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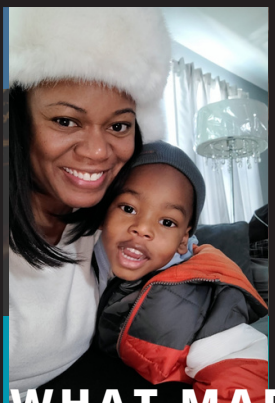
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MEET

AKILAH LINDLER

Parent Advocate of the Month

March 2026



WHAT MADE YOU ADVOCATE FOR YOUR CHILD'S EDUCATION?

Education is especially important to me as my son is very talented and I do not want him to be judged because people do not understand him. My son is only 4 years old, and the activities of toddlers are very unexpected. The world perceives those that are different by putting labels on what they do not understand out of ignorance. One of the most important reasons I chose to advocate is the growing tendency for non-clinical personnel to apply informal labels to very young children—using terms like “aggressive,” “threatening,” or references to conditions without proper evaluation or expertise. While educators play a vital role in observing children, they are not qualified to diagnose medical or developmental conditions, and yet these labels are often used prematurely or inaccurately. When such labels are introduced without evidence or professional assessment, they can quickly shift from observation to stigma, and from support to exclusion. As a “momma bear” and parental advocate, it is my duty to ensure that no one labels my child or any other child. In some cases, these assumptions become the basis for isolating a child or recommending removal from an educational setting—even when the circumstances do not warrant such conclusions. This is especially concerning for very young children, whose behavior is still developing and evolving daily. Parents must remain vigilant and informed, because once a label is placed on a child, it can follow them throughout their educational journey and into adulthood. Advocacy, in this sense, is about ensuring that decisions are grounded in facts, qualified evaluations, and fairness—not fear,

convenience, or misunderstanding. Every child deserves the fundamental right to be supported based on who they are, not defined by unverified assumptions. I reached out to the Arc of New Jersey and had the pleasure of meeting Adara Heilmann. This is where I learned that there was help and support for advocates like me. This wonderful organization helps by being an “Advocate” for “Advocates” especially when you feel the need to be “seen” and your voice heard. The Arc of New Jersey provides you with so much information that you do not have to feel alone on your journey. Education has always been deeply important to me because every child deserves to be seen, understood, and supported for who they are. Children learn, communicate, and engage with the world in different ways, and those differences should never limit their access to opportunity.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO EDUCATE YOURSELF ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION AND RELATED SERVICES?

Being my child's advocate means being his voice when he cannot fully speak for himself yet, and ensuring that his needs, strengths, and potential are clearly understood. It means staying informed, asking thoughtful questions, and working collaboratively with educators, organizations, other resources and support systems so that he has the same opportunities as any other child. Every advocate needs to know how to build their own “village” for support.

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Being perceived as “different” should not exclude children from being productive members of society. As an advocate, you put safeguards in place to help protect your child when there are unexpected challenges. Advocacy is a full-time job, and the reward is knowing that your child has everything they need to succeed. Advocacy also means recognizing that no one knows a child better than their parent. It requires balancing encouragement with guidance and being willing to step in when something doesn't feel right. It's an ongoing process- sometimes challenging, sometimes uncertain—but always rooted in love and intention. Ultimately, being an advocate means helping my child build confidence and resilience, while ensuring that systems designed to support children truly do so in equitable and respectful ways.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE OTHER FAMILIES ADVOCATING FOR THEIR CHILD'S RIGHTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION?

My first piece of advice is: don't feel alone, don't get burned out, and don't feel discouraged. The world of special education and support services can feel overwhelming, especially when families are navigating it for the first time. The Arc of New Jersey often publishes wonderful events on their social media pages. Another “go-to-place” for networking with other parents and free events is Eventbrite. I feel that not only should you be an advocate for your child but also encourage in other ways through activities that motivate through inclusion. My son loves playing soccer and his participation was well received because he felt a part of being on an accepted team. It's important to build a strong support network early—

whether that's through advocacy organizations, community groups, or trusted professionals—so you're not navigating complex systems by yourself. Educating yourself, asking questions, and seeking evaluations or guidance proactively can help ensure that decisions are made collaboratively and thoughtfully.

WHAT DOES BEING YOUR CHILD'S BEST ADVOCATE MEAN TO YOU?

Partnering with advocacy organizations has been one of the most valuable ways for me to learn and grow as a parent advocate. Organizations like The Arc of New Jersey provide not only educational resources, but also guidance, representation, and emotional support for families navigating unfamiliar territory. I encourage other parents to help by getting more involved and offering your time by volunteering with the Arc. Having knowledgeable advocates present in meetings made a tremendous difference for me. It transformed what initially felt overwhelming into a process I could understand and engage with confidently. Sometimes, simply having someone explain next steps or clarify terminology can help families feel empowered rather than isolated. Education isn't just about policies and procedures, it's also about feeling seen, supported, and reminded that you don't have to do this alone. Sometimes emotional support is all families need to help equip you with the tools to be an advocate for your child.

