

# Tips & Insights on Working with Families to Support Inclusive Learning



The Arc of King County promotes and protects the rights of people with intellectual or other developmental disabilities (IDD) so we can all live, learn, work and play in the community.

We are driven by the fundamental belief that everyone deserves to write their own life story. That means:

- Real access to education
- Meaningful employment
- Quality healthcare
- Genuine community connections

We are one of a network of Arcs across Washington and the United States. At our chapter:

- We offer information and support and help people navigate complex systems
- We help people understand disability, and IDD specifically
- We work to change and improve policy and funding for people with disabilities
- We run a supported living program for adults with IDD
- We help (or refer!) on any topic. The most common are special education services, housing and homelessness prevention, and Medicaid long-term supports.

We produced this guide as part of the state's Inclusionary Practices Technical Assistance Network. It accompanies a series of workshops we produced for educators and families, including Understanding Disability, Insights on Supporting Families, and A Parent's Guide to Inclusive Learning.

To inform our guides, we surveyed a sampling of diverse families from across the state. Some of their voices are included here.

Ramona Hattendorf  
Director of Public Policy & Civic Engagement  
The Arc of King County

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## FAMILY VOICE: **What is inclusive learning?**

"Belonging. To me, inclusion means all students are who they are and they are respected and accepted as they are.

They are important and belong. All students are supported as needed in the same environment."

Family survey on inclusion, spring 2025



# Supporting Black /African American families

## The importance of cultural responsiveness

Ableism and racism affect quality of life. When combined, the effect is magnified. If a school or organization's culture does not prioritize the needs of Black, indigenous, or other people of color, or fails to respond to the needs of people with developmental disabilities, it leads to lifelong disparities..

How kids fare in school affects their lives.

When those children are Black and live with disabilities, school climate and absence of belonging can threaten their lifelong health and well-being. (Carli Friedman, "Ableism and Racism Hinder the Quality of Life of Black, Indigenous, People of Color with IDD." 2023)

Addressing cultural biases and barriers is critical for children to thrive. Some key points:

**Stereotypes and Prejudice:** Negative stereotypes can affect perceptions and interactions that lead to discrimination in classrooms, patient rooms, and social services.

**Systemic Racism:** Institutional practices often disadvantage African American and Black people

**Healthcare Disparities:** Black people frequently encounter inequities in healthcare access and treatment.

**Cultural Representation:** Under-representation can perpetuate stereotypes.

### FROM THE RESEARCH:

"We found that when Black and indigenous people of color with intellectual and developmental disabilities lived in regions of the United States that were higher in ableism and racism, they had a worse quality of life. In fact, for every 0.1 increase in ableism in the region where they lived, Black and indigenous people of color with IDD's quality of life decreased by 4.13 outcomes, regardless of their other demographics.

In addition, for every 0.1 increase in racism in the region where they lived, Black and indigenous people of color with IDD's quality of life decreased by 5.32 outcomes, regardless of their other demographics." (Friedman, 2023.)

### **Language and Communication:**

Dialects and cultural expressions may be misinterpreted and or devalued, leading to misunderstanding and biases

### **Disability/Health Stigmas:**

Cultural perceptions around mental health can discourage one from seeking help and support

Students bring all their experiences into school. Educators can't control how students are treated in the community, but they need to be aware of what the kids and their families are grappling with.

### **What educators should be aware of:**

Many parents of children with developmental disabilities, especially autistic children, are neurodivergent themselves. This affects not only how they interact with staff as they navigate their own way of being, but their experiences as children stay with them. Students who are Black and live with disabilities experience much higher rates of exclusionary discipline and restraint and isolation than White students and other students of color.

Black and Latino children are also disproportionately less likely to be identified for and receive early supports for infants and toddlers (ESIT) compared to White children, even when they have similar developmental delays. And when they receive services, they have worse experiences. (Sarah Carr. Black and Latino infants and toddlers often miss out on early therapies they need. 2023. Hechinger Report

### **FAMILY VOICE:**

#### **What is inclusive learning?**

"Creating a whole environment with no boundaries for our children!"

#### **What does this look like?**

"The learning environment where all students are treated with equal respect and dignity."

#### **What are your fears?**

"That many won't respond with open mindedness"

#### **Your hopes?**

"That our schools, staff and families will create a better environment for our children."



## **A strategy: Look. Listen. Learn. Let's talk about it.**

### **LOOK**

Seek out the communities that African American and Black families already belong to.

Ensure marketing and services are accessible in pivotal community drivers (for example)

- Church events
- School functions
- Parent groups

### **LISTEN**

Understand cultural nuances and validate concerns expressed by the families

- Be an effective listener (for example)
- Don't assume
- Ask questions
- Try not to minimize or dismiss a parent or caregiver's concerns and feelings

### **LEARN**

Commit to ongoing education.

This can be done in several ways.

- Attending workshops
- Participating in community conversations

Talking with community partners who work directly with African American and Black families

Understand spaces of strength and support.

- Family structure
- Educating extended family
- Religion

**FAMILY VOICE:  
If you could  
change one thing  
at your school,  
what would it be?**

"Trust."

**What do you like  
most about your  
child's school?**

"They are one of the *most helpful* schools when it comes to needing support outside of school."

**On the  
dimensions of  
belonging, which  
3 stand out most  
to you?**

**Accepted:** Students are embraced without condition and viewed as equals by their peers.

**Supported:** Students are given what they need to reach their full potential and truly thrive.

**Heard:** The perspectives of each student are sought out, listened to, and respected by others.

## LET'S TALK ABOUT IT!

Ask yourself and your colleagues:

- How can knowing the cultural strengths in the African American community assist you with supporting parents in navigating their child's developmental disabilities?
- How can you ensure that developmental disability support services are accessible and responsive to the needs of African-American families?
- How can you address systemic barriers such as racism and discrimination that may disproportionately affect African-American families seeking support?

In the end, supporting Black and African American students and their families loops back to the dimensions of belonging, taking a human-centered approach, and being diligent about access to the general education curriculum and learning standards.

And with all inclusionary practices, in school and in the wider community, it often means looking at disability through a social model lens:

- Sometimes the most disabling barriers aren't the condition someone lives with, but attitudes and failure to design public spaces to be accessible and inclusive.

For diverse families, that includes cultural considerations, as well as understanding that race and ethnicity – along with other identities – intersect with disability and inform how people experience the world, and how the world treats them.

## TIP:

**Have you thought of disability as diversity?**

We review the models of disability, disability's place in the civil rights movement, and the shift from disability rights to disability justice in "Disability is Diversity: Rights & Justice" a chapter in our Parent's Guide to Inclusive Learning.

## FROM THE RESEARCH:

"While special education programs are touted to be helpful for student development, these results suggest that Black students are not getting the equal treatment, instruction, and academic benefits as their peers." (Graves, S. L., & Ye, F. F. 2017)

## Research

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