



PARA

Welcome Book

Building Inclusive Classrooms

By Iana Samoilova
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Welcome to Your Role!

You Are the Heart of Inclusion

~ Inclusion is not a place. It's a practice—and you are a vital part of it.

Welcome to District 11 and to your essential role as a paraeducator!

You are entering a profession built on care, collaboration, and the belief that every student deserves equitable access to learning and belonging.

In our schools, paraeducators (PARA) are more than classroom helpers. You are learning partners, communication bridges, and advocates for dignity. You see things others may miss. You help students express themselves, regulate emotions, and navigate the school day with confidence. You help teachers bring inclusion to life—every single day.

This Welcome Kit is designed to help you **understand your role**, feel confident in your daily practice, and build your identity as an **inclusion leader**. Inside, you'll find guiding principles, examples of respectful language, simple tools for supporting students, and reminders of how powerful your presence can be.

Our shared beliefs

Every body is a learning body.

Each student has unique ways of learning and communicating.

Presume competence.

Assume that every student can learn, understand, and grow — even if they express it differently.

Support autonomy and choice.

Offer choices whenever possible. Respect “no” as a valid communication.

Nothing about us without us.

Students should always be part of conversations and decisions that affect them.

How to use this guide



Read it once, then keep it handy — like a map for your first 90 days.



Look for “Try This!” boxes—they include quick classroom tips.



Scan QR codes to access templates, forms, and visuals.



Share it with your team—
inclusion grows when we learn together.



This guide was inspired by Dis/Ability Studies Education (UCCS, 2025) and shaped by real experiences of paraeducators and teachers across District 11 Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Your Role Matters

You Are a Bridge, Not a Shadow

~ A student's success often depends not on how much we teach, but how much we notice.

As a PARA, you are one of the most visible adults in a student's day.

You may walk with them to class, share a quiet space during a sensory break, or celebrate their smallest victories. You are the bridge between students, teachers, families, and the wider school community.

Your role is essential, but it also has clear boundaries — both to protect students and to protect you. Understanding where your responsibility starts and ends helps you work confidently and safely.

What PARA Do

✓ DO	✗ DON'T
Support instruction and reinforce lessons under teacher direction	Design or modify curriculum on your own
Assist students with accommodations and communication	Make discipline or IEP decisions
Help students regulate emotions with calm and respect	Use physical force, scolding, or restraint
Collect observations and share them with the SPED team	Share student information with others
Model empathy, patience, and collaboration	Take student behavior personally
Use visual schedules, prompts, or cues to support understanding	Give multiple verbal directions at once without support
Encourage independence — let students try before stepping in	Do tasks for students that they can do with support
Follow safety, health, and confidentiality procedures	Ignore classroom protocols or make exceptions "just this once"

- ~ You are not ‘helping the teacher.’ You are co-creating a safe and equitable learning space.

Case in Practice

Mini-Case: “A Morning with Rose”

Rose uses an AAC device, but she often feels shy or hesitant to use it – especially during busy classroom moments. When she needs something quickly, she tends to communicate through gestures, eye contact, and small movements that feel safer and more natural for her.

This morning, you notice Rose quietly tapping her desk with two fingers. It’s soft, rhythmic, and familiar – you’ve seen her use this signal before. You remember that this tapping is her early indicator of sensory overload, her way of saying: “Something is getting hard. I need a break.”

Instead of prompting her to speak or encouraging her to use the AAC device before she’s ready, you calmly show her the visual card for “quiet space.”

Rose looks at the card, then at you. She gives a small, quick nod, her preferred “yes”, stands up, and walks to the calm corner. She settles into her favorite beanbag, rocking gently until her breathing slows.

You didn’t force language. You didn’t demand speech or AAC use. You simply responded to the communication she was ready to give.

- ~ Inclusion in action means noticing the signal, honoring the student’s autonomy, and offering support in the least intrusive way possible.

Try This! Tips for daily success

- **Stay curious.** If you’re unsure about a strategy – ask.
- **Observe and note.** Keep a small notebook or digital log to track triggers, successes, and supports.
- **Communicate early.** Don’t wait until something becomes a crisis.
- **Respect each student’s identity.** If a student uses AAC, gestures, or silence—that’s still communication.
- **Practice self-care.** Calm adults create calm classrooms.

Anti-Ableism in Action— Changing How We See Dis/Ability

~ Disability is not a deficit. It's a natural part of human diversity.

