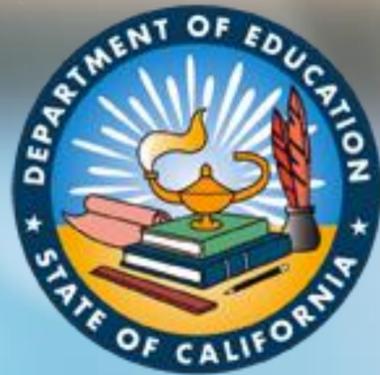




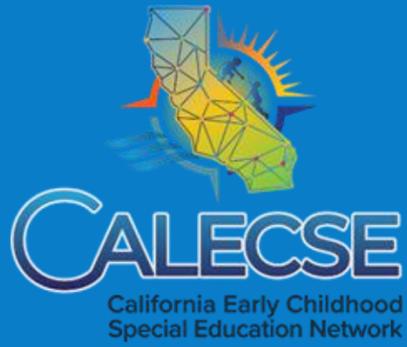
CALECSE

California Early Childhood
Special Education Network



**Funded by the California Department of Education (CDE),
Special Education Division**

**Leading with Trust: Strengthening Family Partnerships in
Early Childhood Special Education Through Alternative Dispute Prevention
Session 2: Advanced Strategies
March 5, 2026**



CALECSE



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CaIECSE

California Early Childhood Special Education Network

Funded by the CDE

<https://www.calecse.org>



CaIECSE is a technical assistance project funded under the California Department of Education (CDE) that supports Local Educational Agencies (LEAs), Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA)s, County Offices of Special Education (COEs), and other Agency Partners in the areas of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C to B Transitions, Preschool Assessment Practices, and Preschool Child Find by providing technical assistance, professional learning, and demonstration of tangible practices *that have been proven successful*.

The CaIECSE Network leverages collaboration amongst agencies, disseminates resources, highlights existing exemplar practices, and provides direct technical assistance to improve the capacity, knowledge, collaboration, and implementation of evidence-based practices across agencies throughout California.

The CaIECSE Network is committed to improving outcomes for children and their families by eliminating and addressing barriers to successful transition for California's youngest children with disabilities.

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**Communities
of Practice**

California Early Childhood
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Pathways to Partnership

Connect • Collaborate • Support

**Leading with Trust: Strengthening Family Partnerships in Early Childhood Special Education Through
Alternative Dispute Prevention**

**Session Two: Advanced Strategies for
Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and Prevention**

**Presented by
Peter Aguirre, M.S., PPS, BCBA
and
Michelle Kinner, M.Ed.**

Project funded by:



ccee
California Collaborative
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Meet the Team



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Objectives

- Participants will be able to define the value of early trust-building and apply strategies to foster long-term family collaboration.
- Participants will practice active listening and open-ended questioning to strengthen connections and de-escalate tension.
- Participants will be able identify underlying interests rather than fixed positions to navigate and resolve conflicts effectively.



Power of Partnership: Initial Impact

Early childhood educators are often the first people that parents interact with on their child's special education journey.

- How can we make it less complicated and more welcoming?
- How do we show empathy for parents who may be grieving their child's diagnosis or eligibility?
- Relationship building is essential at this stage to break down barriers for families and build trust that will ultimately prevent conflict.





“Rapport Bank”

Invest in Relationships

- Trust
- Collaboration
- Connection

<https://pathways2partnership.org>

Building Trust

- Early and consistent communication
- Clear and jargon-free explanations
- Providing access to Individualized Education Program (IEP) documents in advance
- Encouraging parents/caregivers to ask questions and provide input
- Create welcoming spaces where family members feel included
- Establish a culture of collaboration, not confrontation
- Be mindful of body language and tone of voice



Collaboration Through Family Engagement

- **Parents are their child’s first teacher and they inherently know their child’s strengths, needs, and interests.**
- **“Meaningful parent participation” is not just a collaborative process or a way to build trust, it is a legal requirement in the IEP process as outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).**
- **Research shows that student outcomes are significantly impacted by parent involvement.**
- **Parents should be engaged in decision making and determining what the meeting objectives are.**
- **Trust is built when true collaboration is accomplished.**

**“IEPs are not something we present
TO parents,
they are something we build
WITH parents.”**



Barriers to Collaboration

Jargon and Acronyms

Parents do not always understand the language in education and special education.

