

[RADIO FLIPPING BETWEEN STATIONS]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

- SIMON BUEHRER:** Welcome to *Inspiring Change* from OCALI, our forum of stories and connections from our ongoing work of inspiring change and promoting access for people with disabilities. I'm Simon Buehrer.
- BRIDGET KELLY:** We call it "yelling at the rain." I kind of step outside and look like a crazy person talking to myself, but it's just a way to kind of relieve the anxiety and the frustration of not having those other outlets.
- BEN BERGER:** She knows a lot more than maybe what I give her credit for. And seeing her or hearing her say things or seeing her do things, it's like, that's cool because it's-- in the beginning, I was very afraid for her and her future and what it was going to be for her. And seeing her do these things and being able to speak and having better communication, I'm like, oh, I think she's going to be OK.
- RACHAEL MILLS:** I appreciate you guys as parents being so engaged for your kid. I know you feel like you're not doing enough. You're not doing it well enough. But just the fact that you care and you're trying is half the battle.
- SIMON BUEHRER:** *So what do you do for a living?* How many millions of conversations are jumpstarted with this very question? How many chance encounters, line queues, dreaded business networking functions all begin the same way, where time and circumstances force perfectly good strangers to interact and mingle and attempt to get to know each other? It's our go-to, our icebreaker, our fallback when we don't know what else to say. Or it was before COVID 19.
- So what do you do for a living?* It makes sense, of course. So much of *who we are* is largely defined by *what we do*. I'm a history professor. I'm a delivery driver. I'm an electrician. I'm an occupational therapist. I'm a writer and mother of four. Our job, our profession, our career is a large part of our identity, how we define ourselves, and how we view and perceive each other.

No matter what you do, what would it be like to try and teach someone else how to do your job in just a few days? And what would it be like to try and teach someone else how to do your job while adhering to social distancing measures, where you would have to use email or video conferencing or some collaborative web-based platform like Google Docs? Could you do it? How would you do it?

Well, this is exactly what thousands, if not millions, of educators and other professionals have been doing while stay at home orders are in effect and schools across the country are closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. They're trying to teach parents how to be teachers or speech language pathologists or paraprofessionals or occupational therapists.

And this is largely happening on the fly with minimal preparation time. There's a sort of building-the-ship-as-you-sail-it vibe to the whole enterprise. It takes a lot of effort on both sides. There are challenges and frustrations with the change in routine and schedule, with technology that facilitates, or sometimes hinders, learning and discovery. It requires a lot of flexibility and patience. Do you think you could do it, or are you doing it now with your own children?

As we continue our podcast series, "Voices, Visions, and Victories," we talk to an intervention specialist and two parents about their experiences with stay at home learning so far. Rachael Mills is an intervention specialist at Medill Elementary School in Lancaster, Ohio. That's a city of around 40,000 people in Fairfield County.

Bridget Kelly is the mother of a third grade student, Damien. Ben Berger is the father of first grader Evelyn. Both Damien and Evelyn are students of Ms. Mills. One note before we begin-- our conversation was recorded using the Zoom platform, so part of it sounds like we're underwater, and you will hear occasional interference and distortion. That often happens with these web-based conversations.

RACHAEL MILLS: I had to have my son stop doing what he's doing, so hopefully my internet picks back up. We got frozen. Let's move your tech time to another time, OK?

SIMON BUEHRER: Hey, bud.

BRIDGET Can you say hello?

KELLY:

DAMIEN: No. Hi, Mills.

RACHAEL Hi, Damien.

MILLS:

BRIDGET Can you go up with Wesley right now when mommy does this? OK? Go on upstairs
KELLY: with Wesley. OK.

SIMON There he goes. OK. Rachael, I'm going to start with you. And if you could just tell us
BUEHRER: your name and your job title and where you work.

RACHAEL Sure. My name is Rachael Mills. I'm an intervention specialist in a self-contained
MILLS: autism classroom at Lancaster City Schools. And I work at Medill Elementary.

SIMON And how long have you worked as an intervention specialist? How many years?
BUEHRER:

RACHAEL This is my sixth year.