Inclusion starts with how we see students. The biggest barriers are often not physical; they're in our assumptions, our words, and our expectations. When we shift our thinking, we begin to see ability everywhere.

Ableism is any belief or practice that treats people with disabilities as less capable, less valuable, or “in need of fixing.”

It can sound small: a sigh, a look, a phrase, but it sends a powerful message about who belongs and who is expected to change. Anti-ableist practice simply means choosing curiosity over control, access over convenience, and dignity over compliance.

It begins with noticing the moments where barriers are created, and choosing instead to create connection, opportunity, and respect.

Respectful language matters

Language shapes reality. When we use language that honors dignity, we send a message of belonging. Try to use person-first or identity-first language based on how each student and family prefers.

For example:

- A student with autism (person-first)
- An autistic student (identity-first)

Always ask: “What words feel best for you?”

**Our job is not to “fix” students.
It’s to change environments, attitudes, and
opportunities so that everyone can thrive.**

~ When you speak with respect, listen with curiosity, and act with empathy — you are dismantling ableism every day.

Anti-Ableist Practice in Everyday School Life

Anti-ableist practice starts with noticing the subtle ways classrooms can create barriers – and choosing actions that build connection, safety, and dignity instead.

Here are simple, everyday ways paraeducators can practice anti-ableism:

1. Slow Down and Give Processing Time

Many students need extra seconds to understand, plan, or respond. Silence is not refusal. Wait-time communicates respect.

2. Honor All Communication

AAC, gestures, visuals, pointing, typing, humming, echolalia, movement—they all count. Never assume “not speaking” means “not understanding.”

3. Support Autonomy, Not Compliance

Instead of “Do it because I said so,” try: “How can I help you start?” Choice builds confidence and trust.

4. Change the Environment, Not the Student. If something isn’t working, adjust:

- visuals
- sensory tools
- seating
- timing
- predictability
- noise level
- number of steps

This is inclusion in action.

5. Default to Curiosity. Anti-ableist practice starts with questions:

- “What might be hard right now?”
- “What need is being communicated?”
- “How can I reduce the barrier?”
- Curiosity creates connection.

6. Validate Differences as Normal

- Movement is normal.
- Sensory needs are normal.
- Different learning paces are normal.
- There is no one “right” way to be a student.

~ When you understand the “why” behind student behavior and communication, anti-ableism becomes practical, not abstract.

On the next page, you will find examples of how to reframe ableist language into inclusive, supportive practice.



Anti-Ableism Table

Communication

🚫 Instead of...	👉 Try reframing...	⭐ Why it matters
“He refuses to follow directions.”	“What’s the barrier? What’s the unmet need?”	Behavior is communication.
“He’s non-verbal, so he doesn’t understand.”	“He communicates in ways other than speech or chooses when to use AAC.”	Understanding ≠ speech.
Forcing speech or AAC use	Respecting preferred mode: gestures, visuals, AAC, silence	Communication is not only words.
“He’s ignoring me.”	“He may need more processing time before responding.”	Processing time varies; rushing increases stress.

Behavior & Regulation

🚫 Instead of...	👉 Try reframing...	⭐ Why it matters
“She has behavior problems.”	“She’s communicating a need, stress, or frustration.”	Behavior communicates unmet needs.
“They can’t focus.”	“They need support to stay regulated and engaged.”	Regulation is a prerequisite for learning.
“Be good” expectations	Clear supports, visuals, and predictable routines	Students need structure, not vague rules.
“She’s being defiant.”	“She’s trying to regain control in an overwhelming moment.”	What looks like defiance is often dysregulation, anxiety, or a need for autonomy.

Independence & Capability

🚫 Instead of...	⭐ Try reframing...	⭐ Why it matters
Helping too quickly	Pausing + prompting independence	Independence builds dignity and competence.
“That’s not normal.”	“That’s their way of learning or expressing.”	There is no one “normal” way to learn.
Limiting access (“He can’t handle it”)	Providing scaffolds to make access possible	Inclusion means designing with, not excluding.
“They’re too distracted / slow / uncoordinated – I’ll do it for them.”	“I’ll break the task into smaller steps and let them do as much as they can independently.”	Scaffolded independence builds skills, confidence, and long-term autonomy.

