

Foundations to Inclusion and Belonging: Executive Functioning.



# THE COLLABORATIVE IEP



# HI THERE, I'm Ashley Barlow

I'm Ashley Barlow, special education attorney and advocate. I created The Collaborative IEP to help parents and IEP team members work together more effectively and to make advocacy resources more accessible. These short IEP Guru Academy videos and guides are designed to educate and empower you on key topics—quick enough to enjoy with a cup of coffee! Are you ready to become an IEP Guru?



INTRODUCTION

# Inclusion in Action



Introduction

A Little on  
Belonging

Inclusion: It's  
Not that Hard

Support  
Executive  
Functions to  
Promote  
Inclusion

A LITTLE ON BELONGING

# Why Belonging and Inclusion Work

“Inclusion doesn’t lower the bar — it raises opportunities. When diverse learners share space, everyone grows.”

## 15-20%

Students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms are 15–20% more likely to meet grade-level standards in reading and math.

*(Source: Hehir et al., 2016, Harvard University)*

## Boosts Outcomes

Inclusion boosts outcomes for non-disabled peers too — they show higher empathy, improved problem-solving, and stronger academic outcomes.

*(Source: Szumski et al., 2017, Educational Research Review)*

A LITTLE ON BELONGING

# Why Belonging and Inclusion Work

“Inclusion prepares students not just for school — but for life beyond it.”

## 2x More Likely

Students who spend 80% or more of their day in GenEd are twice as likely to attend college or obtain competitive employment after graduation.

*(Source: National Longitudinal Transition Study 2, U.S. Department of Education)*

## Greater

Inclusive practices in high school predict greater self-determination and independence in adulthood.

*(Source: Wehmeyer et al., 2012)*



A LITTLE ON BELONGING

## Fostering Belonging: Everyday Practices That Work

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**Inclusion = Placement + Participation + Progress**

Every student learns, contributes, and grows with their peers.

A LITTLE ON BELONGING

## Fostering Belonging: Everyday Practices That Work

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**Belonging= Connection + Acceptance + Value**

“Belonging is when you can show up as yourself and know you matter.” — Brené Brown

A LITTLE ON BELONGING

# Inclusion vs. Belonging

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## Inclusion

inclusion is structural

## Belonging

belonging is emotional

Belonging fuels motivation  
and engagement.

A LITTLE ON BELONGING

# Why Belonging Matters



Attendance and  
motivation



Behavior referrals  
(up to 40%)



Academic  
performance

*(Goodenow 1993; Osterman 2000; Allen 2021)*

Belonging is not fluff —  
it's a high-impact academic strategy.

## STRATEGY 1

# Welcome: Build Predictable, Positive Routines

### Consistent Openings/Closings

“Students experience a greater sense of belonging and emotional safety in classrooms with consistent, predictable routines and clear expectations.”

— Cornelius-White, J. (2007).

*“Learner-centered teacher-student relationships are effective: A meta-analysis.” Review of Educational Research.*

### Greet Students by Name

“When students know what to expect and feel emotionally safe, they are more likely to engage, participate, and take academic risks.”

— Pianta, R. C., Hamre, B. K., & Allen, J. P. (2012).

*“Teacher-student relationships and engagement: Conceptualizing, measuring, and improving the capacity of classroom interactions.” In Handbook of Research on Student Engagement.*

### Preview the Day

“A sense of structure and predictability in the classroom is foundational to belonging — students need to feel safe before they can feel connected.”

— Allen, K.-A., Kern, M. L., Vella-Brodrick, D., Hattie, J., & Waters, L. (2018).

*“What schools need to know about fostering school belonging: A meta-analysis.” Educational Psychology Review.*

## STRATEGY 2

# Connect: Create Opportunities

- Belonging grows through relationships.
- Encourage peer empathy and collaboration.
- Strategies

Daily check-ins (“High, Low, Hero”)

Peer shout outs

Highlight academic and non academic successes

System for encouragement

Peer shout outs

## STRATEGY 3

# Accept: Collaborate to Meet Individual Needs

- Show that belonging includes getting students what they need.
- Fair is not equal — fair is everyone getting what they need to succeed.
- Strategies

Encourage use of  
regulating skills,  
strategies, and  
supports

Modify lessons,  
work, assessments,  
and environments

Partner with families,  
support and SPED  
staff, students

## STRATEGY 4

# Value: Validate Strengths and Voices

- Recognition builds confidence.
- When students see their strengths reflected back, they lean into learning.
- Strategies

Lead with strengths

Offer choices & roles that focus on strengths

Celebrate contributions

A LITTLE ON BELONGING

# Everyday Ways to Foster Belonging

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Allow everyone to  
appear just as they  
are always