MILLS:

SIMON Wow. That's great. And how many students-- how many kids do you work with?
BUEHRER:

RACHAEL I have six in my classroom.

MILLS:

SIMON OK. And what are the age ranges of your students?

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL This year, I have first, second, and third graders.

MILLS:

SIMON First through third. OK. And is most of your instruction one-on-one or a group
BUEHRER: setting? How do you--

RACHAEL Most of it is one-on-one. We try to sprinkle in some group work, but that's usually a
MILLS: work in progress.

SIMON Sure. Bridget, can you introduce yourself?

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET Well, I am Bridget. I have a child in Ms. Mills' class, Damien.

KELLY:

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET I'm a nurse who's currently off work right now.

KELLY:

SIMON OK.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET I decided to spend all this time with all of my kids.

KELLY:

SIMON How many other kids do you have?

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET We have five in total.

KELLY:

SIMON Wow. Wow. And are all five of them--

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET Damien is the youngest.

KELLY:

SIMON I'm sorry. What's his name? Damien?

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET Damien is the youngest.

KELLY:

SIMON OK.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET My oldest got married last year. She's the only one that's out of the house. Then, I

KELLY: have a 19-year-old, a 17-year-old, and one that just turned 11 today.

SIMON BUEHRER: Wow. And so all of them except the one who got married are all at home, I'm assuming.

BRIDGET KELLY: Yes.

SIMON BUEHRER: OK. That's lively. That's exciting.

BRIDGET KELLY: We call it collective chaos.

SIMON BUEHRER: [LAUGHTER] That's pretty great. And I'm sorry. Your son's name is Damien?

BRIDGET KELLY: Yes.

SIMON BUEHRER: And he's in third grade. Is that correct?

BRIDGET KELLY: Yes.

SIMON BUEHRER: OK. Ben, would you mind introducing yourself?

BEN BERGER: My name is Ben. My daughter, Evelyn, who's a first grader, is in Ms. Mills' class. I also have a younger daughter who's four years old named Charlotte. And I'm a paramedic. It's my full-time job. I'm still going to work. And I come home, and with my wife, we're trying to do this education at home thing.

SIMON BUEHRER: Wow. Wow. OK. So I want to hear more about that. We're going to jump into this education from home thing because I'm sure you both have a lot of stories to share about this. Rachael, I'm going to jump back to you. Can you talk about-- when did school close down for the year?

RACHAEL MILLS: So Friday the 13th was our last day of school. Yeah. So then that very next week on Monday, staff had to report, but then the kids were out.

SIMON BUEHRER: OK. So you went back to school that following Monday. And what was your-- what was your initial reaction when you found out?

RACHAEL MILLS: Well, at the beginning of the week, there were some rumblings like, we need to start preparing in case this happens. I mean, I prepared, but I thought, probably nothing is going to come of it. So I was pretty shocked by the end of the week when it was confirmed that we would be closing. And I think-- I don't know that the shock's worn off yet.

SIMON BUEHRER: Really? Yeah.

RACHAEL MILLS: Just it was a lot to process, and it really concerned me about kids being home and just how I was going to reach them digitally.

SIMON BUEHRER: Did you have any prior experience with remote learning or distance learning?

RACHAEL MILLS: No, not at all.

SIMON BUEHRER: OK. So this was brand new.

RACHAEL MILLS: Yes.

SIMON BUEHRER: And so how much time did you get between-- so Friday the 13th was the last day of school. You reported the following Monday. And then when did home school or whatever you want to call it-- when did that begin for students?

RACHAEL MILLS: We had like three or four days that week.

SIMON BUEHRER: OK.

RACHAEL MILLS: I sent home packets. That's what the district decided to do for elementary school. So we had that time to gather the packets, and then we sent them home with kiddos on Friday. So that Monday was when the distance learning started.

SIMON BUEHRER: Oh, it started that quickly?

RACHAEL MILLS: Yeah. Mhm.