Respect & Dignity

🚫 Instead of...	⭐ Try reframing...	⭐ Why it matters
“I feel sorry for them.”	“I admire their persistence and strengths.”	Compassion ≠ pity. Respect preserves dignity.
“We need to fix this behavior / fix this problem.”	“We need to understand what’s happening for them and adjust the environment or support.”	Students don’t need fixing; they need understanding, safety, and inclusive design.
“He shouldn’t act like that at his age.”	“Development isn’t linear – everyone has their own timeline and pace.”	Respect means honoring diverse developmental pathways without judgment or comparison.

Always start from “They can!”

Communication & Collaboration

~ Inclusion works best when adults work together.

You are not alone in your work. Behind every student's success is a team: teachers, paraeducators, therapists, administrators, and families – all moving toward the same goal: student growth and belonging.

Paraeducators are often the “connective tissue” of this team. You are the one who sees students in everyday moments — transitions, sensory breaks, emotional highs and lows. Your observations, calm presence, and communication can make a powerful difference.



Your Core Communication Partners:

SPED Teacher / Case Manager:

Manages IEP goals, accommodations, safety and regulation plans, and collects data.

Classroom Teacher:

Your daily guide. Sets instructional direction and expectations for academic tasks.

Therapists (SLP, OT, PT):

Design communication, sensory, motor, and functional strategies to support learning.

Behavior Specialist / School Psychologist:

Supports behavior plans, regulation strategies, and safety frameworks.

Families (through the SPED teacher / case manager):

Families know the student best. Your SPED teacher/case manager is the person who communicates with them and brings their insights to the team.



Professional Communication Tips

When you want to say...	Try this instead
"He refuses to follow directions."	"He seemed dysregulated; here's what helped calm him."
"She just doesn't listen."	"I think she needs more visual cues for directions."
"I didn't know what to do!"	"Can we review the plan for what to do next time?"
"This isn't my job."	"Could we clarify my role for this situation?"
"I think something is off."	"I noticed some changes today – could we talk about them?"

How to Build Trust in Your Team

Ask with curiosity, not judgment.

- “Can you show me how you’d like this done?”

Use neutral, descriptive language.

- “He tapped his desk and looked away,” not “He refused.”

Share observations early.

- A quick note after class can prevent bigger challenges later.

Celebrate wins.

- “Today she read a full paragraph independently!” builds team morale.

Honor privacy.

- Never discuss a student outside the professional circle.

When to Speak Up

Your perspective matters, especially when something feels unsafe, disrespectful, or inconsistent with a student’s plan. Use calm, factual language:

“I’m concerned this approach may not align with the student’s IEP goals. Can we review it together?”

It communicates professionalism, respect, and shared responsibility.

Case in Practice

Mini-case: “Teamwork Around Thomas”

Thomas becomes anxious when routines change. You notice he starts clicking his tongue and hiding his face before transitions – his early signs of overload.

You quietly tell the teacher, “He’s showing early signs of overwhelm, maybe we could use the visual countdown now?”

The teacher nods, shows the 5-minute timer, and Thomas visibly relaxes.

That’s collaboration in action – noticing, communicating, and supporting the plan together.

~ Collaboration isn’t about knowing everything; it’s about caring enough to ask and to listen.

Everyday Inclusion Strategies— Small Actions, Big Inclusion

~ Inclusion isn't a special event — it's a daily habit.

True inclusion is built from small, consistent choices: every word, gesture, and routine can either build a bridge or a barrier.

As a PARA, you make inclusion real by how you offer support, respond to behavior, and create opportunities for independence.

Below are five strategies you can use every day to help every student feel seen, capable, and valued.

Small Actions That Make a Big Difference

1. Offer Choices

Even small choices build self-determination and reduce frustration.

"Do you want to use the blue pencil or the green one?"

"Would you like to start with reading or drawing?"

Choice gives control — and control builds calm.



Create a small “Choice Board” with pictures or icons of activities.
Students who can’t speak can still point or look to choose.

2. Use Visual Supports

Visuals make the world predictable.

They help students understand what's next and what's expected.

- Post a visual schedule for the day
- Use first/then cards (“First math, then break”)
- Create visual reminders for transitions



Downloadable visual templates and icons

3. Speak Calmly and Clearly

Simple language supports understanding.

Use short sentences, a neutral tone, and wait time.

Instead of “Stop that right now, you’re making a mess!”

Try: “Let’s pause. Hands on the desk. Take a breath.”

~ Silence can be powerful—sometimes waiting is the best support.

Small Actions That Make a Big Difference

4. Reinforce Effort and Growth

Notice what's working — not just what's missing.

