

ACR 214 final draft

Tue, Apr 23, 2024 4:00PM 58:22

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

kids, parents, child, accommodations, educators, teacher, iep, iep meeting, school, disability, great, work, book, goal, communication, people, talk, students, meeting, disabled

SPEAKERS

Veronica, Kelley, Chris

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development. I'm your host Dr. Christine Reeve. For more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education. But my real love is helping special educators like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research based practices in a practical way in your classroom, to make your job easier and more effective.

Hi, everybody, it's Chris Reeve with Autism Classroom Resources podcast and you are listening to Episode 214. And I am extremely excited for you to meet the guest that I am interviewing today. Her name is Kelley Coleman. She is the parent of a child with a disability who has written the most amazing book for families. But I think that there is a lot in it, that can really help us as educators as well. And I know I have a lot of parents out there. So I think it's a really useful resource for you all as well.

I'd like the fact that it is a rational practical approach for families to get support, and the information about having a child with all different kinds of disabilities. Because even if they have the same disability, it isn't necessarily the same. She also has templates that are provided for families on letter writing and checklists for visits and things like that, that I think are invaluable. And I really just think that her perspective is really, really great and how balanced it is.

And I'm particularly in love with her advice for IEPs. And as a family member, how you decide to hire a lawyer or get an advocate and how to make sure you have the right one to support you. Because over the years, I've seen a number of situations that don't work in the family's favor in those situations. And I think she has some really great tips for that. She also has a really terrific perspective on ableism and neurodiversity that she's going to share with us. So I'm gonna go ahead and stop talking so we can get to the interview. Let's get started.

Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources podcast. I am really excited for you to meet our

guest, Kelley Coleman today, who is going to talk about the parents' perspective. And help, you know, one of the things I talk about a lot on the podcast is just the the need to really think about what does our classroom look like from a parent's perspective? And how do we interact with our parents in a way that builds those positive parent relationships. So I'm really excited for her to share her story and book and her advice, which I think is just invaluable with us today. So with that, let's get started.

Kelley, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and tell us a little bit about your journey?

Yes. So my journey, the last couple of weeks has been a lot of listening to your podcast and just feeling like my people! Yes, yes to that. And like sending it to people and saying, you know, the thing I was trying to articulate? Oh, yeah, here it is articulated much better. So first, thank you for all that you are doing. It just breaks everything down in such a way that makes sense. And that is where my book is coming from, is how do we explain all these things in a way that actually makes sense and feels empowering and not overwhelming.

My own journey has been a lot of overwhelming. I'm the parent of two amazing kids. I could talk about them all day. My older son is 12. My younger son is 10. They are just the best of friends. They're weird and hilarious and wonderful in all their unique ways. My younger son is disabled, he has multiple disabilities, including a yet undiagnosed genetic syndrome. And within that sub diagnoses include autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, cortical visual impairment, feeding tube, microcephaly, sensory processing, cognitive, fine motor, gross motor, he's like, I'm just going to check all the boxes. I'm an overachiever. He's super handsome. And he is a happy, healthy kid. And this is this is his world, and we are just living in it.

And boy, I wish I knew that when we had started this journey when he was born, and when we started our diagnostic odyssey. We've done every test science has available and don't yet have the overall diagnosis. So the odyssey continues. And it will always be a learning process for me. He is part of a community that I am not part of as a non disabled person.

And so it's been a journey of learning, not just the paperwork and the planning and the acronyms and what the heck is an IEP and a financial plan for a kid who will never be fully in dependent and like all this stuff, and then also digging into my own stuff of before he was born, if you're like, hey, how do you feel about disabled people? I'd be like cool, they're great, whatever. And after he was born, if I really felt that way, I wouldn't have been just so shaken by having a kid who has diagnostic odyssey started when he was an infant, and just kind of unlearning all of the bias, and confronting that in others, whether that is the big picture: the systems in the bureaucracy, or educators, fortunately, I am super biased towards teachers.

My kids are in public schools that have served them very well. We've had a few people who have absolutely discounted Aaron, my younger son, because he has this disability, or this or this, or this, and they're just putting these ceilings on him that are not only not fair, but are just exhausting for all

of us. And then he's blowing through those ceilings. And I don't want to be like, Yeah, I told you so. But as you know, you meet one person with a disability and you've met one person with a disability. And there are certainly those with lived experience that we might be able to look to for ideas.

But you know, my kid is kind of, in my opinion, the ultimate example, because he's my kid and he's awesome, of really individuals writing their own stories. If he gets a diagnosis, he might be the only one in the world with it. And so we can't put him in a box of autism, CP, epilepsy, CVI like, whatever the box is, he's like, that's cool. I'm just gonna, like walk right through the box.