SIMON BUEHRER: Wow. Wow. So the kids went home with packets on Friday with the expectation that homeschool education begins that following Monday.

RACHAEL MILLS: Yeah. Mhm.

SIMON BUEHRER: Wow. Bridget, what was your initial reaction to school closing?

BRIDGET KELLY: We actually saw it coming.

SIMON BUEHRER: Did you?

BRIDGET KELLY: My husband and I both work in a home healthcare field of nursing, and so we had already started to see some of the panic going on, things shutting down around us before it was physically announced by the governor that it was going to shut down. Though we were hopeful that that wasn't going to happen, we had already started to plan.

SIMON BUEHRER: Yeah. So it was not a shock to you at all.

BRIDGET KELLY: No. Unfortunately, no.

SIMON And, Ben, what about you? What was your reaction? Was it a surprise?

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: Not really. I work for a governmental agency too, so we could kind of see it coming.

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: There were rumblings of stuff starting to close down. I just really more wasn't prepared for doing the schooling or the education itself--

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: --and all that was involved.

SIMON Yeah. And so let's get into some of that. So, Rachael, maybe jumping back to you,

BUEHRER: what were some of the initial things that you did to try to help prepare parents for this? You mentioned the packets that went home with students, so I'm assuming you had a hand in putting those packets together.

RACHAEL Mhm. Yes. Since my kiddos are all self-contained, I was the one to put them together.

MILLS: I kind of focuses on their IEP goals and things that would help maintain what we've taught over the course of the year.

So I was planning on calling everybody, but also on that Friday, I didn't have a voice. So I just started out with an email. And I've been doing daily emails throughout the closure just with some focused tips on what I would like to focus on for the day and just offering support.

SIMON So were the packets designed for a certain duration of time, like a week, two weeks?

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL Yeah. It was-- the first packet was for the first two weeks, and then we had our spring break.

SIMON OK.

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL And then we went back at the end of March to put together April's packet.

MILLS:

SIMON OK. And so then, were those-- how were those distributed? Did the parents have to
BUEHRER: stop by the school to pick those up?

RACHAEL Yeah. For gen ed-- well, for everybody, they were available during lunch distribution
MILLS: during the week.

SIMON OK.

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL And then if they were on an IEP, then we mailed those ones out to parents if they
MILLS: were not picked up.

SIMON Oh, OK.

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL The school could make arrangements if the parent called, but for the most part,
MILLS: parents picked them up.

SIMON OK. So they physically came by the school building and actually picked them up.

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL Yeah.

MILLS:

SIMON Yeah. Ben, what was it like during those first few days with Evelyn?

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: It was kind of chaotic--

SIMON Was it?

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: --a little bit trying to learn the apps that she uses at school. We're pretty fortunate
that we had everything we need as far as technology wise, internet and devices.

SIMON OK.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: But it was logging into the apps, learning the apps for myself to kind of help her, and then it was seeing what Ms. Mills was sending home in reports about her behavior at school or working with certain apps. We were seeing it firsthand, so it was kind of shocking because it's stuff that we hadn't seen out of her before, behavior or not willing to participate in things like that, just trying to work through that or figure out a way to help her along.

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: And it's like, oh, wow. Now I see why we're getting these reports from school, because she's a totally different child at home that she was at school.

SIMON Interesting. Yeah. So you were seeing that side that you don't see of her because

BUEHRER: she's--

BEN BERGER: Right.

SIMON Yeah. She's different in school.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: Correct. And it's not that she was being bad, but it was just a lot of frustration on her part because we didn't know what we were doing, so she was getting frustrated with us because we didn't know what the heck we were doing. And it's kind of like suddenly now become-- working for an airline and being a paramedic, we've now got master's degrees in special education and occupational therapy and speech therapy-- it's like, I have no idea what to do for your child.

So we were just doing the best that we can. And there was a lot of frustration with her and us first couple days, and then we kind of settled in and found some ways to kind of get her to engage. But it's still difficult keeping her engaged even going this long, probably six, seven weeks now--

SIMON Sure.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: --trying to keep her engaged and just trying to figure out ways to keep her interested.

