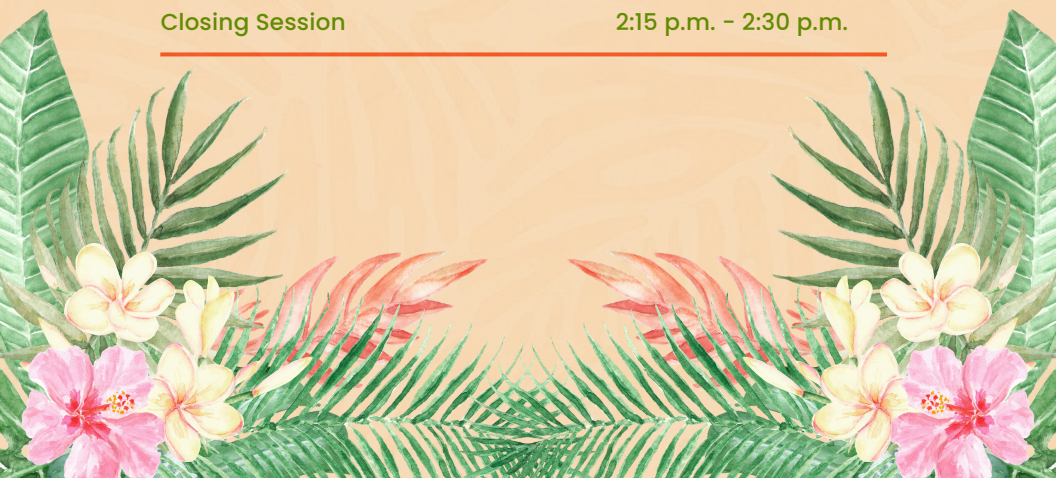
About The Keynote Speaker:

Mary Donnet Johnson grew up in Vermont, earned her BA from Sarah Lawrence College, worked as a professional actress, and now enjoys writing plays. She has been widely produced, frequently published, and recognized nationally with awards, commissions, and fellowships. Mary and her husband Rick have two adult children, Mary Margaret who lives and works in New York City, and Pace who has autism and lives and works in Knoxville supported by Sertoma and a large circle of devoted family and friends. Over the past 25 years Mary has published three books on autism and resiliency which are available by email from merrypacepress@mac.com. Please visit www.marydonnetjohnson.com for more information.

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

FAMILY ENCOURAGEMENT CONFERENCE

Registration and Exhibitor Fair	8:00 a.m. – 9:15 a.m.
Welcome & Keynote Address “The Power of Aloha”	9:15 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.
Session One- See Breakout Session Schedule	10:10 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.
Session Two- See Breakout Session Schedule	11:05 a.m. – 11:55 a.m.
Lunch Break	11:55 a.m. – 12:25 p.m.
Session Three- See Breakout Session Schedule	12:25 p.m. – 1:15 p.m.
Session Four- See Breakout Session Schedule	1:20 p.m. – 2:10 p.m.
Closing Session	2:15 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.