Develop Handshakes

Smile

Co-Regulate

Model authenticity  
and vulnerability

Use Nicknames

Validate emotions  
and struggles

Foster teamwork

Explore interests

# A LITTLE ON BELONGING

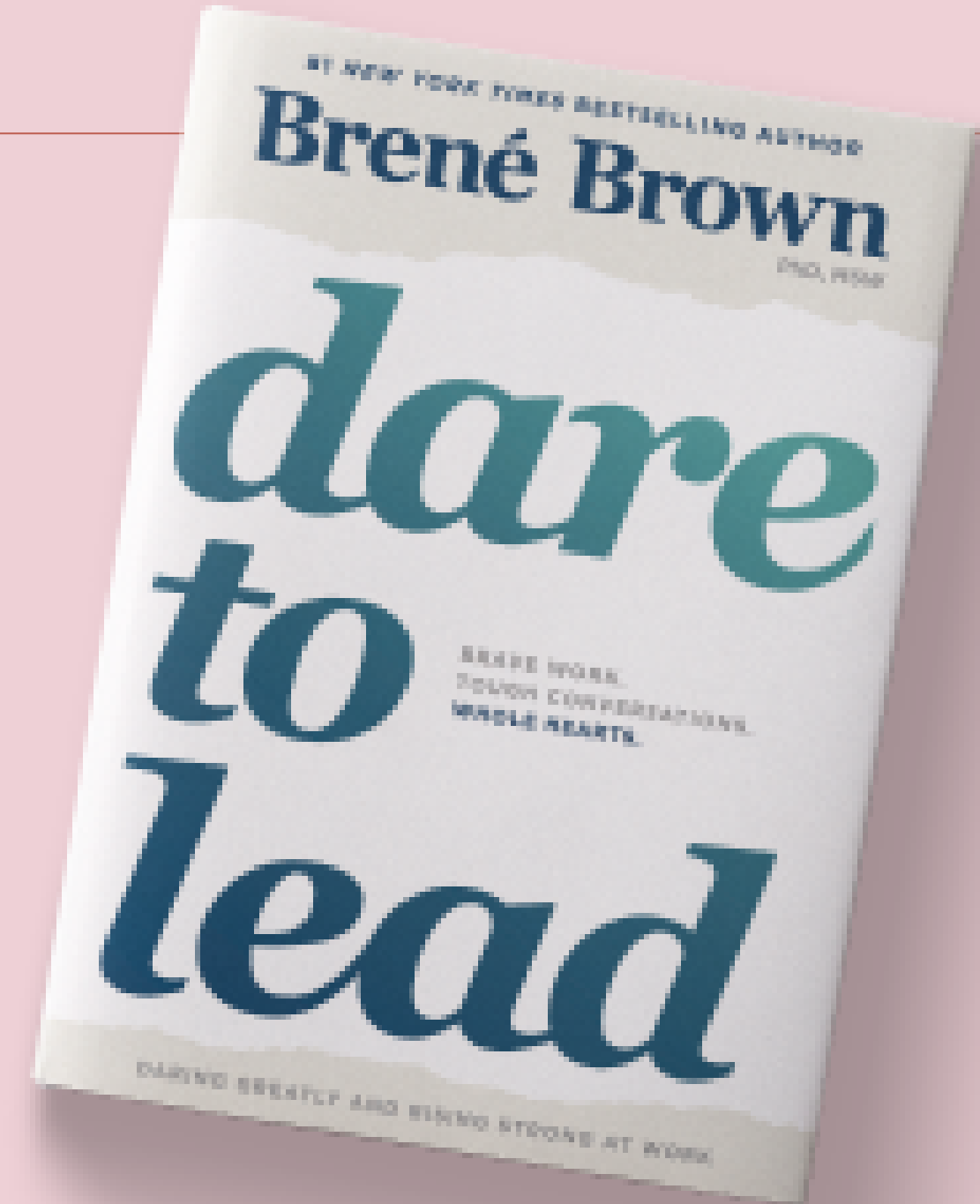
## Dare to Lead, Brené Brown

Seven elements that build trust and belonging:

Boundaries • Reliability • Accountability •  
Vault • Confidentiality • Integrity •  
Nonjudgment • Generosity

“Fitting in is becoming who you think you need to be.  
Belonging is being accepted for who you are.”

— Braving the Wilderness (2017)



## A LITTLE ABOUT INCLUSION

# Introduction

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- Small shifts that make a big difference for inclusion.
- Goal: Easy-to-implement, high-impact strategies — things you can start tomorrow.
- Belonging is the ‘why’; this is the ‘how.’

A LITTLE ABOUT INCLUSION

## Inclusion in Practice

# Inclusion= Placement + Participation + Progress

“We’re not trying to fit kids into our classrooms; we’re trying to build classrooms that fit our kids.”

— *Paula Kluth*

## INCLUSION: QUICK WINS

# Supporting Executive Functioning

*Structure = Freedom for Students with EF Challenges*

Concept: EF struggles often look like “motivation issues,” but they’re really about planning and memory.

### QUICK WINS:

Post visual agendas and checklists.