"I like how you're trying again."

"You worked hard to calm down."

"You used your words — great job!"

Positive feedback motivates learning and builds self-worth.

Remember: Celebrate the process, not perfection.

5. Support Regulation and Breaks

Students can't learn when they're overwhelmed.

Teach and model self-regulation as a skill, not a punishment.

- Offer sensory breaks proactively, not only after escalation.
- Keep a calm space or fidget box accessible.
- Model calm breathing or counting.

"You seem tired. Let's take two deep breaths together."

"Would you like to stretch or draw quietly?"

When students learn how to regulate emotions, they gain lifelong tools for independence

6. Narrate the Environment, Not the Student

Students respond to what they feel around them: noise, light, movement — not just to directions. Describe the environment with calm neutrality instead of labeling the student's behavior.

Offer supportive narration:

"There are a lot of sounds right now, let's move to a calmer spot."

"Looks bright in here, want to try the quieter table?"

"It feels busy. Let's take a moment to breathe."

When in doubt, step back and observe

Before acting, pause for a second:

"What is this behavior telling me?"

"What might the student need right now?"

"How can I help without taking control?"

That pause often turns reaction into understanding, and understanding into inclusion.

~ Inclusion grows from what we practice every day, not once a year, but moment to moment.”

De-escalation and Respect— Supporting Students with Dignity

~ When a student loses control, our calm is their safety.

Every behavior has meaning. When students feel overwhelmed, their nervous systems are saying: “I need support, not punishment.” Your steady presence helps protect safety: for the student, for others, and for yourself.

Core Principles of Respectful De-Escalation

1. Recognise the Early Signs

Students rarely escalate “out of nowhere.” Watch for subtle cues:

- tapping, pacing, humming
- avoiding eye contact
- covering ears
- changes in breathing
- body tension
- withdrawal or verbal strain.

Your power is in noticing early. A calm prompt can interrupt escalation before it grows.

Try saying:

“Looks like you’re getting restless – want to stretch or take a short walk?”

“Do you want your noise-canceling headphones?”

2. Stay Regulated Yourself

Students borrow our emotions. Your calm becomes their anchor. Try:

- lower your voice instead of raising it
- keep hands visible, and movements slow
- step back to create space
- soften your facial expression

Say: *“You’re safe. I’m here. Let’s breathe together.”*

If you feel overwhelmed, call for help before reaching your own limit.

3. Respect Autonomy During Crisis

Even in hard moments, the student deserves dignity.

- Don’t touch or block unless safety is at risk.
- Don’t take preferred objects unless they’re dangerous.
- Avoid “Calm down,” “You’re fine,” or anything that dismisses emotion.

Offer choices instead: *“Do you want to sit or stand?” “Stay here or go to the quiet space?”*

Choice reduces fear. Respect preserves trust.

Core Principles of Respectful De-Escalation

4. After the Crisis – Reflect, Don’t Lecture

When the student is calm, debrief gently and briefly. Try:

“That was a hard moment, what might help next time?”

“You came back really well.”

Avoid shame or blame. Focus on what worked and how to repeat it. Use your ABC Log (Antecedent–Behavior–Consequence) to record:

- what happened before
- what behavior you saw
- what helped.

Share it privately with the SPED teacher, it's data, not judgment.

5. Safety Is a Team Responsibility

Never manage a dangerous situation alone.

- call the teacher or administrator immediately
- follow the student’s BIP (Behavior Intervention Plan)
- know where the plan is stored
- follow district protocols step by step.

You are not expected to “fix” everything, you’re part of a safety system.

Language That Calms

🚫 Instead of...	👉 Try reframing...
“Stop it right now!”	“Let’s pause — you’re safe.”
“If you don’t stop, you’ll lose your break.”	“You can take a break when you’re ready.”
“You’re making me mad.”	“I want to help you feel better.”
“Calm down!”	“Take a deep breath with me.”
“What’s wrong with you?”	“Something’s hard right now — I’ll stay with you.”

Words can escalate or de-escalate.
Choose the ones that keep doors open.

~ Respect during crisis teaches more than any lesson ever could.

Ethics, Confidentiality, and Self-Care: Respect Comes First

~ Respect is the foundation of every safe and inclusive classroom.

Working in Special Education means carrying both trust and responsibility.

Families share deeply personal stories. Students show their most vulnerable moments. That trust is sacred, and it must be protected through ethical practice, confidentiality, and self-care.