We use complex terms and acronyms for everything.

Cultural and Linguistic

Parents come to us from many different cultures, including ethnic, socioeconomic, and otherwise.

Parents may need support with translation of materials and interpretation at meetings in their home language.

Complexities

Assessment reports and IEP documents are complex and technical.

Many parents are overwhelmed by the volume of paperwork they are given in IEP meetings.

Apprehension/ Confidence

Research shows that parents feel like outsiders to school IEP teams and they feel like their input is not considered (Elbaum, Blatz, & Rodriguez, 2016).

Parents report that they feel like “unequal partners” in the IEP development process (Rossetti et al., 2020).

Disorientation and Fear

Researchers have repeatedly documented parents’ feelings of dread over attending IEP meetings, anticipating disagreements with IEP team members from the school (Burke & Hodapp, 2016; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014).



Effective Listening Strategies

Effective listening (especially during conflict) can:

**Demonstrate
Respect**

**Affirm
Understanding**

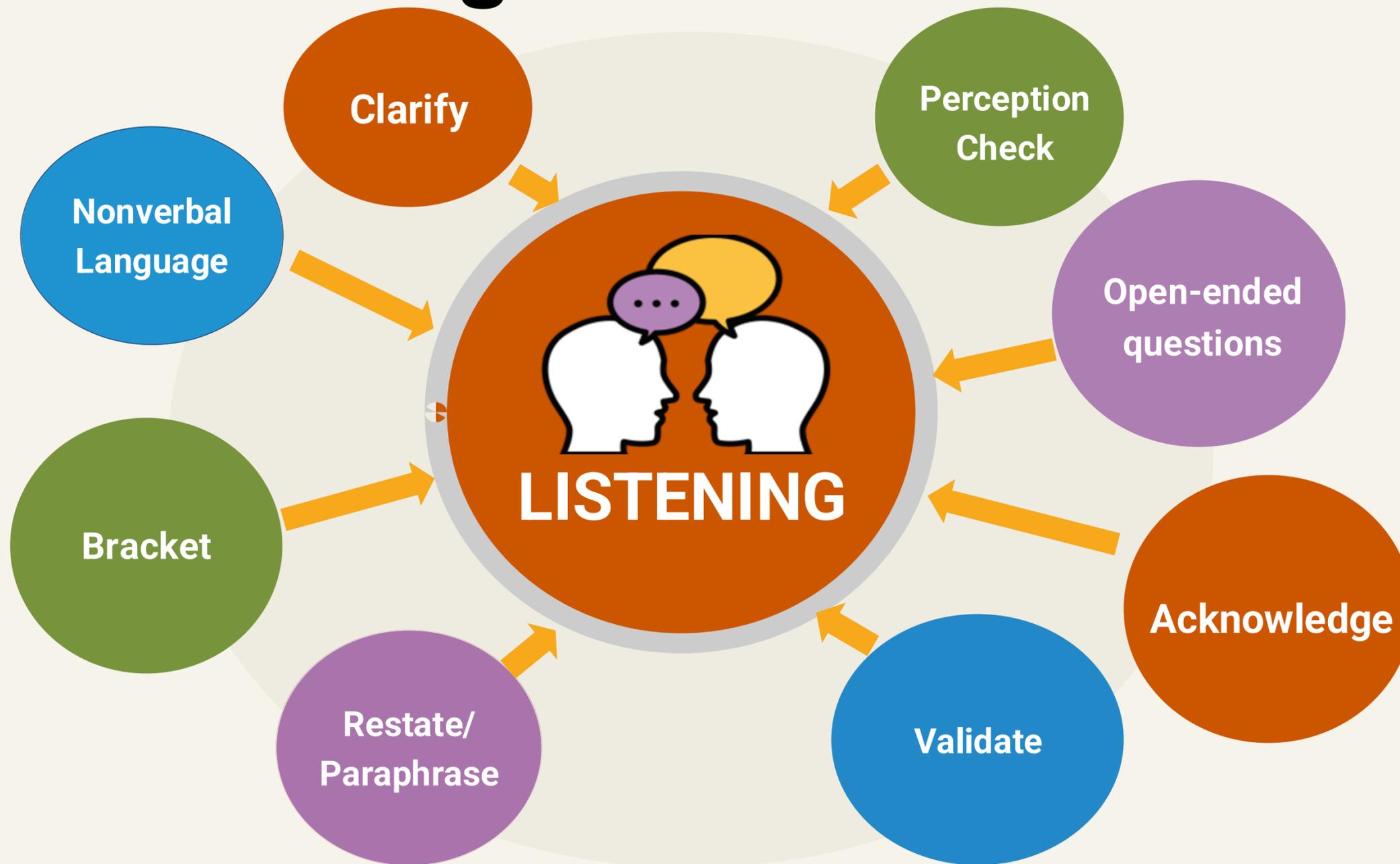
**Create Psychological
Safety**

**Clarify Misunderstandings
or Differences in
Perspectives**

**Identify and Validate
Feelings**

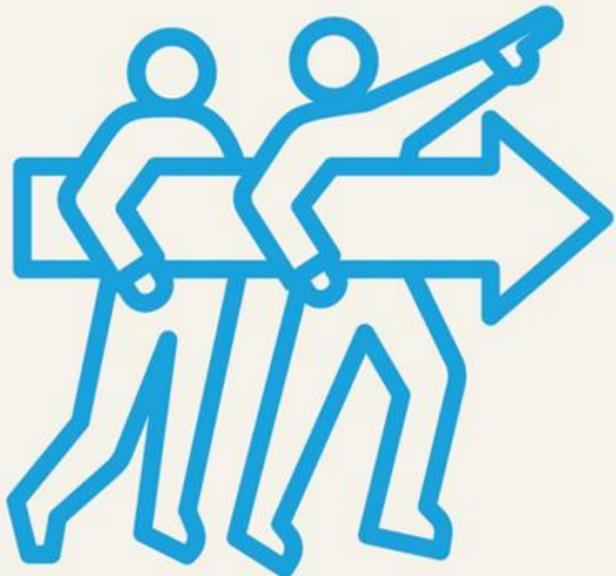


Listening to Connect



Communication Framework: LEAD

- L – Listen with empathy
- E – Explore concerns fully
- A – Acknowledge feelings and validate perspective
- D – Direct toward constructive next steps



Asking Questions to Connect

Using Questions to Invest in the Relationship

Understanding

To seek information or get clarification.

“What brings us here today?”

“Can you tell me more about why that is important to you?”

Feeling Understood

To actively listen and show empathy.

“It sounds like you...Is that correct?”

“Am I hearing you correctly that you wanted...?”



Open-Ended Questions



An open-ended question allows the speaker to expand (avoids one word answers or yes/no answers)