And so the journey for me has been about all of the things and all of the emotions. And I think it's so important, whether it's in the book, it's called Everything No One Tells You About Parenting a Disabled Child, Your Guide to the Essential System Services and Supports. And it's how the heck to like, do the paperwork, do the planning, so that you can be a parent, and spend time with your kid and genuinely love them and do the things with them exactly as they are.

And it is a different journey for all of us. And I acknowledge and the book acknowledges it's hard sometimes. My kid and who he is, as a human isn't hard, and he's great. Sometimes he drives me crazy when like, he wants to go this way. And I want to go this way. But you know what all kids do that. And it's so important to talk about the hard things of caregiving, the hard things of working in special education, as a teacher, as a therapist, as a one to one aide, my son's one to one aid is incredible. However, we are coming at it, these aren't the quote unquote, easy kids. But they're the kids where we are learning the most and where we are really able to just see these incredible things.

My other kids incredible, too. He's also great, but we need to talk about what's wonderful, what's hard, and acknowledge the fullness of the experience. And I have that conversation over and over. As I was writing this book, there are over 40 experts featured in here, many of whom are disabled themselves. And saying it's okay to acknowledge that being disabled is harder than not. And if we tiptoe around it, it's like this unspoken horribleness of like disabilities real bad, huh? I can't even talk about it. We can't say seizures are hard because that that sounds like we're dissing disability. No, it's not seizures are hard.

So it's been this incredible learning experience for me and opportunity for me to be in community with all of these experts and say, How can we acknowledge caregiving as a job in addition to parenting, and there's a whole lot of overlap, and how can we build systems that teach us the caregiving stuff, so that we actually have the capacity to do the parenting stuff. And you know what, sometimes that is like, ice cream is dripping on our hands and we're sitting at the park and just like goofing around and making funny sounds, and for me, I have to be able to check off a lot of this awful paperwork in order to feel like I have the space to do that.

I love that and I love the fact that you focus on how all of our kids are so have different. You know, we were talking before we got on the recording that, you know, I have an older sister with autism and nobody realized that that's what she had. And of course, her experience would be very different than

somebody with Autism now, and it's constantly a journey of growth really of figuring out what's what's going on.

One of the things you do and one of the things I love about the book is your inclusion of the individuals with disabilities and the way you talk about disability. Because I think that's something that is really something that we're struggling with, as a society as well as just across the board, you give a really good description of ableism in your book. And I think that this is something that a lot of people in schools are really struggling with. How do we respect and recognize the diversity of our students while we're also teaching other students how to support them with compassion?

I was doing a training a couple weeks ago, and that was one of the questions is, you know, how do you handle this kid's behavior when all the other kids are just going to think that they're getting away with it? And I'm like, Well, there's a balance here. And it's hard. Can you talk a little bit about your experiences with ableism? And kind of what that means to you?

Yes, this could be a 12 hour podcast in and of itself. And I love that you brought this up. We're at a point when it is being acknowledged so much. And wouldn't it be nice if there was like a clear how to path of like combat ableism 101, let's do this. There's not listen to disabled people, it's not awkward for them to talk about it. Oh, because disability isn't awkward, right?

So ableism, for those who haven't wrapped their brains around it at all, is bias against people based on their disability. And as we know, disabilities might be visible, they might not be visible. And it can be very complicated. And I think school is a great example of the complexity of different individuals might want to acknowledge their disability differently. And certainly, as kids, we need to respect their privacy, gain their consent, include them in any conversations about their personal medical information, which their disability is.

For my kid, he is visibly disabled. And he is loud and proud with all the things, quite literally, very loud everywhere, because that's his thing. He cheers with joy at the grocery store and at airplanes, and every time he sees a swimming pool. He makes himself very visible. He is very social and very outgoing. So we are able to follow his lead. And whether it's in a school setting, with kids, at the park, anywhere, we don't really need to explain like he's disabled, like you could kind of figure that out pretty fast. But we certainly talk about it very openly, because that is in line with his consent and his comfort level.

Especially looking at kids whose disabilities are not visible. And kids that I'm friends with. And you know, the parents of kids have voiced this to me so many times saying, my kid doesn't want the teachers to say, Oh, this this kid likes to do the flapping and the squealing every time she sees an airplane, because of her disability, because of her neuro divergence, because she's autistic, like whatever the thing is, it's really tricky, because some kids are not comfortable having that information shared. And educators and staff might have different information than students might have.

