Guiding Hands: A Digital Toolkit for Disability Advocacy

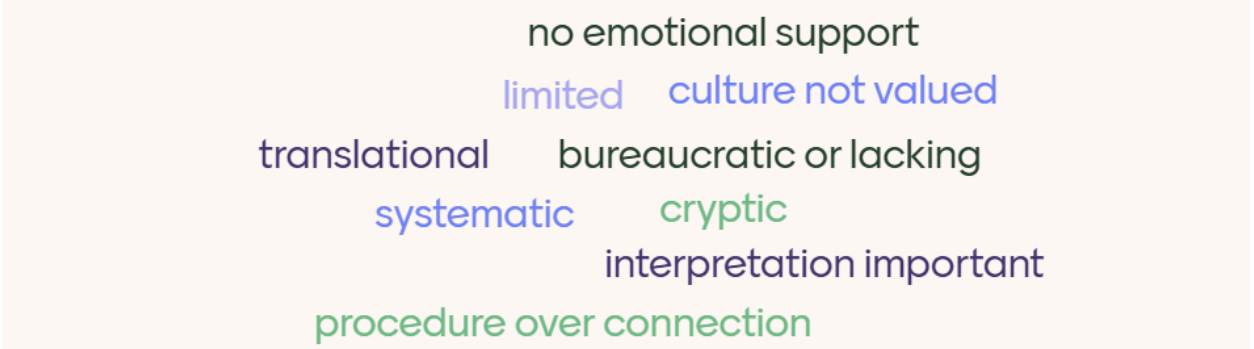
Online Modules for CLD Families Navigating Disability Supports in K-12 education



Melody Mann, M.S., M.A.
Education & Development Pillar Fellow
ABLE Foundation
Online at ABLEtheFoundation.org/guiding-hands



What are your perspectives on the supports provided to CLD families undergoing the IEP process?



Introduction

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families often encounter significant barriers when navigating the U.S. special education system. Although federal legislation, specifically the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), guarantees procedural safeguards, parent participation, and equitable access, these rights are not experienced uniformly across families (Gerzel-Short et al., 2019). For many immigrant, bilingual, and refugee parents, the processes of evaluation, eligibility determination, and individualized education program (IEP) development unfold within institutional contexts that may be unfamiliar, linguistically inaccessible, or culturally incongruent (Adams & Santos, 2022). As a result, families often struggle to understand their child's educational entitlements, advocate for appropriate services, and build collaborative relationships with school personnel. This is an area that requires attention because CLD families bring substantial cultural knowledge, resilience, and advocacy capacity to their interactions with special education systems (Rios & Aleman-Tovar, 2023). Research has highlighted families' strategic use of advocacy tools, transnational understandings of disability, and culturally rooted forms of engagement that may go unrecognized by schools (Sauer & Lalvani, 2017). Still, structural barriers, fragmented communication, and limited institutional supports continue to impede equitable collaboration. Understanding these complexities is essential for developing responsive practices that honor families' strengths and ensure full participation in their children's educational trajectories.

The purpose of the Education & Development Pillar project of the ABLE Foundation 2025 - 2026 is to address these complexities with a culturally responsive toolkit that is empirically and communally informed.

Understanding the Landscape of Caregiver Support in Special Education

Studies of early childhood evaluations and transitions, such as Harvey and Wennerstrom's (2023) work with parents of dual-language learners and Chang et al.'s (2023) study of early intervention–to–preschool transitions, highlight confusion, limited language access, and inconsistent collaboration despite IDEA mandates. Legal analyses similarly emphasize that practitioners often inadequately communicate CLD families' rights (Yllades et al., 2021). The layers to this mismatch in federal mandates missing the mark in local school implementation leaves educators without the proper means to accommodate CLD families, but also leaves CLD families on their own to navigate institutional systems, a major flag and area for growth.