SIMON Yeah. Yeah. And what are you using? You said you have internet connectivity. Are
BUEHRER: you using like a laptop, an iPad, or--

BEN BERGER: Yeah, an iPad.

SIMON OK.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: She likes one of them. She does really well. The other one has a penguin that runs through it, and she hates that penguin. So that one's kind of-- we've pushed that aside. And it's difficult getting her to do the paperwork and writing with a pencil. That's been the biggest struggle, is just traditional paper and pencil kind of work.

SIMON Yeah. Yeah. That's the stuff she kind of balks at.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: Yeah.

SIMON Uh huh. Uh huh. Bridget, what about you? What were those first few days like?

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET Ours was very chaotic as well because we have three in school. One went straight
KELLY: packets. One was doing online. And then Damien-- where Ben, she adapted to the apps really well, we still can't use the apps. He's better with the traditional on paper tracing and such.

SIMON Interesting.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET The routine is very difficult. He has his routines, and changing those routines led to
KELLY: a lot of chaos, a lot of behaviors, a lot of outbursts. Since then, though, he meets with Ms. Reed for therapy once a week. And he looks forward to meeting with her on the iPad and going back and forth. But that's about all that we get done as far as apps and iPad activity or his visits with Ms. Mills. Other than that, we are on paper strictly.

SIMON Wow.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET He just doesn't want to sit and do the apps. He just presses whatever he can to be
KELLY: done with it. And in class, he was very active with the apps, so it came as a surprise to us when he didn't want to have anything to do with them at home.

SIMON Interesting. Yeah. And did you have some of the same challenges that Ben had, for
BUEHRER: you trying to learn and understand these apps?

BRIDGET Yes.
KELLY:

SIMON OK.
BUEHRER:

BRIDGET Very much so. And Damien's in third grade, and then I have a fifth grader, and then I
KELLY: have a senior. So I'm spending--

SIMON That's a range.
BUEHRER:

BRIDGET --a lot of my time trying to learn algebra II and then switching to geometry. I feel like
KELLY: I'm in school all over again. And it can be very difficult at times. My husband is usually-- he works two jobs. So the schooling and the household right now is very much my job.

SIMON Wow. That's a lot. That's a lot. The apps that they're using, are these for language,
BUEHRER: math? What subject areas, Rachael, are they?

RACHAEL So there are two that we use mainly at school. One is a reading, and one is a math.
MILLS:

SIMON OK.
BUEHRER:

RACHAEL But then, as far as-- I decided to offer a digital option for maintaining those IEP
MILLS: goals. So I found an online that has basically all of the subjects. And so I'm able to assign digitally areas to focus on and certain skills to focus on based on what their goals are.

SIMON And are these-- are the assignments daily?

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL MILLS: Yeah. So I started out-- it's been hard to strike a balance between giving them enough so that they're getting enough but not giving them too much. I think I was a little overzealous in the beginning.

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL MILLS: So I have definitely tweaked that and pared down. I'm going more towards they-- each day is focused in a certain area. So Mondays, we kind of focus on communication, and Tuesday is like a brain break day. But then, I also would like those activities for them to focus on maybe 15 minutes of working on those IEP goals. So I've tried to adjust it to make it a little bit more engaging and also manageable for everyone.

SIMON BUEHRER: Mhm. And are your students turning in assignments to you, or are you able to monitor kind of what they're doing? How does that work?

RACHAEL MILLS: Yeah. So we haven't received the May-- or, I'm sorry, the March packets yet. Well, we have received them, but we were letting them sit for however many days. So we'll be reporting tomorrow to go through those, what we have returned. So that's kind of why I relied on that digital progress monitoring, because it's real time, so I can see what they're doing and how well they're doing towards the goals. So I haven't actually laid eyes on packets yet.

SIMON BUEHRER: OK. And the packets are all pen and paper-- pencil and paper? Those are physical.

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL MILLS: Yeah.