And my son's team has been phenomenal with frequent and open communication. And as educators that is a great way to just make everything easier for everyone. I know it can be different and trickier in some situations than others. Always check in with the parents if you are not able to certainly gauge from the student, their comfort level with talking about the disability with others, and with other kids versus with other adults. And we need to be sure that we are not using the disability to quote unquote explain away negative behaviors.

I will use my son again as an example is can be very loud during movies and squealing and cheering at times that might not seem appropriate to others. And someone once in the movie theater said to us, they didn't see my kid they were some behind us there said, "Hey, can you please keep her keep your child quiet?" and I said I wish I could this is quiet for him. Thank you for understanding. I did not say I'm so sorry. He's disabled. Oh I'm so sorry. He's autistic, has CP, is intellectually disabled, like, I don't use his disability as a like I'm so sorry.

Number one, because I don't want my child to move through life, hearing me apologizing for who he is as a human. I want him to be proud of all of the parts of himself. And so instead of I'm so sorry. And I've had to retrain myself, because I used to do that. And then felt really yucky about that after a conversation with an autistic adult friend. And it was like, Oh, I got to knock that off. And so we shifted to, thank you for understanding, which is often a great default, and it might take effort to to make that shift, but that's okay, we can make the effort.

And then when looking at school settings, oftentimes, frequency equals familiarity. If you see my kid one time, and one time only, he's the weird kid. Because he moves differently, walks differently, holds the pencil differently, chews on things, make sounds, asks for music, communicates with the device, like all the things, because it is this isolated, like, Whoa, you're not like everybody else. No, he's not. Surprise!

If we are able to integrate the students, to foster inclusion, we do not have to force friendships that are not genuine, but having our students around one another. And when we are able to give other students the language, and sometimes sneakily, we give them our opinion about disability, for example, you know, we get a lot of staring with my son's feeding tube. Alright, most people have never even heard of a feeding tube. I certainly hadn't before my baby got one, surprise, whoo! feeding tubes, it turns out are not a big deal. You know, when people are staring, and adults are super awkward, kids are rarely awkward. Kids are just like not weird. They're like, Hey, what's that? I'm like, Hey, come over.

And I see a kid staring and I'll say, how cool is that? Come here and check it out! Again, because my son is super into that and very social. And when I'm saying how cool is that? Is a great phrase, which is a code for, "this actually isn't weird." And my son cheering loudly for airplanes, every time they pass over our school, thank goodness is in a flight path of an airport because he loves the airplanes.

And so when the kids on the playground see him squealing and cheering and like doing all the things because of its enthusiasm for the airplanes, if we're like, Oh, I'm so sorry. Is he interrupting your soccer game? He's real loud. I'm so sorry. Is so different than, how cool is that that he is so excited about the airplanes? Do you guys want to come dance with us? Cool.

It's okay for other kids to not know how to react or what to do. Or if they see an accommodation to feel like, wait why does this kid get extra time on the test? We don't have to spell out the child's IEP accommodations. We all know that's not appropriate. But we can say different people need different things. You are getting what you need for how your brain works. How cool is that that we are able to give Sally the accommodations she needs for how her brain works? You know what if your brain needed this, you'd get it too. But you don't need it.

It's kind of like, well, I wear glasses you want to wear? Do you think everybody needs some? Because I guarantee you if you look through my glasses, you're not going to see anything and you're going to be disabled?

Yeah, that's exactly uh, glasses are such a great example that I often use. And I love that you brought it up. Because I think people don't think of glasses as an accommodation. Because they are so prevalent if hearing aids, mobility, AIDS, service dogs, all these things were as prevalent as eyeglasses, they would be no big deal.

I think that's exactly right. I think that's a great discussion, because I think it's just it is tough. And I think that a lot of people still have that idea that I grew up with a mom who, when I could do my homework in front of my television, at the television, and my sister needed to be in a quiet place doing hers, her answer was when she would get upset about it. I'm sorry, that's not fair. That's what you need. That's what she needs. And her whole thing was and she said it until the day she died was my daughter keeps reminding me that I always say that life's not fair. But life's not fair. It's it's fair in that we can accommodate for things, but not the idea that everybody gets the exact same thing. That's not how fairness works.

And also like, life isn't fair. It's not fair that I have to wear glasses and someone else has perfect vision. Like, that's not what we're aiming for. Again, with the experts in the book, something that was reiterated over and over, that I just talk about so often with people is accommodations are not extra, period. And it is so important for children who are receiving or who might receive accommodations. And also like to teach this to everybody, that accommodations are not extra. Because there as we know, there are conversations that will happen that the educators will not hear.

And if we can strengthen our own children's resolve in, you are not getting something extra, you're not getting a bonus that nobody else is getting, because you get a better parking spot next to the grocery store. No, you know, you need that accommodation, because we need the room and the

doors and you to not run across and drop onto the hot pavement. Like it is an accommodation. That is not extra, that is access. And that is what we are all looking for is access.

