

EXCEPTIONAL  
NEEDS  
TODAY  


# An Innovative Approach to Serving Children with Disabilities

By **Areva Martin, Esq.** and **Arshya Vahabzadeh, MD**



---

ONE OF US IS A PARENT TO A CHILD WITH AUTISM, A LEADER IN ANTI-RACISM WORK, AND NEARLY 20 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE DEVELOPING LEADING SERVICES FOR FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES, PARTICULARLY THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN UNDERSERVED AND IGNORED. THE OTHER IS A PHYSICIAN SPECIALIZING IN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD) AND LEADING EXPERT IN THE WAYS PHYSICAL SPACES IMPACT SOCIAL COMMUNICATION, COGNITION, AND MOTIVATION. TOGETHER, WE HAVE WRESTLED WITH A MAJOR OBSTACLE TO SERVING FAMILIES BETTER—AND WE KNOW HOW TO OVERCOME IT.

---

More than 40 years ago, in developing guidelines to de-institutionalize services for people with disabilities, advocates secured the addition of well-intended language requiring that services be delivered “in the child’s natural environment.” That directive has been interpreted by many—including funders—to mean the child’s home environment. And while the home environment can be an ideal space for serving the children of middle-class and wealthier families, narrowly defining a “natural environment” to mean home overlooks the realities of those most critically in need and ultimately excludes many of them.

Los Angeles County alone has thousands of children needing services who live outside of middle or upper-middle-class circumstances. We witnessed this during the COVID-19 pandemic when children were expected to log into their online classrooms from home—many turned off their cameras, did not log in at all, and dropped out of school altogether.

Allowing people without the lived experiences of so many families to define how we deliver services overlooks the reality of many families. Some children live in homes that house multiple family members in a very small space. Some children are in the custody of foster care, in the juvenile justice system, or a system or residing in shelters. Some live with adult caregivers who are sleeping after working an overnight shift. Some live in families struggling with mental health issues or substance abuse disorders. Some lack available tables, chairs, or a clean, comfortable, well-lit space where services can be effectively delivered.

The limited definition of “natural environment” impacts provid-

## EXCEPTIONAL ADVOCATE

ers, too. Some behavioral health specialists we've tried to hire express feeling unsafe entering a child's home in the neighborhoods that need their services most. For organizations trying to hire staff, that presents major challenges.

Finally—and in this moment, perhaps most critically—the limited “natural environment” definition excludes settings like Special Needs Network’s innovative and comprehensive new Center for Autism and Developmental Disabilities (CADD) on the MLK Hospital campus in the Watts/Willowbrook neighborhood.

### The new “natural environment teaching”

As experts in serving children with autism, we have visited countless clinical spaces. When collaborating on the design of the CADD, we envisioned a space where families could experience a warm, natural environment that would inspire connection and nurture growth while making a meaningful and measurable impact.

It turns out scientific research reinforces that these welcoming spaces designed to model home and hearth are more conducive to positive outcomes. Not only that, but experts are already in practice creating these types of data-supported spaces. The designers at Plana Architects, who helped bring our vision to reality, take a research-informed approach that builds learning environments as places to foster curiosity and connection. Their Natural Environment Teaching (NET) designs integrate natural light and green spaces and treat every design decision including furnishings as a facilitator of learning and collaboration.

NET helps children with autism in several ways. It enables children to grasp a range of concepts, such as sitting in different types of chairs in different environments; enables children with autism to learn and practice skills in multiple settings that are deliberately crafted to mirror real-world situations; and allows the therapy to focus on topics of interest to the child, increasing the likelihood of retaining key skills and behaviors.

The NET-informed design at the CADD allows children to practice life skills in spaces like a light-filled kitchen where nutritious recipes are tested, a model bedroom where a young person

can practice making bed and folding clothes, and a game room and music center for teens to connect socially and challenge themselves with activities from laying their own music beats to hosting a podcast. Serving families there means delivering research-informed best practices that can have an enormous impact on children who might otherwise be out of our reach—but only if the guidelines dictating our work will allow it.



*Areva Martin, Esq. is an award-winning civil rights attorney, sought-after on-air legal commentator, and nationally recognized children's, women's and disability rights advocate. Since her son Marty's autism diagnosis, Areva has undertaken a broad range of initiatives to deliver culturally sensitive leading-edge interventions to historically marginalized populations. She is Founder and President of the Special Needs Network, one of California's largest and most effective autism organizations.*

[@arevamarin](#) [@arevamarin](#)



*Dr. Arshya Vahabzadeh, M.D., is a nationally recognized leader in psychiatry, innovation, and medical leadership. Dr. Vahabzadeh is deeply interested in neurodevelopmental disorders, including autism and schizophrenia. His research experience has encompassed several lines of study, including genetics, novel psychopharmacology and social cognition. He is a strong proponent of mental health education.*



# Autism Evaluation Resource


The Inland Empire Autism Assessment Center of Excellence (AAC) is a non-profit, evaluation-only center that provides a singular solution to a multi-specialty evaluation process.


✿ We provide the **“Gold Standard”** in Comprehensive Diagnostic Evaluations for autism and other neurodevelopmental disorders through a transdisciplinary team of experts in the fields of neurology, neuropsychology, occupational therapy, and speech and language pathology.

✿ We're a trusted resource for thousands of caregivers and hundreds of physicians for children with medical, behavioral, sensory, social, or other complexities.

We look forward to collaborating in supporting the children and families of our shared community!

**Call us today** (909) 799-3777 **Email us at** [info@ieaace.com](mailto:info@ieaace.com)

**More info**  
 [www.autismassessment4ie.org](http://www.autismassessment4ie.org)

**Follow us**  
 [@inlandempireautismassessmentcenter](https://www.facebook.com/inlandempireautismassessmentcenter)

 [ieautismassessment](https://www.instagram.com/ieautismassessment)

**COMMITTED TO PROVIDING THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF CARE**

YOU AND YOUR CHILD DESERVE THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF CARE FROM CHILD EXPERTS