**Room
Location**

Session 1

10:10-11:00 am

Session 2

11:05-11:55 am

Session 3

12:25-1:15 pm

Session 4

1:20-2:10 pm

B234/36

**Coping as
a Parent**

Brett & Katie
Gleason

**Navigating
Relationships
& Building
Support**

Brett & Katie
Gleason

**Theology of
Disability**

Jim Coffield

**Understanding
The Grieving
Process**
Jim Coffield

B242

**Sensory
Strategies For
Community
Outings**

Tiffani Dixon

**Behavioral
Triggers &
Strategies**

Tyson Vesser,
Aubrey Ridenour,
&
Ayssa Sweet

**5 Practices
That Will
Make Any
Relationship
Better**

Marla DeLong

Resiliency

Lauren Johnson

B232

ECF Choices

Sonya Parker
&
Kristen
Calloway

**What's Next?
Transitions**

Penny Johnson

**Play With
Purpose**

Pete Capell &
Amanda Cox

**A Clear
Financial Plan
For Special
Needs Families**

Nelson Brittan
&
Shauna Collins

B237/39

**Advocacy:
The IEP and
Me**

Kim Kredich

**Sibling
Support**

Mary Kendall Akers

**Sibling
Support**

Mary Kendall Akers

**Supportive
Strategies For
Sensory
Challenges in
Daily Routines**

Becca Emblar &
Brooke Roelle

**Room
Location**

Break Rooms

Available during all
sessions

Descriptions

**Welcome
Center**

Rest & Renewal Room

Enter our quiet space complete with chocolate, massage chairs, cozy spots, aromatherapy, and relaxing music. Come relax, rest, and be refreshed.

137

Coffee & Conversation

Come connect with other families at our coffee and cookie bar. Sit and take a moment to meet someone new and be encouraged.

139

Massage Room

Sign up for a 10 minute specialized massage by licensed massage therapists.





Session One Descriptions



**Room
Location**

**Breakout Session
Title and Speaker**

Description

B234/36

**Coping as a
Parent**

Brett & Katie Gleason

Join us for this interactive section as we discuss self-care as caregivers. Finding practical ways to make sure we are pouring out from a full cup.

B242

**Sensory Strategies
For Community
Outings**

Tiffani Dixon

This presentation will share practical strategies for supporting children with sensory processing differences in public spaces. We will talk about ways to prepare ahead of time, help children feel more regulated during outings, and use simple tools and tips to make community experiences more successful for everyone

B232

ECF Choices

Sonya Parker & Kristen
Calloway

This session introduces Tennessee's Employment and Community First (ECF) CHOICES program for parents and caregivers of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Attendees will learn about eligibility, available services, and how the program supports independence, employment, and community involvement through a person-centered approach.

B237/39

**Advocacy: The
IEP and Me**

Kim Kredich

Kim's journey through the world of Special Education and how parents can prepare for their own odyssey!



Session Two Descriptions



**Room
Location**

**Breakout Session
Title and Speaker**

Description

B234/36

**Navigating
Relationships &
Building Support**
Brett & Katie Gleason

Not everyone understands life with disabilities. This session encourages you to invite your loved ones to walk along side of you in your journey.

B242

**Behavioral Triggers
& Strategies**
Tyson Vesser, Aubrey
Ridenour, & Alyssa Sweet

This presentation will highlight what behavioral triggers are, how to prevent them, and how to de-escalate them once they've happened.

B232

**What's Next?
Transitions**
Penny Johnson

Transitioning to adulthood can be both exciting and challenging, especially for youth with disabilities and their families. Effective transition planning helps reduce uncertainty and build a roadmap for future success. In this session, participants will explore key aspects of the transition process, including decision-making support options, conservatorship and other legal tools, education and employment planning, and available community services and supports.

B237/39

Sibling Support
Mary Kendall Akers

A story of growing up with a sister with a disability. Ideas of ways you can support your other kids on this parenting journey.



Session Three Descriptions



**Room
Location**

**Breakout Session
Title and Speaker**

Description

B234/36

**Theology of
Disability**

Jim Coffield

Very few things challenge our faith more than struggles, suffering and injustice. It is inevitable that in our life situations we will face all of these things.

B242

**5 Practices That Will
Make Any
Relationship Better**

Marla DeLong

An overview of 5 research and biblically based practices that are shown to improve relationships.

B232

Play With Purpose

Pete Capell &
Amanda Cox

In this presentation we will discuss the impact of play on a child's social development and communication skills as well as how to cultivate an environment in which all types of play are accessible to every child. We will be learning how to make inclusive play a possibility!

B237/39

Sibling Support

Mary Kendall Akers

A story of growing up with a sister with a disability. Ideas of ways you can support your other kids on this parenting journey.



Session Four Descriptions



**Room
Location**

**Breakout Session
Title and Speaker**

Description

B234/36

**Understanding The
Grieving Process**

Jim Coffield

"Last year our 37 year old son passed away. We had no idea how complicated the grieving process would be. In this short discussion we will explore some of the basic issues of grief for our children and our families."