And there are so many accommodations that can be made many of them very easily. And if we are teaching our kids, not just, hey, these are the accommodations you're getting. And this isn't a bonus, this isn't anything extra you're getting. And if anybody tells you it is that is actually not correct. This is equal access, just like eyeglasses.

And that's what all of special ed is. That's exactly what it's designed to be. I know you talk in your book about some of the some of the challenges and successes that you've had in finding a good fit in school for your son. Can you talk a little bit about what you would like educators to know, for instance, about meeting parents for the first time and like what, for a parent's perspective, what is really important to them, to you?

From a parent's perspective being heard. And that can look different for me, depending on how much sleep I've had. Sometimes I'm very articulate and make a lot of sense. Other times I'm just all over the place because I haven't slept in three weeks. From a parent's perspective to educators, the parent coming to you and into special education has very likely been through the wringer. And this is both an emotional decision for them, as well as such a relief because here is someone who is trained at how to work with my child. And each parent experience is very different.

But if educators were to say to parents, I want to get to know you and your child. And I want you to be a partner in this process so that we can work together to teach your child, to support them as themselves. And I need your help. And getting to know your child. And also into listening when I'm telling you what I'm seeing at school, the good as well as the challenging, so that we can be partners in this process. And I think that is such a relief for parents, because that tells me I can trust you.

The very few relationships with educators I've had, where I haven't felt that trust and for very legitimate reasons, I have felt like the parent who needs to micromanage every single thing. And that's exhausting for everyone. And educators, you guys know what to do and you don't need me micromanaging you unless you do. Rather than pushing parents away because you're afraid like, ohhh here comes the micromanager, bring them in closer and say we need to trust each other for this to work. I will come to you and I want you to come to me. Let's be sure we can always trust each other. I will communicate with you.

And especially for parents where there is a language challenge between the teacher and the parent, there are some incredible, well-educated, amazing parents whose first language is not the same as yours and just be sure to reiterate I want you here. I want to be in communication with you. I want you at the IEP meeting. Do not be shy about asking for clarification, about communicating through a translation app. We want you there is huge.

Yeah. I think fostering that that inclusive piece there as well is so so important. What do you see as how parents can foster the best relationship with their child's school and how can their child school help them to develop that, that positive relationship?

I start out the year, especially with new teachers, with lots of enthusiasm. And we've have good reason for that. And our son loves school. Number one, I reach out to the teachers and say, what is the best way for us to communicate? What works best for you? So if parents find out just their teacher prefer, emails, phone calls, scheduled conferences, talking at drop off or pickup, and if we can just establish what is the best way to communicate, that's great. And parents know that if a staff member reaches out to you, it's not just to say like, Oh, your kid's behavior challenges have surfaced again. It might be to say he wrote his name. Be sure to look at what I put in the backpack, he wrote his name, this is amazing!

They want to communicate. So start right off the bat with that communication. Our son is a complex communicator, and has an IEP like a phone book, we just had our annual IEP meeting last Friday, and it's a long one. What I do as a parent, it is more work on my end, but it just is such a shorthand for conversation. And if I can make the teacher's job easier, then it's, it's better for everybody. And also, frankly, for the other students.

My son has many IEP goals. I find IEPs to be absolutely frustrating to read. And we need a graphic designer to like redo it and give us a table of contents. But we don't have that yet. So I type up a list of hey, here's our shorthand for the goals so that all of our service providers and teachers just have that. They can read it, they cannot read it. But I often hear wow, that was really helpful, because it took me 30 seconds to just glance and see, oh, these are the classroom communication goals. Got it.

And for our son, and many friends do this, I was inspired by another friend who does this, we type up a one page sheet with an adorable picture of my kid and say, "Here's the quick summary of his vision statements. Here is what he's working on. Here is what motivates him. Here's what doesn't work. Here's what is challenging for him. Here's what he absolutely loves." And as a parent, it's a great snapshot to have at the beginning of every school year, to be saying, like, wow, we really have seen growth and progress since I typed this up. And for the teachers, it's very helpful to know my kid is not motivated by food, he is not motivated by the toy that you offered him. He is very motivated by music. He is very motivated by the break, look for an airplane come back in.

I love that when you talk about breaks on your podcast, you talk about how it can be so different from one person to the next. And individualizing that is so key to making that meaningful to the child. And that it supports the whole team because when that child has the break that they individually need, then they can come back and have the focus and the mental space to say cool, let's learn about the Constitution, I'm in, that they might not have had before.