Across grade levels, CLD parents report uneven support and culturally mismatched services. Hispanic mothers of youth with disabilities describe inconsistent or limited nurturant support from transition stakeholders (Hawk Yeager et al., 2025), while Korean immigrant caregivers emphasize the importance of culturally relevant literacy interventions and social validity of instructional practices (Kang, Kim, & Kim, 2025). Refugee families face additional structural and policy-based barriers to participation (Adams & Santos, 2022). Language access remains a central issue; interpreter-mediated IEP research demonstrates how interpreters' positioning shapes or restricts multilingual parents' participation during meetings (Compton, 2020). Families frequently draw on cultural brokers, community networks, and forms of cultural wealth to navigate these barriers. Latinx cultural brokers provide informational, emotional, and

advocacy supports for families of children with extensive support needs (Mortier, Brown, & Aramburo, 2021). Latina/o immigrant families similarly rely on community cultural wealth (such as institutional navigation skills, multilingualism, and resilience) to support their children (Delouche et al., 2024). Research on Latina mothers documents how parents strategically use special education law, data, and nonadversarial advocacy practices to secure services (Rios & Aleman-Tovar, 2023). Asian immigrant parents' networks and empowerment also predict their children's academic outcomes (Kim et al., 2017).

Cultural values and transnational orientations further shape parental engagement. East Asian immigrant and non-immigrant parents show both shared and shifting beliefs about disability and special education (Yan et al., 2017), and Dominican transnational mothers navigate contradictions between U.S. individualistic schooling norms and collectivist family expectations (Anzures Tapia et al., 2017). Broader work describes a needed shift from compliance-based to empowerment-oriented family-school partnerships for multilingual communities (Albrecht, 2021). System-level inequities (especially during transition planning) continue to disproportionately affect low-income and CLD families. A meta-synthesis of transition studies reveals persistent structural barriers rooted in school and service-system practices rather than family limitations (Hirano et al., 2018). Pandemic-era research similarly shows that deficit thinking and inequitable planning constrained CLD families' participation in online instruction (Krishnan, 2023).

In essence, the literature demonstrates a persistent gap between policy intentions and lived experiences and underscores the need for advocacy tools, supports, and culturally sustainable resources that amplify the lived experiences of CLD caregivers and their children such that they can navigate the systemic conditions of special education in contemporary society.

Proposed Project

Through the Education & Development Pillar of the ABLE Foundation, my proposed project aims to cultivate the development of a strengths-based, culturally responsive support model to assist CLD families as they navigate special education, whether their coverage is through an IEPs under IDEA or a 504 plan. The initiative aims to serve both families and the professionals who engage with them by addressing gaps in communication, expectations, and shared decision-making. For families, the project centers empowerment, cultivating clarity, confidence, and community. For educators and service providers, it offers guidance on culturally aware communication, relational trust-building, and collaborative planning with caregivers whose cultural frames may differ from dominant U.S. models of advocacy and disability. At the core of the project is an accessible, mobile-friendly digital toolkit, designed to be used on-demand by caregivers of young children with disabilities. This evergreen resource integrates multiple supports in a multimedia presentation that are accessible in one place:

- **Advocacy Script Library**
  Ready-to-use, customizable scripts to help caregivers prepare for IEP/504 meetings, request evaluations, follow up with school teams, or articulate concerns, available in multiple languages (i.e., English & Spanish) and culturally adapted examples.
- **Mindset + Orientation Videos**
  Short videos that outline what families can expect in early childhood disability systems,

explaining roles, rights, and processes through a culturally responsive lens. Videos highlight collectivist caregiving values, interdependence, and caregiving strengths often overlooked in U.S. special education. These videos will be compiled from existing sources online and/or created by interns in the pillar.

- **Stress-Check and Coping Tools**
  Brief self-assessments grounded in the stress process model and family resilience frameworks. These tools help caregivers identify stressors, protective factors, and coping strategies, acknowledging the emotional labor often required to advocate for a child with disabilities while honoring cultural expectations around family roles. These assessments will be adapted from online publicly available resources so they are presented in the short form and provided to caregivers to initiate not as a "punishment" but as a self-evaluation tool to reference.
- **Printable Templates and Planning Guides**
  Infographics, templates for organizing evaluations, preparing questions for IEP/504 meetings, tracking services, communicating with teachers, and setting family-defined goals will be readily available as PDFs for caregivers to access. These tools foster transparency and reduce cognitive load for caregivers navigating multiple systems.
- **Creative Outlets**
  Interns will use their creativity to showcase their understanding of online resources in multimedia formats (i.e., art, movies, podcasts, trailers, movie posters, etc.) to appeal to the various ways a consumer takes in information on a daily basis. This component of the toolkit will bring to life the wonderful nature of social emotional development that a child undergoes in grade school to bring novelty and joy back into the educational process.