B242

Resiliency

Lauren Johnson

This presentation explores resilience in families of children with special needs, focusing on practical strategies to support emotional well-being, strengthen family connections, and navigate challenges with hope and confidence. Topics include caregiver wellness, coping skills, support systems, and fostering resilience in children through a compassionate family-centered approach.

B232

**A Clear Financial Plan
For Special Needs
Families**

Nelson Brittan &
Shauna Collins

Join us for an interactive session on TennCare and Social Security benefits, conservatorships, Special Needs Trusts, community supports, and financial planning aimed at protecting and securing your child's future.

B237/39

**Supportive Strategies For
Sensory Challenges in
Daily Routines**

Becca Emblar &
Brooke Roelle

Join Brooke, a certified occupational therapist, and Becca, a speech-language pathologist, as they share practical, evidence-informed strategies to support sensory challenges in everyday life. Together, they will explore functional approaches that can be seamlessly integrated into daily routines, helping individuals build comfort, confidence, and independence across home, school, and community settings.

SPEAKERS BIOS

Mary Kendall Akers

Cedar Springs Presbyterian Church

Director of Special Needs Ministry

Mary Kendall Akers grew up in Nashville, TN and has a sister named Molly who is 19 months younger than her. Molly has Down syndrome and is a big part of her story and the reason she chose disability ministry as a career path. MK came to Knoxville to attend UTK and later went on staff with Young Life Capernaum for 8 years after college. YL Capernaum is a ministry to high schoolers with disabilities, and she learned a lot about supporting kids and families impacted by disability during this time. She now serves as the Director of Special Needs at Cedar Springs and has been a part of building the ministry there. She loves entering into the lives of kids and individuals with disabilities. There is so much joy and life in creating spaces of belonging at church for families to find a home here. Mary Kendall is married to Will and they have 3 girls, Margo (9), Evie (7) & Caroline (7)

Nelson Brittan

Stonebridge Advisors Inc.

Private Wealth Management Professional

No one ever told me how incredibly transformative it would be to be a parent of a special needs child. No one prepared me for the emotional trauma; no one steeled my nerves for the yelling, the throwing of the candle holders, the stomping, the scratching, or the soul crushing guilt that came afterwards when I realized I reacted all wrongly. No one ever showed me how to navigate the financial difficulties that came with it either--so I'm here to at least help with that part if I can.





SPEAKERS BIOS

Pete Capell

Power of Play

Owner of Power of Play & Chief Scientist at Muppet Labs

Australian by birth, American by chance, hopeful by choice. Pete's background in physical therapy and then specialization into the field of assistive technology has led him to here and now. Through his many years as a physical therapist and then an Assistive Technology Practitioner, Pete has become a firm believer in the "power of play" as a means to promote opportunities for meaningful inclusion. Just doing our part to try and make the world a better place for all to share.

Jim Coffield

Christ Covenant Church

Pastor & Psychologist

Jim Coffield has been a seminary professor for 20 years and a pastor for 10 years. He is the father of 37 year old Skylar Coffield.

Shauna Collins

Special Needs Planning Attorney,

Smoky Mtn. Legacy Partners, PLLC

Shauna Collins is an adoptive mother and special needs parent who attended law school to serve as Guardian ad Litem for children in foster care. After years in juvenile court, when her child with special needs turned 18 and required a conservatorship, Shauna recognized the need for detail-oriented special needs planning, especially for blended families like her own. She returned to school for a second law degree and now combines that legal education with the strengths-based approach of juvenile court social workers to help clients protect their children's futures



SPEAKERS BIOS

Marla DeLong

DeLong Counseling LLC

Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist

Marla is a licensed marriage and family therapist with 32 years of experience. She has been married to her husband, Keith for 32 years. She is a mother to three children and has four wonderful grandkids.