MILLS:

SIMON BUEHRER: OK. Yeah. So that'll be interesting when you look at those as well as the digital data to kind of see where things are. Ben, how are you structuring things for Evelyn? Do you have a routine or a schedule? Can you just kind of describe the learning environment at home?

BEN BERGER: We usually get up in the morning, or when I come home from work, I'll try to get some stuff done. So we have a few hours in the morning to do it. They watch a lot of learning programs. Like on Netflix, they found some stuff that they like. So maybe we start the morning just with that.

SIMON Ease into the day. Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: They both get into it. I try to do the iPad stuff after breakfast, maybe before lunch, or maybe a little bit after lunch. Because that stuff is just really difficult to get her to engage in. And once we get her engaged in it, she's fine for 15, 20 minutes, and then that's it.

So I'd say most of the day is more learning stuff through TV, or we read books for her, some stuff on YouTube, or Netflix. The gym teacher has sent home some videos. We've tried that with him. Four-year-old gets into them. She loves them. Evie, not so much. So it's difficult in that way because there's still housework to be done.

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: I still go to work. I work 24 hours. So there's days that Christie's home with them for 24 hours by herself.

SIMON By herself. Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: She's furloughed right now from the airport, so she's home with them all the time.

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: But we try to-- we do, I think, pretty good at tag teaming and trying to-- Christie will do a little bit with her, and then I'll do a little bit with her just to try to get a different engagement or try to get her engaged differently through both of us. And usually, that works. We can get two or three assignments done. But that's usually the end of it.

SIMON OK. So you're kind of sticking to roughly a Monday through Friday schedule.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: Right. Sometimes, on weekends, she'll do schoolwork. And we might get something out, more maybe like an occupational kind of thing of some scissors and Play-Doh or scissors and paper or a pen and paper. I let her write or just do some dexterity things, which she's working on through occupational therapy. It's kind of at her own pace. And we've kind of found working at her pace is better than trying to force her because then it's a complete shutdown and frustration on her part.

SIMON Yeah. So give her some room to maybe make some of those decisions on her own.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: Yeah.

SIMON Yeah. But obviously, you need to adjust as you go along, like all of us have to do

BUEHRER: right now, right? Bridget, what about you? What's the learning-- do you have a set schedule or a set room?

BRIDGET We have set schedules. We actually start by getting our daughter up because she
KELLY: has special learning from 10 to 11 every morning. So we get her up and get her started.

SIMON Is that a kind of online thing?

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET Yes. She has a 504, so she meets with Ms. Meadows, and they do their reading and
KELLY: their math assignments to where she can get help online for that hour Monday through Friday. While they're doing that, we go ahead and get Damian up and start his routine, which starts which, of all things, he gets the laundry basket and collects all the laundry from the bathroom upstairs and brings it down.

SIMON Nice. Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET So we start with that. He gets his chocolate milk, and we settle in. And we may get
KELLY: one writing assignment done. I'm kind of like Ben is. It's maybe 10, 15 minutes, and then he takes a break. His older brother, Wesley, takes him outside to do PE every

day.

We have several pictures. Wesley likes to punch on a heavy bag that he bought. And so Damien's treat is if he does his jumping jacks or his skipping or whatever, he gets to get on top of the heavy bag, and Wesley swings him back and forth like a swing. Now, mind you, he has a swingset in the back of the yard, but he prefers that heavy bag. So we've found that implementing rewards tends to help a little bit more.

And then there are days that we're just not going to get anything out of him. We're more flexible, so it's not totally set up Monday through Friday for us. If he has a bad day, say, on a Wednesday, then we'll try again on Saturday to make up for that time that he didn't get.

SIMON Yeah. Yeah. I think you told me he likes to climb anyway, right? So maybe--
BUEHRER:

BRIDGET Oh, he is Spider-Man. He can dig his fingers into a wall and climb straight up the
KELLY: wall. He does it in corners.