Activity time

20 Questions

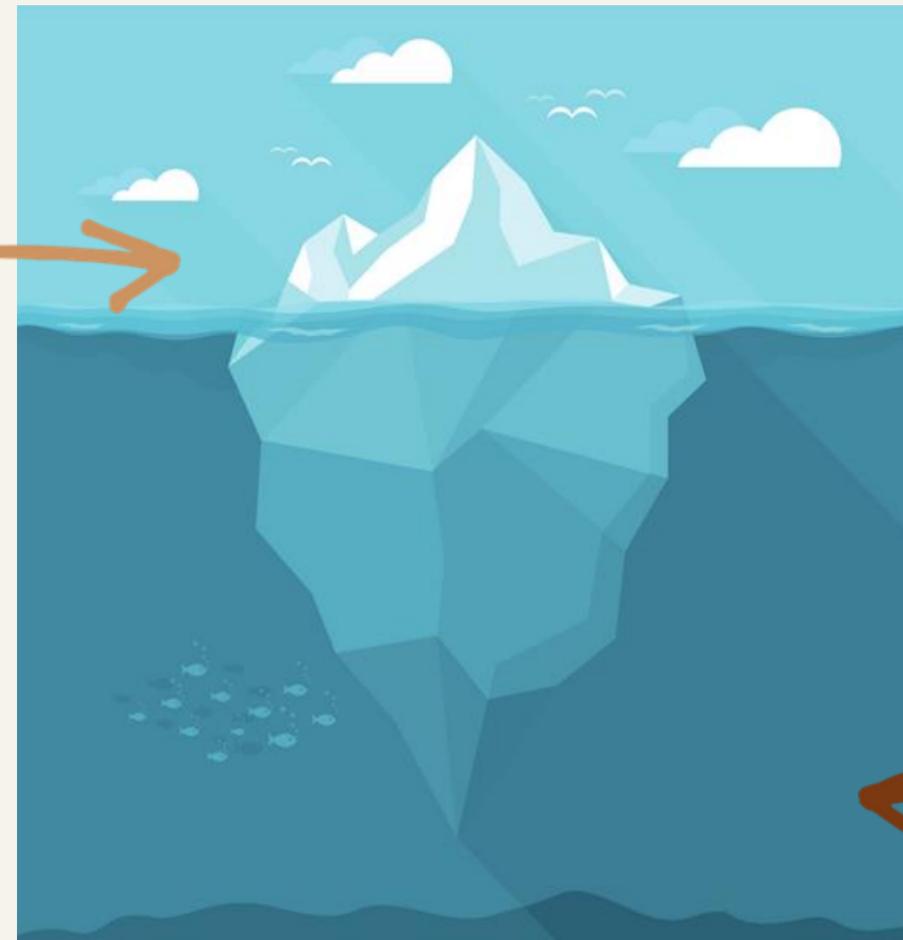


Identifying Interests underlying Positions

- An interest is different than a position.

Positions are:

- Declarative
 - Fixed
 - Single solutions
- “I want my child to have a 1:1 aide.”



Interests are:

- Hidden
 - Underlying needs
 - Open to many solutions
 - The why
- “I’m really concerned about my child’s safety.”