So really giving our, our staff the shorthand for here's what works, here's what we're working on. And then parents trusting the staff. and trusting the teacher. if you have an aide. trusting the aide enough

...to step away and say I'm going to check back in with you. I will trust that you are holding yourself accountable to my child, to everything we've agreed upon. And that you will come to me with questions. And if I am always the phone call that they want to return and the parent that they are comfortable reaching out to, they will reach out to me.

If they know I'm going to be yelling and screaming every time they call. They don't want to call me. So be the phone call that the teacher wants to make. Because if my teacher is just stumped on what a break should look like for my child or how to address an accommodation that maybe doesn't seem to be fitting quite right or how to implement a behavior plan, like whatever the thing is, be the parent that the teacher actually wants to talk to. Sometimes it can be hard. IEP meetings are hard even with a great team like ours, it can be hard to keep ourselves in check as parents, but you will never regret being the phone call that the teacher wants to make.

I think that's really, really good advice. And I think it's one of the things that is really hard, because there's a lot of emotions that go into it. And there's a lot of sometimes frustration and, and it is a lot of trust. It's a lot of trust for any parents of any child, to send their child to school, and know that they're getting what they need. But when you have a child who can't always tell you about their day, and things like that, that trust becomes even more important. So I think that's a really, really good point.

But I also appreciate the fact that you have recognized several times, and you noted in your book as well, that, you know, they're coming into a classroom where the teacher has training in this. And I think sometimes it's finding that balance of working with families and recognizing, as I always say, they're the experts in who their child is. And we have expertise on the education side of how to educate. We have to figure out how to make those two things go together in the same way that we do figuring out how every child is different, and how do we meet their needs. I've got the skills, it's not a one size fits all kind of thing. And families are the same way.

Absolutely. And I think, as I said before, so many of us and me included, are coming into the education system where we already feel like we have been knocked around by so many systems. And it can be very easy to vent all of our frustrations on to, rightfully are not often not, on to our educators, because they're there. And they are with our kids for many hours. Parents need to know there might be a perfect school for your child, there might not be a perfect school for your child.

If I were to create the perfect school for my son, it would be different than his school. We are very happy with his school. He is respected and educated and individualized and like all the things with his team. But is it perfect? No. And that's okay. And we need to work with what we have. There will be teachers or parents who are challenging. There can be people who are not the right fit. Overwhelmingly, the right people will show up in your life.

And we really need to give one another the chance to be the right person and to work as a team. And we need to remember, sometimes the challenging people will remain on our team. Sometimes for

years. Sometimes you won't see them much, but then they show up in that IEP meeting. And they're the challenge. Think about how you are dealing with the people, you might not enjoy it. But they might be on your IEP team for years. And they might be the gatekeeper to your child getting the services and supports that they are legally entitled to, under federal law, to receive a free and appropriate public education.

And you need to be sure that their understanding of appropriate is in line with what is actually appropriate for your child. You as a parent need to be reasonable about what is appropriate for your child and to listen to your team, as well as to stand up and advocate for your child as well as teach your child to metaphorically stand up and advocate for themselves to the degree that they are interested and able. It is a lot. But it can work.

And I think those are really good observations. And I think a lot of times, for instance, teachers find themselves in between the person who makes those decisions about the services and the families that they're working with so closely. And it's it's hard not to see you talk in your book about what I've had every family ever that I've worked with experience of walking into an IEP with all the people behind the table and you. And it's it's frightening. And it's really easy to look at all those people and say, they're all of one mind.

And, you know, it's one of the things I work with teachers on a lot is the idea that we do need to advocate for our students. Sometimes there is a carefulness of how we do that within our systems. But it's important that if you know this child and you know what he means that you're willing to say that and that the way to say that isn't necessarily to go to mom and dad and say, you need to say, because when that comes back around, it's not gonna work out well.

And may I build on that? I love everything you're saying I'm like, yes, that! Here's a way to make IEP meetings way harder. Don't be in communication with your teacher and with your service providers, and then just show up and it's all a surprise to everybody. Who knows how it's gonna go! You know how it's gonna go? Poorly! We have, and yes, it is effort. And it is time. If you want to not dread IEP meetings, be in communication throughout the year. Request all of the evaluations and goals and everything well, in advance.

We request ours, about two months in advance of the actual IEP meeting. That gives, everybody noticed that they need to work on the reports, and it gives them time to do it. We read everything in advance. And then I speak with every team member in advance of the meeting. We all know that we cannot make or discuss the actual offer of services prior to the IEP meeting, that is the job of the meeting and the job of the team together. But what we can do is we can clarify and be on the same page, when I'm saying my son does that in school, really, I have no idea, you know, good or bad, often good. He's doing a lot of great things.