1. Confidentiality: What It Really Means

Confidentiality isn't just FERPA — it's daily respect.

Do:

- Talk about students only with authorized staff.
- Keep notes secure — never on personal devices.
- Speak quietly in shared spaces.

Don't:

- Share stories with friends, family, or online.
- Post photos or classroom moments on social media.
- Compare students in front of others.

2. Professional Boundaries and Ethics

Boundaries protect students and staff.

- Avoid physical contact unless part of a plan or safety need.
- Follow the teacher or case manager's lead.
- Keep language neutral and professional.
- Don't change a plan without checking first.

Ask: "*Is this my decision?*" , "*Who needs to know before I act?*"

3. Self-Care Is Not Selfish

Your calm and energy shape how students feel.

Helpful habits:

- One deep breath between tasks.
- Debrief hard moments — don't carry them alone.
- Use wellness supports (see page 15).
- Aim for consistency, not perfection.

Calm adults create calm classrooms. Self-care is part of professionalism.

4. Ethical Reflection

Each week, take five minutes to reflect. Growth begins with awareness:

- Did I speak with respect?
- Did I listen more than react?
- Did I support autonomy?
- Did I care for myself so I could show up fully?

Local Resources: Where to Find Help and Learn More

~ You are never alone in this work.

District 11 is full of people and programs ready to support you. Use these contacts anytime you need guidance, collaboration, or growth.

District 11 Contacts:

Department	What They Help With	Link
SPED	IEPs, supports, behavior plans	d11.org/academics/sped
HR	Onboarding, benefits	d11.org/hr
PD / Professional Learning	Trainings & certificates	d11.org/employees/professional-learning/pd-facilitator-resources
Employee Assistance	Wellness & counseling	d11.org/employees/employee-benefits/home/eap
IT Service Desk	Tech & accessibility tools	d11.org/employees/it-tech-support
Crisis Response Resources	Support to an individual or groups during a vulnerable crisis period	d11.org/employees/crisis-response-resources
Risk Management	Reporting injuries, safety procedures, workers' comp	d11.org/riskmanagement

When you need support, don't wait until you're overwhelmed.
Reach out early – collaboration is strength, not weakness.

~ Asking for help isn't giving up; it's joining the team that already wants you to succeed.

Closing Message: You Belong Here

~ Inclusion is built one relationship at a time — and you are part of every one of them.

Thank you for choosing this work, for your patience, your kindness, and your belief in every student's potential.

Being a paraeducator means balancing heart and skill, humility and strength. It means showing up again and again with compassion and curiosity.

You belong in this community of educators.

You are not "just a PARA."

You are a partner in learning, a builder of trust, and a voice of inclusion in our schools.

Remember:

- **Every body is a learning body.**
- **Behavior is communication.**
- **Respect comes first, always.**
- **You make inclusion happen.**

From the Author

This Welcome Kit was created as part of Dis/Ability Studies Education (UCCS, 2025) and inspired by real experiences of paraeducators in District 11.

My hope is that it helps every PARA feel confident, valued, and prepared, because your work changes lives.

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Scan to share your thoughts, ideas, or stories.

Your feedback will help make the next edition even stronger.

~ Every time you listen, support, and believe, you make the world more inclusive.

Abbreviations & Terms— Quick Reference Guide

SPED — Special Education

Support and services for students with disabilities.

PARA — Paraeducator / Paraprofessional

Staff member who supports teachers and students.

IEP — Individualized Education Program

A legally required plan outlining goals, supports, and accommodations.

BIP — Behavior Intervention Plan

A plan that outlines proactive strategies, supports, and safety steps for behavior.

ABC Log — Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence Log

A structured observation tool documenting what happened before, during, and after a behavior.

AAC — Augmentative and Alternative Communication

Non-speech communication: gestures, visuals, devices, apps.

PD — Professional Development

Trainings, workshops, and learning opportunities for staff.

MTSS — Multi-Tiered System of Supports

A framework for academic, behavioral, and social support at increasing levels of intensity.

FERPA — Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act

Federal law protecting student privacy and educational records.

EAP — Employee Assistance Program

Confidential counseling and wellness resources for staff.

IT — Information Technology

District technology support: devices, accounts, software, accessibility tools.

Risk Management

Safety incidents, injury reporting, and workers' compensation support.

HR — Human Resources

Hiring, onboarding, benefits, policies, and employee support.

PL — Professional Learning

District learning platform with courses, certificates, and required trainings.

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