



The Bridge to Belonging: Building True Partnerships in Your Child's Journey

International Early Childhood Inclusion Institute, May 2026



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Parent Centers in Action

How many contacts did Parent Centers reach via social media in 2020-2021? → **~35 million!**

<p>Parent Centers Train:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents/Caregivers of children with disabilities • Professionals • Youth and Young Adults with disabilities to be effective self-advocates (virtual & in-person) 	<p>543,794 Parents/Caregivers attended Trainings</p> <p>291,783 Professionals attended Trainings</p> <p>49,510 Youth/Young Adults attended Trainings</p>
<p>Parent Centers are knowledgeable, committed, and a source of info you can count on.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Self assistance ✓ Webinars ✓ On the phone, by text, by mail, in-person meetings ✓ Webinars ✓ Newsletters ✓ In-person and virtual trainings ✓ Partners in systems change
<p>Parent Centers also provide individual Assistance to Parents/Caregivers, Professionals and Youth/Young Adults with Disabilities (virtual & in-person)</p>	<p>505,312 Parents/Caregivers received Individual Assistance</p> <p>165,089 Professionals received Individual Assistance</p> <p>79,500 Youth/Young Adults received Individual Assistance</p>

EVERY STATE AND TERRITORY HAS A Parent Center → Find Yours! → <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/find-your-center/>

Parent Training & Information (PTI) Centers

Empower youth with disabilities, their families, and professionals

Learn about navigating special education and disability services

Help parents participate effectively in their children's education and development

Birth to age 26

Parent Centers are knowledgeable, committed, statewide experts on issues related to babies, children, and youth with disabilities

Find Your Parent Center!



Session Objectives



Exploring definitions of family engagement, inclusion, belonging, and rightful presence

Discussing the *why* and importance of inclusive practices

Learning family's role in increasing access & belonging

Applying strength-based attitudes in building family-school collaborative partnerships

**Parent includes any adult caregiver e.g., parents, grandparents, siblings, extended family members, foster parents, and other adults.*

DEC Recommended Practices

Division for Early Childhood. (2014). DEC recommended practices in early intervention/early childhood special education 2014. <https://www.dec-spced.org/dec-recommended-practices>



Family 3

Practitioners are responsive to the family's concerns, priorities, and changing life circumstances.

Instruction 2

Practitioners, with the family, identify skills to target for instruction that help a child become adaptive, competent, socially connected, and engaged and that promote learning in natural and inclusive environments.

Teaming and Collaboration 1

Practitioners representing multiple disciplines and families work together as a team to plan and implement supports and services to meet the unique needs of each child and family.



Inclusion, Belonging, & Rightful Presence

Rightful presence lives in schools **when students, families, and communities** have a sense of **belonging** and have the **power to contribute** to educational decisions.

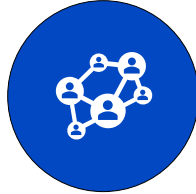
"We believe that all students can learn no matter what, no matter what their background is, what their abilities are, that all students belong in a classroom together. We believe that all students can access curriculum. It is up to us as teachers, as professionals, to understand how to best ensure that their needs are being met, to ensure that they have the best quality education."

[National Center on Inclusion Toward Rightful Presence - SWIFT](#)

Why are Inclusive Practices Important?



BELONGING



RELATIONSHIPS



LEARNING AND
OUTCOMES

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International Early Childhood Inclusion Institute 2026 May



Inequality in education hurts.

“All human beings desire friendships, relationships, and academic challenges.”
J. Causton, 2015.

Isolating students causes them to feel different from everyone else and not part of the larger school community, which has real consequences for a student's self-esteem and ability to learn. (Peterson & Hittie, 2002)

“How children are treated in schools often mirrors how they are treated later in life.” –

Autistic Self Advocacy Network

Belonging



Students with disabilities educated in inclusive settings are more likely to have friendships and to see them outside of the school setting.