Professional Development Component

In addition to supporting families, the project includes optional modules for educators, case managers, and early intervention specialists focused on:

- culturally informed communication practices
- understanding family stress and disability careers
- engaging families who may be new to U.S. educational systems
- avoiding deficit-based assumptions
- strengthening family–school partnerships

These findings will be showcased in a manuscript prepared by Melody Mann and Andra Howard who are working on a scoping review that is the pillar's foundational piece, and further will be translatable to PD sessions, workshops, and practitioner papers.

Innovation and Contribution

This project goes beyond typical parent guides by centering cultural humility, family strengths, and relational trust, rather than compliance-focused or deficit-based models. It recognizes that navigating disability services is not a one-time task but part of a lifelong caregiving trajectory shaped by linked lives, migration histories, and community networks. The mobile-friendly design ensures accessibility for families with varied schedules, transportation barriers, or limited familiarity with traditional resource formats.

Anticipated Impact

By equipping families and professionals with practical, culturally grounded tools, this resource aims to:

- reduce stress and confusion for caregivers
- increase meaningful participation in IEP/504 processes
- improve communication and trust between families and schools
- promote equitable access to services for culturally diverse children with disabilities
- support more consistent, relationally grounded collaboration across early childhood systems
- directly serve the needs of CLD families in the DMV

References

Adams, N. B., & Santos, R. (2022). A call for support for refugee families and their children with disabilities. *Exceptionality, 30*(5), 351-365.

Chang, Y.-C., Hunt, N., & Dodds, R. L. (2023). *Building better bridges: Perceptions of transition from early intervention programs to preschool from culturally and linguistically diverse parents, early interventionists, and preschool special educators. Infants & Young Children, 36*(2), 164–174.

Compton, S. (2020). Interpreter-mediated interactions: Parent participation in individualized education plan meetings for deaf students from multilingual homes. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education, 19*(4), 227-245.

Delouche, A., Marichal, M., Smith-Bonahue, T., & McCray, E. (2024). Unveiling Community Cultural Wealth among Latina/o Immigrant Families. *School Community Journal, 34*(1), 243-268.

Gerzel-Short, L., Kiru, E. W., Hsiao, Y.-J., Hovey, K. A., Wei, Y., & Miller, R. D. (2019). Engaging culturally and linguistically diverse families of children with disabilities. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 55*(2), 120–126. https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451219837637

Harvey, H., & Wennerstrom, E. K. (2023). Hearing their voices: Parents' perceptions of preschool special education evaluations with dual-language learners. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 43*(1), 46–59. https://doi.org/10.1177/02711214211005853

Hawk Yeager, K., Choiseul-Praslin, B., Deardorff, M. E., Argus-Calvo, B., & Ordoñez, E. (2025). Perspectives of hispanic mothers on social support from key transition stakeholders. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals, 48*(3), 188-200.

Kang, V. Y., Kim, S., & Kim, H. (2025). First-Generation Korean immigrant parents' experience and perception of dual language English literacy intervention for their young children in the United States. *Literacy Research and Instruction, 64*(3), 275-298.

Mortier, K., Brown, I. C., & Aramburo, C. M. (2021). Cultural brokers in special education. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 46*(1), 3–17. https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796920975386

Rios, K., & Aleman-Tovar, J. (2023). Documenting the advocacy experiences among eight Latina mothers of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities, 20*(1), 89-103.

Sauer, J. S., & Lalvani, P. (2017). From advocacy to activism: Families, communities, and collective change. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities, 14*(1), 51-58.

Yan, M. C., Kim, S., Kang, H. J., & Wilkerson, K. L. (2017). Perceptions of disability and special education among East Asian parents: US immigrants and non-immigrants. *Journal of International Special Needs Education, 20*(1), 41-55.

Yllades, V., Dunn, C., & Ganz, J. B. (2021). Legal issues and parent rights for culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities. *Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals, 81*(Spring/Summer), 81–94. https://doi.org/10.64546/jaasep.458