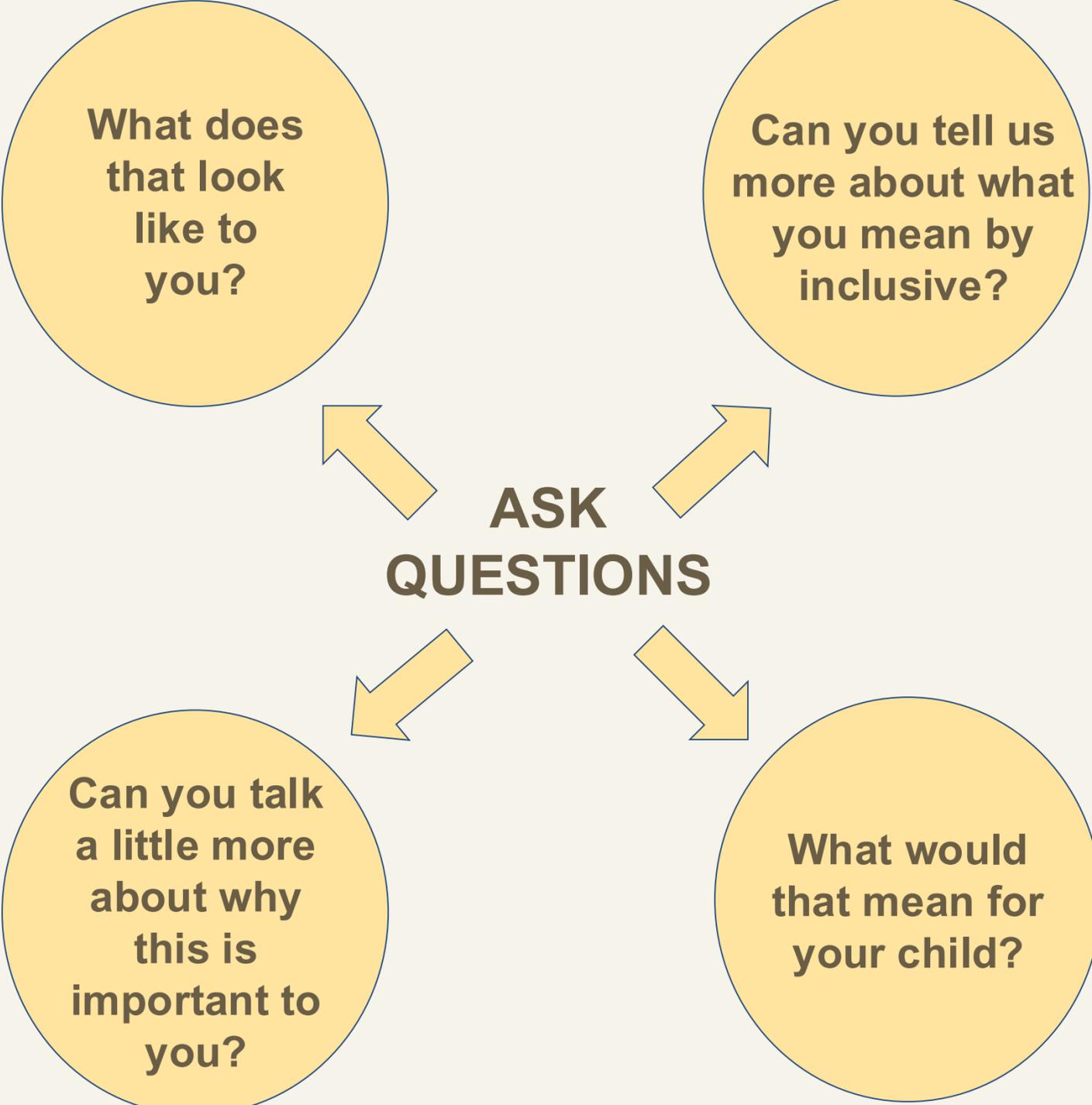


List of Interest Words

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	JUSTICE
APPRECIATION	PRIVACY
AUTHENTICITY	PROGRESS
AUTONOMY	REASSURANCE
BELONGING	RECOGNITION
CLOSURE	REPUTATION
DIGNITY	RESPECT
EQUALITY	SAFETY
EQUITY	SECURITY
FAIRNESS	STABILITY
FINANCIAL	TRUST
HOPE	WARMTH



Discovering Interests



Identifying Interests

Let's practice...

1. What questions can you ask to identify possible interests?
2. Based on the individual's response, what potential interests can you identify?

Context:

Maya (three years old) recently started in an inclusive preschool program with an IEP focused on speech goals. Her parents are very anxious because this is her first time away from home. During the first IEP meeting, the parents insist that Maya must be placed in a smaller, self-contained classroom immediately because she "cries every morning and is not eating her snack." The classroom teacher believes Maya is placed appropriately.



Identifying Interests

Let's practice...

Context:

Leo (four years old) is transitioning from preschool to Transitional Kindergarten (TK). His parents are adamant that he requires a 1:1 dedicated instructional aide to attend the district TK. The parents share that when Leo is home, he cannot be left alone for a second without climbing furniture or