If there's a goal, I'm like, This sounds like it was copied out of a gold bank. And I have no idea what it means. Can you explain this to me, please? Not only does it save time in the meeting, but it allows

me as a parent to actually be an equal team member, because I understand going into things. And then if there is disagreement about what is being offered in terms of placement, curriculum, accommodations, goals, service hours, summer school, like, whatever it is, we have a framework for conversation. We've been talking throughout the years so I have a sense of how my child is evolving and learning and developing.

And if there is disagreement, instead of just saying that's unacceptable, and crying. By the way, if you need to cry in your meeting, like there's no shame, like cry in the meeting. We all do that, for good or bad reasons. But we actually can have a conversation. And we can use the meeting to not just be taken by surprise with what people are saying, but to view the IEP as an ongoing conversation about your child. And then it becomes an actual discussion with the team where you are able to be an equal team member. And it is way less intimidating.

We have a dozen people from the school district and our meetings, it's a lot. But it is less intimidating because I've been talking with them throughout the year. I've been talking about, you know, the adaptive PE program with the adaptive PE coach and hearing what he's doing. So I'm not like, Oh, who's this fellow? The communication, it is the work that makes this feel doable. Because it makes you feel like you are a part of things and that you can trust this team. And that you guys can really come to genuine agreement on what is appropriate for your child, pairing their expertise with the curriculum and the supports and all the things with your expertise as the person who lives every single day with your child.

I think that's an excellent example and an excellent description. And I love the idea that and I something I try to really impress upon educators as well that the IEP is not a one time of year process. You know, I think in in past years, people have looked at IEP s and it's like, well, we wrote the IEP and now we're done. It's like, no, the IEP is a living document. And, you know, we're following it but it's really helpful if you let people know, like, what's going on with it, and, and all those kinds of things. So I love that idea that just that communication becomes so important for how the team works well together, that it's not just, we all come to a meeting and have a discussion and then we're done.

Absolutely. And that you can discuss the IEP with all of your providers without calling an IEP meeting. You won't make changes to it. But you can discuss, you can gain understanding, and you can get recommendations.

For example, our son had a goal that included lowercase letters, and we realized that lowercase letters are much more complicated for him than uppercase letters. I knew that because his teacher was in frequent communication with me. And she said, Can we do an amendment to the IEP that is still in full support of this goal, but makes that simple change from lowercase to uppercase? Because I don't believe he will achieve this goal with lowercase letters. I believe he will achieve it with uppercase, and we can build in the lowercase. And once he blows through the uppercase goal, let's add that in. And that was a great example, we are able to hold a brief and delightful amendment IEP that best served my child based on the teacher's expertise. And that's a great example of making everyone's jobs easier.

Yeah. And it's a good example, too, of why I talk a lot about data with teachers and the need to take the data as we go. Because we don't want to get to the point where we get to the end of the IEP and go, Well, he didn't make it. It's like, well, how did we not know that? Like, Was he making it for three quarters and then he like fell behind last quarter? No, he stopped making it in the first quarter. Well, why weren't we talking about it in the first quarter?

And you know, that data becomes really important to it should be informing or instruction. And that I think people, people dread IEPs so much. And it's like, I don't want to call another IEP. Because a lot of times, for instance, IEPs get passed down from last year's teacher to this year's teacher and last year's teacher wrote it, and then you read it and you're like, because I get frequent, you know, what does this mean? And some of them look at them, like, I have no idea what that means you need to rewrite the goal. Because if no one on the team understands the goal, like ask the family find out what they thought the goal was. But if nobody understands the goal, we're not going to be able to teach the goal.

Yeah! Thank you, yes, that!

But people are just like, but then we'll have to have an IEP and I'm like, it doesn't have to be long IEP. Just fix the goal. And you're gonna, you're gonna think yourself, like your future self will thank you for that. Because at the end of the year, you won't be facing, well, why didn't we address this earlier problem.

Yes. And for and again, I just want to like underline everything you're saying. So to underline what you're saying, this so important for educators and especially for parents. It does not make you look foolish to say, I don't understand this. It makes you look active and interested. And that's what you are. I don't know any parent who's like, I don't really care. No, like, it's not what the parenting thing is. It is actually empowering and shows that you are all in if you say, Okay, can we stop for a sec? We just talked about an acronym or what what was this word or the thing?

Or I often say because of how I process things, can you just read out loud, exactly the same thing that you just said and read a little bit slower so I can think about it because I have questions. And I just don't understand anything. I don't even know what the questions are right now. And don't be afraid to stop and say, I have no idea what this goal means. When you wrote this in the present levels of performance. Huh? What? I don't know. That gets you respect from the team. And that also gives them a comfort level of asking for clarification from you.