Use timers for tasks and transitions.

Teach “chunking” and self-monitoring.

Break long assignments into steps.

## INCLUSION: QUICK WINS

# Executive functioning is the brain's management system.

*It helps students plan, start, organize, remember, regulate, shift, persist, and complete tasks.*

*In inclusive education, EF matters because students are often expected to manage complex environments: multiple teachers, peer interactions, transitions, group work, assignments, materials, emotions, and independence.*

## EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

# Executive Functioning Skills

### **Common EF Skills:**

- Planning
- Organization
- Task initiation
- Working memory
- Time management
- Emotional regulation
- Impulse control
- Cognitive flexibility
- Sustained attention
- Self-monitoring

### **More Nuanced EF Skills:**

- Prioritizing
- Sequencing steps
- Goal-directed persistence
- Flexible problem-solving
- Transitioning between tasks
- Managing uncertainty
- Estimating time and effort
- Inhibiting over-reliance on adults
- Recovering after mistakes
- Knowing when and how to ask for help

# EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

# EF and Inclusive Education

Inclusive settings increase access to peers, curriculum, routines, and belonging — but they also increase executive functioning demands.

## **Students may need support to:**

- Follow multi-step directions
- Move between activities
- Manage materials
- Participate in group work
- Handle sensory, social, or emotional load
- Complete assignments with modified expectations
- Stay regulated in less predictable environments

Inclusion works better when we support both access and independence.

## EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

# Supporting the Building Blocks of EF

Before expecting independence, build the foundation.

### **Students need:**

- Predictable routines
- Visual clarity
- Emotional safety
- Regulated bodies
- Reduced cognitive load
- Explicit expectations
- Supported transitions
- Opportunities to practice with coaching

### **Important reframe:**

We do not remove all support to build independence.

We use the right support, then fade it intentionally.

## EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

# Accommodations and Modifications That Support EF

### **Accommodations may include:**

- Visual schedules
- Checklists
- Chunked assignments
- Extended time
- Reduced copying demands
- Preview of transitions
- Graphic organizers
- Written directions
- Timers and reminders
- Breaks for regulation
- Adult or peer prompting
- Assignment calendars
- Color-coded materials

### **Modifications may include:**

- Fewer problems or items
- Simplified directions
- Alternative response formats
- Reduced writing load
- Modified projects
- Prioritized learning targets
- Adjusted pacing
- Supported participation in group work

**Goal:** Reduce the EF barrier without lowering access to meaningful learning.

## EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

# Coping Skills Beyond "Just Breathe"

Breathing can be helpful — but it is not the only regulation strategy, and it does not work for every student in every moment.

Students may need a wider coping toolbox that includes:

### **Body-based strategies**

- Movement breaks
- Wall pushes or chair push-ups
- Stretching
- Heavy work
- Walking with a purpose
- Access to sensory tools

### **Thinking-based strategies**

- Naming the feeling
- Identifying the size of the problem
- Using a coping script
- Choosing from a visual strategy menu
- Reframing: "This is hard, but I can try one step."

### **Connection-based strategies**

- Asking for help
- Checking in with a trusted adult
- Using a break card
- Sitting near a supportive peer
- Having a predictable re-entry plan

### **Environment-based strategies**

- Reducing noise or visual clutter
- Moving to a calmer space
- Previewing changes
- Offering choices
- Adjusting task demands temporarily

### **Key message:**

The goal is not to make students "calm down" for adult convenience.

The goal is to help students access regulation tools so they can participate, recover, and stay connected to the learning community.

## EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

# How Do We Teach Executive Functioning?

EF skills can be taught, not just accommodated.

### Teach by:

- Naming the skill: "This is planning."
- Modeling the process out loud
- Using visuals and scripts
- Practicing in real classroom routines
- Coaching before, during, and after tasks
- Reflecting: "What worked? What should we try next?"
- Reinforcing strategy use, not just task completion
- Fading prompts gradually

### Examples:

- Teach how to break down an assignment
- Teach how to use a checklist
- Teach how to ask for help
- Teach how to recover from frustration
- Teach how to prepare for transitions
- Teach how to self-check work

INCLUSION: QUICK WINS

## Fair Isn't Equal

Equity over equality builds belonging and trust.

### QUICK WINS:

Normalize support:  
“Everyone gets  
what they need  
here.”

Talk openly  
about fairness  
with students.

INCLUSION: QUICK WINS

## Paula Kluth Quote

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Inclusion is not a place where students go, it's a philosophy that guides our teaching.”

— Paula Kluth



Thank you!

THE COLLABORATIVE IEP



# CHECK OUT this series

## Advocacy, Negotiation, and Teamwork Series

- The Heart of It All: Interest-Based Negotiation
- From Tension to Teamwork: Harnessing Conflict for IEP Success
- When to Negotiate and When to Compromise: Finding Middle Ground in IEPs





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