eloping. The district assessment team observes that in the structured preschool setting, Leo follows visual schedules well and stays with the group. The team does not believe a 1:1 aide is necessary for him to access his education in TK.

1. What questions can you ask to identify possible interests?
2. Based on the individual's response, what potential interests can you identify?



Thank you!



http://

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Pathways to Partnership, Special Education Resource Lead in Alternative Dispute Prevention and Resolution needs your feedback!

Please take a moment to complete this survey at your earliest convenience. Data from this survey will help our team provide beneficial resources across the state. Thank you so much for your time, we really value and appreciate your input.



Survey can be accessed here:

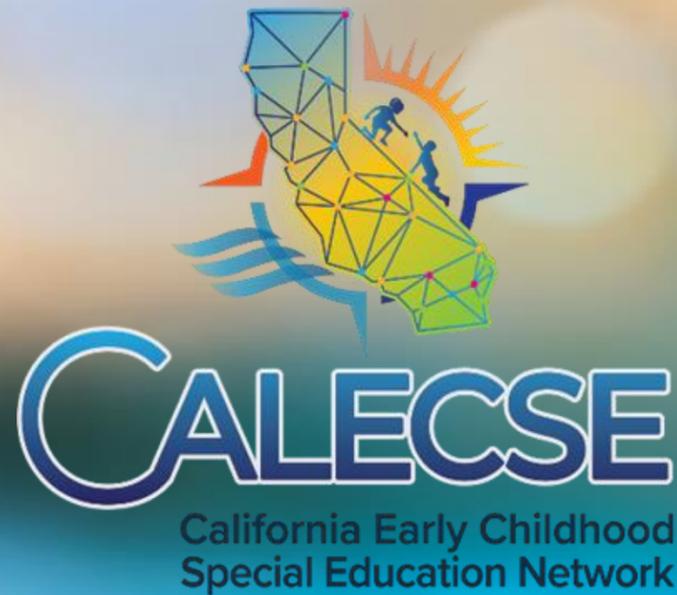
<https://tehamacountyselpa.jotform.com/240515077676865>

Pathways to Partnership (P2P) is part of the California System of Support and led by Tehama County Department of Education, Tehama County SELPA, Ventura County Office of Education and Ventura County SELPA. The project is funded by the California Department of Education (CDE) and the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE).



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