Tiffani Dixon

Emory Valley Center

Inclusion Specialist & Early Intervention Support

Tiffani Dixon holds a degree in Child Development and Early Childhood Education from the University of Tennessee and has spent more than 20 years working in the early childhood field. She currently serves as the Inclusion Specialist and Early Intervention Support for Emory Valley Center in Oak Ridge, TN. Throughout her career, she has worked as a teacher, childcare director, parent educator, and developmental therapist, always bringing compassion, experience, and a deep commitment to supporting children and families. Her work focuses on inclusion, mental health, behavior challenges, and helping infants and toddlers impacted by developmental delays and disabilities. As both a professional and a parent of a child with sensory processing disorder, Tiffani brings both expertise and personal understanding to her work. She is passionate about helping every child—and every family—feel supported, understood, and able to thrive.



SPEAKERS BIOS

Becca Emblar

Prisma Health- Blount Memorial Hospital Speech Language Pathologist

Becca is a Pediatric Speech Language Pathologist and Certified Lactation Specialist who has been employed with Blount Memorial for over 16 years. She is additionally the manager of the second pediatric outpatient facility- Peds West. Becca specializes in pediatric feeding/swallowing and oral motor delays/disorders. She has been trained in the Sequential Oral Sensory (SOS) approach, Beckman Oral Motor, SOFFI, QOM trained and has an additional certification as a lactation specialist. Becca has a passion for teaching and mentoring students and new SLPs in the area of feeding and swallowing. She is passionate about empowering parents to be successful during mealtimes. Becca loves spending time with her husband, 10 year old son, and two adopted dogs. Beautiful skies, bright colors, reading, iced coffees, Jesus, and organizing bring joy to her day!

Brett & Katie Gleason

Restoration Counseling Licensed Professional Counselor

Brett Gleason is a licensed professional counselor at Restoration Counseling Associates. He specializes in working with children who come from hard places and have experienced various types of trauma. He and his wife Katie have six children including a son with autism and a son with arthrogyrosis multiplex congenita.

SPEAKERS BIOS

Lauren Johnson

Knoxville Behavioral & Mental Health Services CPNP, PMHS

Lauren is a board-certified Pediatric Nurse Practitioner and Pediatric Mental Health Specialist with over 10 years of experience caring for children with developmental and behavioral concerns. She earned her undergraduate degree from the University of Tennessee and her master's degree from Vanderbilt University School of Nursing. Her approach is rooted in family-center care—believing the best outcomes happen when families feel heard, supported, and empowered every step of the way. She takes time to truly listen, understand each child's unique strengths and challenges, and partner with families to create thoughtful, individualized care plans. Care begins with a comprehensive consultation visit focused on understanding your child's needs, establishing diagnoses when appropriate, and developing an individualized treatment plan. Lauren provides evaluation and ongoing care for a range of developmental, behavioral, and mental health concerns including Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Anxiety, Depression, Mood Concerns, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Tic Disorders and Tourette's Syndrome, Eating Disorders, Sleep Disturbances, and Developmental Delays. Follow up visits are scheduled as needed and may include ongoing support and medication management. Outside of work, Lauren is a wife and mom of three. You'll often find their family cheering on the Vols or spending time with friends and family.





SPEAKERS BIOS

Alyssa Sweet

M.S., OTR/L, Occupational Therapist

The TEACH Group

Alyssa Sweet, MS, OTR/L, is a pediatric occupational therapist with The TEACH Group, where she has been serving children and families since 2021. She earned her Master of Science in Occupational Therapy from Brenau University. Alyssa's clinical experience includes school-based occupational therapy services across elementary, middle, and high school settings, as well as working with adults in a skilled nursing facility. She holds certifications in Therapeutic Listening and Interactive Metronome and is an active member of the Tennessee Occupational Therapy Association (TNOTA) and the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). Alyssa is passionate about supporting children and families through practical, relationship-centered approaches that promote participation, development, and success in everyday life.

