

INTRODUCTION TO THE "WE KNOW BEST" T O O L K I T



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The National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) is the preeminent voice for Black children birth to age eight and their families. Since 1970, NBCDI has centered Black joy, brilliance, and thriving children and families. Our work is grounded in the strengths of local Black communities through our National Village Network with more than 20 grassroots organizations across the United States. NBCDI's work is guided by Afrofuturism, the belief that the systemic changes necessary for the liberated future and present that Black people deserve must come from their collective imaginations and vision. This practice of Afrofuturism demands the future that Black children need and deserve, free from the limitations of what already exists. Our work is based on the power of Black families and communities who hold the knowledge to shape that vision.

Black families are powerful advocates and champions for their children, despite the barriers and challenges they must navigate in systems that are often created without them and their children in mind. They hold a wealth of knowledge about their children's brilliance, exceptionalities, dreams, and needs. In the earliest years during preschool, as children learn and grow in more formal settings, assessments serve as a mechanism to measure what children know, are learning, and can do. Yet the design, implementation, and use of preschool assessments for three- and four-year-old children often overlook and exclude the nuanced experiences, knowledge, and needs of Black children—a direct result of Black families and children's marginalization from how assessments are created and used.

Imagining and building new systems is critical to achieving the future that every Black child deserves. Black parents need the tools, spaces, and networks to build and exercise the necessary power in the present to collectively identify and demand those changes now and into the future. The "WE KNOW BEST" toolkit (i.e., this introduction document, our preschool assessment guide, and the family journal) is the National Black Child Development Institute's way of tapping into the power you already hold as a parent, equipping you to lean into that power, and providing tools that strengthen your expertise. Guided by a vision of a better system of preschool assessments, the "WE KNOW BEST" toolkit is meant to harness the power of what you know best—your child. The toolkit is a way to build knowledge and power, not for the benefit of just your child but to help improve the quality of learning and assessments for all Black children through family advocacy.



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The current preschool assessment landscape is shaped by these implicit beliefs about Black children and their families: (1) Black children should be measured against standards based on white children and white cultural norms and (2) Black parents' knowledge and expertise related to their children's lives, culture, and experiences is secondary to what educators know and teach. These beliefs have created a world where assessments pathologize, punish, and limit Black children. In this environment, assessments often fail to capture the rich vibrancy of the diversity, creativity, and brilliance woven throughout Black children's unique learning experiences in their homes and communities. As a result, Black children can be subjected to harsh and overused discipline, placed in inappropriate remedial tracks, and offered misaligned supports—all while their unique strengths and needs are overlooked.

NBCDI is actively working to advance a future where preschool assessments protect, affirm, and expand opportunities for Black children ages three to four and, as a result, all preschool children. In this world, assessments will enable families and educators to work together, and Black children are safe, supported, and affirmed. Black children will be recognized for the joy, genius, and love of learning they already embody, while experiencing the freedom to discover and grow into their full potential. To bring that vision to the present, there must be a new foundation of values, beliefs, and ways of thinking to build a new system of preschool assessments.

In collaboration with leaders from our Village Network—through a series of convenings, conversations, and visioning sessions—NBCDI has developed a set of mental models (i.e., values, beliefs, and ways of thinking) that we see as the necessary foundation upon which to build the future of preschool assessments:

Assessments are rooted in educator and family partnerships that use diverse methods, measures, and tools to understand the whole child, including their strengths and needs through ongoing processes in the classroom, home, and community.

Parents and families are key decision makers and co-creators of assessment mechanisms. They are partners throughout the process, which includes collaboratively determining how assessments are developed and used, instead of just being informed of assessment results.

The expertise of parents and guardians about their child is honored. Assessments ideally expand and deepen knowledge about a child, while connecting parents' expertise at home with educators' expertise in the classroom.

Assessment results are used to create alignment between the home and the classroom, identify key resources to support children and families, and strengthen parent-teacher partnerships to best support children's growth and well-being.

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Shifting toward these new Afrofuturist mental models creates a foundation to shape the actions and decisions of everyone involved in a child's education—parents and families, teachers, assessment designers, school administrators, policymakers, and more. Those decisions will create structures, systems, and policies that create new patterns, experiences, and outcomes.

NBCDI recognizes that Black families have the vision, knowledge, and experiences to advance the Afrofuturist beliefs needed to demand new systems. Although the current system of preschool assessments often marginalizes Black parents and families, those parents and families are not silent or powerless. Instead, Black families need the right tools, language, and guidance to harness the power they hold. The "WE KNOW BEST" toolkit is designed as a first step toward building and wielding that power. It is meant to empower Black parents and families by affirming your positions as leaders and advocates.

As you hold this toolkit in your hands, you also hold the possibility and potential for change. We invite you to use this toolkit to not only advocate for your child but to share this vision with your community through engaging with [your local Black Child Development Institute Village](#) or other community organizations to build collective power.

This toolkit is a living document, and NBCDI wants to continue improving it for the benefit of Black children and families. However, we need to hear from you. Knowing more about how this toolkit is being used—and how you believe it can further support your child's educational experiences—will allow us to continue to build and improve this valuable resource. Contact us at moreinfo@nbcdi.org to share your insights, ideas, and vision.