Relationships



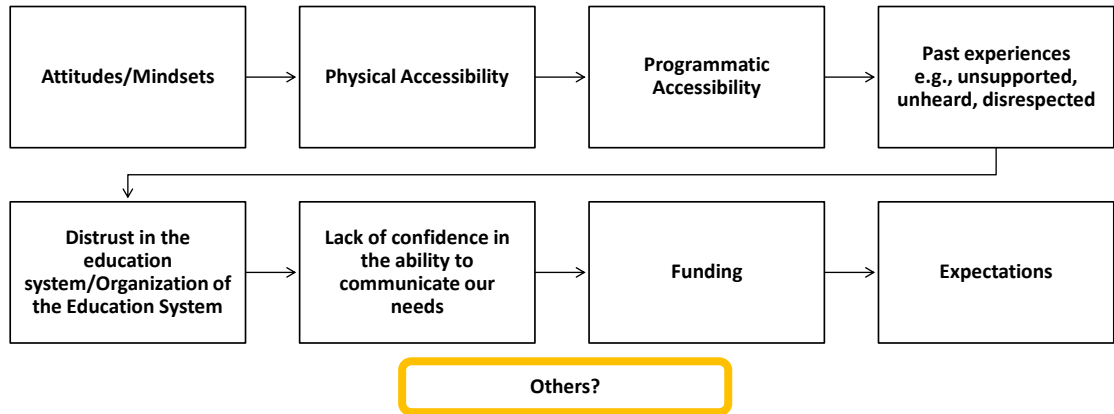
Benefits of Inclusion

- Higher Academic Achievement
- Increased Access to Curriculum & Increased Instructional Time
- Decreased Challenging Behaviors
- Greater Social Benefit
- More Friendships
- More Valued Community
- Successful opportunities for employment and independent living

Learning and Outcomes



Share & Identify Roadblocks/Obstacles to Inclusion



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International Early Childhood Inclusion Institute 2026 May



Inclusion Facts

- ✓ Children who are included have **better academic outcomes** than those in separate classrooms.
- ✓ Children who are included have **better social-emotional outcomes** than those in separate classrooms.
- ✓ Children who are included have **more friends** than those in separate classrooms.
- ✓ The more general education classes a child with a disability is enrolled in, the **closer to grade level** they will be in reading and math.
- ✓ Inclusion **increases communication skills and interpersonal skills**.
- ✓ Students without disabilities educated in inclusive settings report an **increase in empathy and understanding of diversity**.
- ✓ Students without disabilities educated in inclusive settings have the **same or higher academic outcomes**.

[Virginia Guidelines for Early Childhood Inclusion \(November 2023\)](#), VDOE

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International Early Childhood Inclusion Institute 2026 May



Did you know?

“

There have been no studies conducted since the late 1970's that have shown an academic advantage for students with intellectual and other developmental disabilities educated in separate settings.

(Falvey, 2004)

”

www.theinclusiveclass.com

The *How* of Family-Student-School Engagement & Inclusion

Ask, don't assume

Don't judge or be dismissive – remain open

Visualize

Open the lines of communication

Collaborate often

Actively listen

Think outside the box

Encourage and elevate.





GET TO KNOW YOUR FAMILIES!



Share Your Vision!

Find an All About My Family Activity Page or One-Pager



Name: _____ Date: _____

All About My Family

There are _____ people in my family.

My favorite thing to do with my family is _____

Here is a picture of my family.

My family celebrates _____

I have _____ pets. If I don't have any, here is what I wish I had.





One Pager All About Me

- Vision Statement
- About Me
- Strengths
- What I'm Working on
- What Works for Me
- What Doesn't Work for Me

Completed example showing what a child's personal profile can look like. Be creative!

Flip the Script: Strength-based Attitudes

Source: National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (2018). *Family Engagement and Cultural Perspectives: Applying Strengths-based Attitudes*, Building Partnerships Series for Early Childhood Professionals



Strengths-based Attitudes	Description
All families have strengths.	Each child and family have unique strengths that can be the foundation of our discussions and partnership. Always start with strengths first, even when there are challenges.
Families are the first and most important teachers of their children.	Families are the most important constant in children's lives, and children's healthy development relies on sensitive and nurturing interactions within the family and the community.
Families are our partners with a critical role in their child's development.	Families make choices every day that affect a child's development and learning. These choices are rooted in their belief systems and cultural identities.
Families have expertise about their child and their family.	Families understand their children best and make decisions for their children's well-being. When families share what they know, children, families, and providers benefit.
Families' contributions are important and valuable.	Being open to families' suggestions and requests helps us do our best on behalf of their children.



- ✓ Building relationships
- ✓ Building trust
- ✓ Leads to better outcomes for *all* children!

Create a welcoming community for all

- Children are more successful when all the adults who support them work together
- We are models for communication and advocating for their needs
- Mindsets matter



How can you feel like you belong in your community if you don't feel you belong in your own neighborhood school, which is the hub of the community?

Advocate for inclusion.

Dan Habib

Parent & Documentary Filmmaker



Ready to Learn More?

[Family Engagement in Early Childhood](#)

[Inclusion in Early Childhood Programs](#)

PEATC



[Inclusion in Early Childhood Programs](#)

Virginia Department of Education (VDOE)



[Practice Improvement Tools: Using the DEC Recommended Practices](#)

Practice Guides for Families & Professionals and Performance Checklists

ECTA Center & DEC



[Every Kid Needs a Champion](#)

Rita Pierson, Ted Talks Education



[Diversity and Inclusion](#)

Parent Network of WNY



Thank you!



Erin Reisdorf

Education and Community Engagement Coordinator
Parent Network of Western New York

emr@parentnetworkwny.org

Kathleen Gibson

Early Childhood Specialist
PEATC

kgibson@peatc.org

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