Sonya Parker

Wellpoint

QM Member Liaison, SR

Sonya Parker is a member advocate with Wellpoint Tennessee's ECF CHOICES program, dedicated to helping individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities live more independent, meaningful lives. She has 26 years of experience in public education as a teacher and Reading Specialist, and has presented at state and national conferences. Sonya continues to advocate for individuals and families, collaborating with organizations like The Arc of Tennessee, TN Center for Decision-Making Support, and the Council on Developmental Disabilities to promote inclusion and empowerment.

SPEAKERS BIOS



Kim Kredich

Former Volunteer Advocate for Students With Disabilities

Kim Kredich is the mother of three sons, one of whom was diagnosed with autism at 2 and-a-half years old in 2001. Kim has served as a volunteer advocate for hundreds of students with disabilities in East Tennessee since moving to Knoxville in 2005, working with families to help their children gain rightful, supported inclusion in their zoned schools and the general education environment to the maximum extent possible through the IEP process. With degrees in Music from Duke University and New England Conservatory, Kim created the eXceptional Orchestra (XO) inclusive children's arts program as her 2003-2004 Virginia Partners in Policymaking advocacy program project, and expanded this inclusive arts project in Knoxville from 2008-2010. Since 2015, Kim has worked closely with various attorneys in Tennessee to promote systemic change and awareness of the rights of people with disabilities. By age 23, her son, Ben had achieved the three tenets of IDEA: further education (having graduated from four years of the University of Tennessee FUTURE program), employment (as a professional pianist at assisted living centers), and independent living (with minimal supports and use of public transportation). Kim and her husband, Matt, are committed to spreading the message of successes like Ben's to benefit their community and beyond.



SPEAKERS BIOS

Aubrey Ridenour

The Little Learning Lab Lead Teacher

Aubrey Ridenour has worked in Early Childhood education for around eleven years. She attended Tennessee Tech University and obtained her K-5 degree, but found herself drawn towards Early Childhood Education. She has four of her own children ages 5, 6, 8 and 11. Two of her children are neurodivergent which has both deepened her understanding and fueled her passion for connecting and providing quality care for children who need extra support. Aubrey believes that education is best built on connection, mutual trust, and meeting children where they are instead of where we think they should be.

Tyson Vesser

The Little Learning Lab Lead Preschool Teacher

Tyson Vesser has worked in early childhood education for roughly five years. She earned her bachelor's degree in early childhood education and has experience supporting young children's social-emotional development and behavior in classroom settings. Tyson currently teaches preschool children ages 3-4. She is passionate about creating positive, supportive environments that help children build strong social emotional connections.

SPEAKERS BIOS

Kristen Calloway

BlueCare TN

ECF CHOICES Member Advocate

Kristen Calloway is a BlueCare TN Member Advocate who works with individuals in the Employment and Community First CHOICES program assisting them to be more independent, become more involved in their communities and learn about and gain competitive employment. Kristen is part of the The Learning Community for Person Centered Practices as a Person-Centered Thinking Trainer. Kristen is also a certified Personal Outcomes Measures interviewer with the Council on Quality and Leadership. Before her current role as a Member Advocate, Kristen worked for 25 years supporting children and adults. In her various roles she has worked in early intervention with first time-at-risk mothers, foster children and families, as well as adults with a diagnosis of I/DD. She has collaborated with state organizations to learn, teach and implement person centered practices and quality measures that support individuals to have positive control over the life that they desire

Brooke Roelle

Prisma Health-Blount Memorial Pediatrics

MSOT, OTR/L

Brooke Roell is an occupational therapist employed through Blount Memorial Hospital. Brooke has practiced in outpatient pediatrics for more than 20 years, first as a COTA/L and then an OTR/L. She has a strong interest in sensory processing disorder and early intervention. Brooke graduated from Belmont University in Nashville with a master's degree in 2008. She lives with her husband and 2 sons in Maryville, TN.