SIMON Holy smokes.
BUEHRER:

BRIDGET He's very active.
KELLY:

SIMON Yeah.
BUEHRER:

BRIDGET He's very active, and he is fearless.
KELLY:

SIMON [LAUGHTER] Oh, that's awesome. So are you-- you both mentioned PE. Ben, you
BUEHRER: mentioned occupational therapy. Are you getting additional help and support from-- I would assume there's a separate PE teacher at the school as well as maybe an occupational therapist or two.

BRIDGET Yes. Oh, I'm sorry, Ben. You want to go ahead?
KELLY:

BEN BERGER: Yeah. So they have a gym teacher. Mr. Doran, I believe, is his name. I think I just met him at the last IEP meeting. She has a speech therapist and an occupational therapist in school.

SIMON OK. Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: And they've been sending videos and some packets of stuff at home. Some of the occupational stuff is kind of difficult for us because they want different cereals and straws and stuff. We just don't have that here. And sometimes, you just can't even go out and buy it because it's not there.

So we're just trying to use the things that we have at home-- scissors, Play-Doh, paper. We did Easter eggs the other day, so just opening the plastic Easter eggs and putting them back together. And she put them all together like smaller, then the next size, and the next size. And she does those kind of things. Well, she's kind of getting some dexterity working on that.

Speech is a little more difficult, I think, because I'm not really sure what to do and how to engage her into those aspects. So we've really been reading to her a lot and then trying to make her read back to us as we're reading books to her. And usually, her sister will get involved in that, and her sister will read stuff back. And she's like, oh, my sister did that, so now I'll do it.

SIMON OK. Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: So she follows-- the little sister's more of the leader sometimes, and Evie will follow what she does. And sometimes, we can get her to engage that way.

SIMON And the little sister-- I'm sorry. She's 4? Is that correct?

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: Yeah.

SIMON OK.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: Correct.

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: And then we just bought them-- my wife just bought them-- Christy just bought them a trampoline the other day. So they have a little small indoor trampoline that they've been going nuts on.

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: So getting her to try to do the physical or the gym type stuff like jumping jacks and push ups and stuff like that is a little more difficult, but the other day, I found her doing yoga in the kitchen. So it's kind of an adventure sometimes what she will do and what she won't do and when she wants to do it.

SIMON Yeah. Yeah. That's cool. Bridget, what were you going to say?

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET Oh, I was just thinking, we have a treadmill here. And I find that when I get on it and
KELLY: start walking, he wants to get on it with me and walk.

SIMON Uh huh. Uh huh.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET And we had to start hiding the key because he learned how to turn it on. But he hits
KELLY: way too high of a speed.

SIMON Oh, geez.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET And so you can hear him all over the house just screaming for somebody to come
KELLY: down and turn it off because he doesn't want to let go. He doesn't want to fall off. But, boy, yeah, he gets his cardio in no problem.

SIMON Wow. So the PE side of things sounds like that's working out OK between climbing
BUEHRER: and treadmills and-- Ben, what did you say? You bought an indoor trampoline?

BEN BERGER: It's just a small 3' trampoline.

DAMIAN: Is Danny going to come in a little bit?

**BRIDGET
KELLY:** No, Sophia and Danny's not coming over, baby. I need you to go upstairs. He's asking for his sister. Sorry.

**SIMON
BUEHRER:** OK. Yeah. Well, I was going to ask-- I mean, Ben kind of mentioned the younger daughter maybe having an influence. How is this dynamic playing out with your other children?

**BRIDGET
KELLY:** We actually-- we've always worked as a functioning unit.

**SIMON
BUEHRER:** As a family?

**BRIDGET
KELLY:** Yeah. My oldest son would tell you that they call me drill sergeant because we've just always had to have that with such a large family. Everybody knows what they're supposed to do. And we're very fortunate in the fact that we had such a large family when Damian came along because he was forced to interact. He was forced to communicate. So it's actually been a great help rather than a hindrance.

**SIMON
BUEHRER:** Does he maybe a relation--

**BRIDGET
KELLY:** Huh?

**SIMON
BUEHRER:** I'm sorry. I was just going to say, does he have a good relationship with his siblings?

**BRIDGET
KELLY:** Yes, he does. And he has a weekly favorite. It just kind of depends. This week, it's Wesley because Wesley plays with him. And they are so interactive with him. They take the time, and they have the patience.