And in our IEP meetings, I am never surprised at how close or far my child has come to meeting the goals because it has been an ongoing conversation. And these don't need to be long conversations. It can be a quick text or email or high five at the gate when the teacher says, Oh my gosh, okay, so your your kid math, not so much. The first three months have kind of been wash. Here's what we're

doing. We're still working on this goal, but it's a hard one. But this handwriting goal, Whoa! Like, we need to make this harder. It doesn't have to be a long and involved conversation. It can be some quick high fives at drop off.

Yeah. And especially if you've been having those conversations as it goes along. And I'll be the first to say, I write goals. And I go back and I look at him go, what was he thinking? It's like, that made perfect sense when I wrote it. But now, not so much. And sometimes, you know, we write goals at the end of the year and he comes back and he's like, Well, that's a different child. That's not the kid who left here in the summer. So you know, change is the way it's supposed to be. And I think that we've in a school it is a monumental effort to try to get everybody together. But you don't always need everybody to make some of those changes. And I think sometimes we forget that.

Absolutely. And there are, for example, in a small amendment IEP meeting, there have absolutely been times when I always put everything in writing always put everything in writing, that I put in writing to our assistant principal who coordinates the meaning that I am waiving having this list of service providers there, because we don't need a dozen people to change this goal from uppercase to lowercase. If you are comfortable with that, I will waive that. Here's who I would like to have in the meeting go team.

That's really useful. What if parents aren't sure about what is the best placement for their child? What would you recommend?

I recommend validating that first and foremost, because many of us aren't sure. There is very often a leap of faith that families need to take. Even with my older son who is not disabled. He started Middle School this past year, and the school seemed great. And the teachers seemed great. And our visit was great. But there was a leap of faith because we were choosing between different programs.

Know that you will have to take some level of a leap of faith. How can you feel good about that? Number one, just decide, that you are going to do the best with the information that you have and you are not going to beat yourself up over it. If it seems like Oh, should I have chosen something else? No, you're doing the best with the information you have.

What can you do to help you make that decision and to feel confident about it? Number one, know there might not be a perfect school. And if you dig in your heels and get very angry that there's not a perfect school, then you need to start your own school. Most people aren't going to do that. I have a friend who did that. And it's amazing. You're probably not going to do that. If you are start yesterday.

Number two, visit the campus. Visit it at a time when there are students there, meet the teacher in advance, meet the administrators in advance, know that there's not a guarantee that any of these people will be working there next year because everything can change. But it is absolutely

appropriate to ask, Oh, teacher who will be teaching my child next year, have you been at the school for a long time? If someone's like, six months, and I can't wait to get out of here, it stinks! There's information. If the teacher says I've been here for 12 years, and I will be here till I retire, that is also information. The administrators might change but it is totally appropriate to ask them.

And visit the classroom when it is in session. Make an appointment to do so. Make sure that you will be seeing it and not just when the kids are eating lunch. But to kind of see what goes on and how your child would fit in there. And whether that is a special education classroom. My child splits his time between a special ed class and a gen ed class. And for him, that is absolutely the right fit. The right fit is different for everyone.

There are kids who are purely in a special education setting be that in the classroom or a special education school. There are kids who are homeschooled, there are kids who are privately schooled. There are many kids who are in a general education setting with the supports that they need to access their education. Be sure you get a sense of things and that you talk to your student about that. And about here's what's going to be great, here's what might be challenging, can you communicate to me when it feels challenging and when it feels great. I want to hear everything, you are never a burden. If you're like man, I'm having a hard time at school, involving our kids in the process to the extent that we are possible.

When my son goes to school, and the look on his face, and on his iPad communication device, when he's saying want go school. Go away, Mom, go away Mom, and then starts naming his friends is the most amazing thing. Because that is information and always get the information from your kids. Because that will certainly help to put your mind at ease. And if you see any challenges on the horizon, really try and communicate with the staff and with your child to work through those. And hopefully the answer will be Wow, this is the right placement.

Thank you. That's awesome. I'm going to finish up. One of the things you talk about a lot in the book that I really love is the importance of teaching students to advocate for themselves. And I tend to look at most of what we do in behavioral support and in education is focused on that skill. You know and why to me, it's so important because it's great that we understand that he has a disability and he needs his accommodations. But that's not always going to be the case. And that's not what we want for him in the long run either. Can you talk a little bit about why that is so important?