SPEAKERS BIOS

Amanda Cox

**University of Tennessee Pediatric Language Clinic
Speech Language Pathologist**

Amanda Cox has a background of working in pediatric private practice and school-based services, with a focus on serving autistic individuals and children with genetic and neurogenic diagnoses. She joined the Pediatric Language Clinic as a clinical faculty member in 2025. Ms. Cox provides clinical supervision to graduate students through a center-based program for families of children in Tennessee Early Intervention System (TEIS) with early indicators for autism or an autism diagnosis. Her interests include Augmentative & Alternative Communication (AAC), Autism, and Early Intervention

Penny Johnson

**The ARC TN/TN Center for Decision Making Support
Program Director**

Penny Johnson is the Program Director for the Tennessee Center for Decision-Making Support at The Arc Tennessee, where she developed and manages the statewide virtual resource center. Since joining The Arc Tennessee in 2020, she has helped individuals with disabilities, families, and professionals navigate decision-making support and future planning options. Previously, Penny served as a Pre-Employment Transition Services Coordinator for youth with disabilities. With more than 20 years of experience across multiple social service systems, she is dedicated to empowering individuals with disabilities to maximize their independence, self-determination, and opportunities for success.

**NEED A BREAK?
WANT TO CONNECT?
STOP BY OUR "COFFEE
AND CONVERSATION"
ROOM IN 137 OR DROP
IN OUR "REST AND
RENEWAL AREA" IN
THE WELCOME CENTER
ANYTIME THROUGHOUT
THE DAY!**

**ALSO, WE HOPE YOU
ENJOY OUR "STRONGER
TOGETHER" LUNCH AND
LEARN BETWEEN
SESSIONS 2 AND 3**



Exhibitors

Smoky Mountain Legacy Partners, PLLC

ABA Centers of Tennessee

The Koinonia Foundation

Luke 14 Ministries and The Hazelnut Movement

Our Place Art

**Down Syndrome Awareness Group of East
Tennessee**

Sertoma

JoyFull Fitness

Lighthouse Kids Centers for Autism

The Church at Sterchi Hills

Beacon Academy



Exhibitors

Grace Baptist Church - Grace Abilities

Fountain City Church

**Uniquely Growing in Christ Ministry of Central
Baptist Bearden**

Epilepsy Foundation of East TN

ABA Interventions

GiGi's Playhouse Knoxville

Special Needs at Sevier Heights

**Patrica Neal Outpatient Center Seating & Mobility
Clinic**

Cedar Springs Presbyterian Church

Power of Play

ECF Choices

Prisma Health Pediatric Rehab

Joni and Friends

Friends of Tennessee's Babies With Special Needs

Arts For All

Door Prizes

**REGISTER IN THE
WELCOME HALL TO WIN
A DOOR PRIZE! THE
NAMES OF WINNERS
WILL BE DISPLAYED ON
THE SANCTUARY
SCREEN DURING THE
CLOSING SESSION.
PRIZES MAY BE PICKED
UP IN THE WELCOME
HALL!**





Special Thanks

**We wish to thank the following
for making this day possible:**

OUR AMAZING VOLUNTEERS

Concord- Farragut Sertoma Club

John and Sherri Murphy

CSPC Facilities Team

CSPC Sound Technicians

Jason's Deli

FEC Committee

Random Acts Of Flowers

Raising Cane's

Andy's Custard

Home Depot

Door Prize donors



To See Highlights from Today's Event

AND KEEP UP WITH THE MANY HAPPENINGS
AT FOTB

SCAN OUR QR CODES TO
FOLLOW US ON OUR
SOCIALS



FACEBOOK



INSTAGRAM



"BECAUSE BABIES CAN'T WAIT"

In tribute to Karen Hollingsworth

Encouragement is defined as the act of giving someone support, confidence, and hope which embodies what Karen Hollingsworth's life was all about. She was an amazing encourager, artist, counselor, mom, wife and friend, and the inspiration for the creation of the Family Encouragement Conference. Thank you for joining us for our 5th Annual Family Encouragement Conference.

We hope to see you next year!



