

Bridging  
the Gap  
Raise  
Model

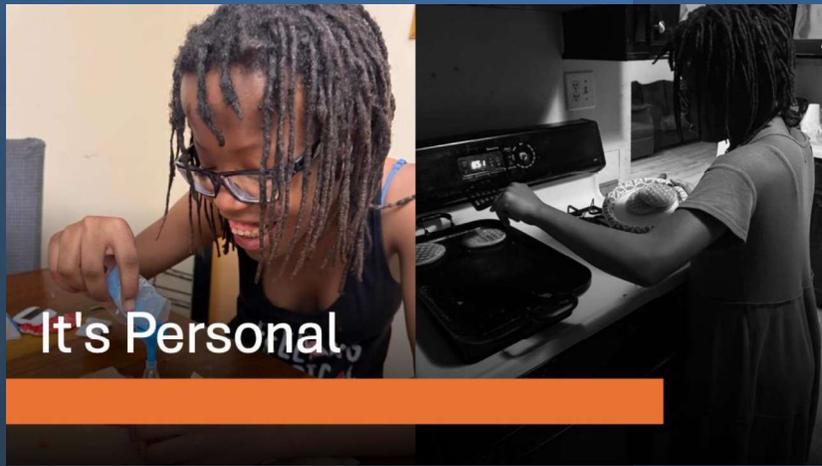


**B.E.S.T.**  
BE EXCEPTIONAL SUPPORT TOGETHER

MY WHY

ZOOEY MAMA





HELLO MY NAME  
IS ZAKARIA



TAKING OVER  
MY PEDICURE



Z LADY  
NAVIGATING  
THE BUS



NIGHT TO SHINE



NIGHT TO SHINE

Can you  
help me?



## Bridging the Gap: Applying the R.A.I.S.E. Model in Neurodivergent Support Systems

USI Annual Social Work Conference  
Breakout Session

Presenter: Dr. Alexis A. Nelson, PhD, MSW, LSW,



## Session Outcomes

### Participants will:

- Understand barriers in neurodivergent support systems
- Learn core functions of each R.A.I.S.E. pillar
- Identify engagement strategies for social work practice
- Apply R.A.I.S.E. to real-case scenarios



**R** – **Resources:** Connecting families to essential supports 

**A** – **Advocacy:** Helping families navigate systems confidently 

**I** – **Integration:** Bridging home, school, community, and services 

**S** – **Support:** Trauma-informed, culturally responsive care 

**E** – **Empowerment:** Building identity, voice, and confidence 

## Lived Experience and Community Voice— My Story

- 20+ years as a social worker supporting individuals & families with ID/DD
- My daughter, a teenager, is neurodivergent—making the work personal
- Parents began reaching out for help navigating IEPs/504s
- Families overwhelmed by terminology, emotions, and barriers
- Created B.E.S.T. to provide advocacy, support, and safe spaces
- R.A.I.S.E. was built from lived and professional experience

## Addressing stigma as a barrier



- Stigma silences advocacy
- Normalize neurodiversity through education
- Use inclusive, culturally aware language
- Share peer stories to reduce fear and shame





## Family-Centered Collaboration



### Parent-Led Support Groups:

- Emotional support, education, advocacy
- IEP/504 Advocacy:
  - Helping parents express concerns
  - Preparing families with knowledge and confidence



### Partnership:

- Schools, families, providers working together



## Early Intervention & Education Equity



- Community partnerships expand access
- Supports must reach disenfranchised neighborhoods

## Transition Planning Beyond High School



Move beyond pamphlets to **real**, supported pathways



Prepare youth for **employment**, higher education, and independent life skills



Youth need **coordinated** transition planning and consistent mentorship



Neurodivergent teens require **individualized**, strengths-based supports

# Bridging the System Through Partnerships



## Role-Play Activity



- Form teams and apply the **R.A.I.S.E.** model to the scenarios



- Work together to address each situation

## Scenarios: Apply the R.A.I.S.E. Model

- 1 The Private Parent:** A parent who grew up believing “what goes on in our home stays in our home.” Refuses to discuss their non-speaking child who has meltdowns & tantrums, falsely labeled as “bad” in the community.
- 2 The Lost Graduate:** A recent high school graduate with ID/DD was given pamphlets but no guidance. They don’t know what to do next and have no resources after leaving high school.
- 3 The School Disconnect:** A parent feels the IEP is not accommodating their child, leading to mistrust. The school feels the parent is against them. Both sides feel disconnected.

How can you use the **R.A.I.S.E.** model to navigate these situations?

# Reflection and Application

-  Where is the biggest **gap** in your community?
-  Which **R.A.I.S.E.** pillar could bridge it?
-  What partnerships can be developed this year?

## Key Takeaways

### R.A.I.S.E.



Lived experience drives strategy



Stigma reduction requires awareness & collaboration



Empowered families strengthen communities

SAVE THE DATE!  
REGISTER TODAY

PRESENTED BY  
BE EXCEPTIONAL SUPPORT TOGETHER  
(B.E.S.T.)

**DON'T  
Stare  
JUST  
Cope**

**EXCEPTIONAL  
ABILITY WALK**

JOIN US FOR A DAY OF  
**FUN AND INCLUSION**

**SAT. MAY 16TH, 2026 | 9:30AM**

MEET US AT  
HIDDEN LAKE PARK FOR A 2 MILE WALK,  
6355 BROADWAY, MERRILLVILLE, IN 46410



**REGISTER HERE**

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Be Exceptional Support Together (B.E.S.T.)

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“Empowerment starts where

**understanding** begins.”