Yes, and I love how you approach self advocacy in your world, as this foundational building block that it is. Children and adults, we are all very different communicators. My son is a very complex communicator. And so his self advocacy looks very different than a child who can sit down and have a verbal conversation in a way that you're having a conversation right now. I have a child who can't do that, in all areas, school and elsewhere.

And I love that when you talk about behavior, you so often talk about self advocacy. Because when we are able to tell our children that we want them to advocate for themselves, we want them to

communicate, not just to communicate, Mom, this is great. But mom, I'm having a hard time. Teacher, this is too overwhelming for me, I can't do this today. Whatever the thing is, all behavior is communication. And we need to know and believe that and to validate every bit of our child's communication, even if that is a quote, unquote, maladaptive or negative or challenging behavior.

And I have a kid who has lots of that, and we do have behavior supports. And so much of it comes back to the self advocacy. If he is able to tell me what he would like his break to look like, what music he would like to listen to during his break, that he needs people around him, that recess is too much for him for the day, that sets him up to succeed as he is, not to feel in any way like he has to mask and fit into the box that everybody else wants him to fit into. I don't know what box he wants to fit into or leap out of, unless he is communicating that. And again, for him, his communication is emerging. And it looks different for all students.

And in our IEP meeting was a great example of building in that self advocacy. One goal was suggested that focused on him communicating appropriately to participate in non preferred activities. And we looked at that as a team and we said, Actually, appropriate communication during a non preferred activity would be a no thank you, I don't like this, I need a break. And refusal of that activity is actually appropriate, because that is non preferred. It doesn't mean you never have to do anything that's non preferred. It means advocating in that moment and the adults who are teaching him saying, I hear you. If this is something we have to do, now I know this is how you feel about it. These are the supports and accommodations we will put in place. This is the break, this is the extra time, this is the lots of loud music that you might need, that allows the appropriate communication to happen.

We are not trying to force him to say, I love this puzzle, because he doesn't love that puzzle at all. That's not self advocacy. And my goal for both of my children in self advocacy is the same. It will look different for them based on their different abilities. For Aaron, within all of his disabilities, which are never going to just magically go away. They are part of who he is and all of his amazing self, we need him to express his likes, his dislikes, his wants, where it hurts, when he's hungry, if he feels unsafe, what he loves, what his passions are.

We're building towards him fully self advocating for himself as a full human. And when we can build that in at school, it's not always easy because he's not always going to want to do the thing, but we can validate that and we can support him in all of the accommodations because we're hearing that from him. And that makes our job easier as educators and as parents because we're not having to guess why he's tantruming on the floor. We're able to say, I will give you this accommodation that we know is what you need so that you don't feel the need to tantrum on the floor, which is also communication.

I think that's excellent. That's one of the things I really really love about your book. I like its practical approach, the balanced approach that you have of recognizing that everything's not going to be, you know, sunshine and roses, it's not all going to be perfect. And this is how you deal with the times that it is. And it isn't.

I also really love that you have templates that you provide for family for letter writing, and checklists, and all those things that I think are so invaluable. And just your advice on IEPs, and how to make decisions about how to deal with things when you're not sure that you really agree with everything. And all those kinds of things I think are really helpful for families. And I'm for also helpful for the people who work with families to have an understanding kind of what they're going through. Because until you've walked in their shoes, you don't always know exactly, you know, I'll be the first to say I have a sister with autism, but I don't know what it's like to be a mom of a kid with autism. I know what it's like to be a sister of someone with autism. It is a very different experience. And so I think that that is really, really, really important. And I really appreciate that.

Thank you so much. That as you know, we're reinventing all these same wheels. And it's like, We gotta stop doing that. And if educators had this book and could say, oh, here's the list of the things parents need to know from a school visit, they can make the school visit easier on the parent and on themselves by addressing all of these things. And it really is a tool for us all to be on the same page to best serve our kids exactly as they are, because that's why we're all here.

Yes. So where can listeners find you? How do they find your book? How do they find you? And I'll make sure that that information goes in the show notes as well. So there'll be links there.

That's great. My book is available at all the book places Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Target, your local bookseller. And my website is Kelleycoleman.com. That's Kelleycoleman.com. And it lists me in the book and info and events and all the fun stuff. And if they're really looking for me, I'll be walking in the neighborhood listening to your podcast, because it's really good. So I so appreciate all that you are doing.

I appreciate what you are doing for families. I think it's amazing, and hopefully to help bring everybody together in the village that is serving a lot of our students.

Thanks so much for listening to today's episode of the Autism Classroom Resources podcast. For even more support, you can access free materials, webinars and Video Tips inside my free resource library. Sign up at autismclassroomresources.com/free. That's F-R-E-E or click the link in the show notes to join the free library today. I'll catch you again next week.