And a lot of times, they have the patience even when I wear thin. We call it "high fiving on the way out." So when one of us needs to tag out, we just kind of clap somebody's hand and walk out the door for five minutes. And that's when he's

having a bad day. I mean, he has-- our best move-- we moved from Columbus to Lancaster because of Medill.

SIMON Because of the school there?

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET Yes, because of the school.

KELLY:

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET He has grown in leaps and bounds since we moved to Lancaster more than, quite frankly, at the beginning we thought was possible. And I attribute that to Rachael, to the teachers, to Mr. Dorian. They just helped him to come so much further than we really thought was possible.

SIMON Have there been any kind of *aha* moments for either one of you that-- because you see your child as a child and don't necessarily see what they're doing academically. We kind of touched on this a little bit earlier. But have there been any moments where you're like, gosh, I didn't know you knew that, or I didn't know you could do that?

BRIDGET For me, it's been his reading--

KELLY:

SIMON Really?

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET --and the amount of words that he actually knows and can read and read on his own. I think sometimes, he kind of plays dumb at home because he has brothers and sisters that will do things for him. And watching him in the reading process, I'm like, really? Really? You know that word? OK. So that's been a big surprise for me.

SIMON That's great. Ben, what about for you? Any kind of aha moments or surprises?

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: I would have to say the reading and a little bit of math too. She'll sit down. It's

difficult to get her to sit and read a book with me or Christie. But I've caught her in the kitchen, where we have a bookshelf with all their books, just sitting out there reading.

And I'll sit there and listen to her. And she's kind of soft-spoken, so you can't really hear what she's saying. And I'm like, hm. How long have you been able to do this? And I kind of feel the same way. It's like she knows a lot more than maybe what I give her credit for.

And then seeing her or hearing her say things or seeing her do things, it's like, well, that's cool because it's-- at the beginning, I was very afraid for her and her future and what it was going to be for her. And seeing her do these things and being able to speak and having better communication, I'm like, oh, I think she's going to be OK.

Her first year of preschool, she didn't speak at all. And then the second year, she talked a little bit. Kindergarten, she talked a lot more. And then this year, she's talking a lot more, communicating her wants and needs. It may be a little backwards, but she's still doing it.

So she's-- I don't really know how to describe it, but especially in the spring-- and I've kind of looked back through the four years that she has been in school. She may have a real big backslide where you're like, oh, man, she's just not progressing. And then all of a sudden, she takes 30 steps forward, and she's saying things and doing things and interacting with things that she's never done before.

And it's like-- I don't know if it's attributed to a brain growth or a growth spurt of just her natural growth spurts or what. We talked about that last week because she was having a lot of difficulty through the last couple months even at school. I was kind of like, what's wrong with you? And then, it was like-- last week, it was like, boom. It was all over with, and she's just moved forward and is doing all these other things that she's never done before. I don't know how to explain it.

SIMON Wow. That's really cool, though.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: It is.

SIMON Yeah. Rachael, you're back.

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL

I am back. My internet decided to take a break.

MILLS:

SIMON

Yeah. No problem. I think I was asking if we could talk just a little bit about what

BUEHRER:

you're doing on a weekly basis to both check in with parents and check in with students. I know in your initial email, you kind of listed some of the communication strategies that you are using. Could you talk a little bit about those?

RACHAEL

Sure. So I've been sending the daily email with the focus. And then on Fridays, that's devoted to a check-in with parents through a Google form.

MILLS:

SIMON

And do you check in with parents individually?

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL

Uh huh. Yeah.

MILLS:

SIMON

And how much time do you give them for the check-in?

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL

Well it's through Google form.

MILLS:

SIMON

Oh, it's a form. OK. Got you.

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL

So they comment online. Yeah. And it's more of an emotional how are you doing and then also how their children are doing with different aspects of their learning at home. And then, I'm kind of just letting the parents guide me. I've been trying to call about once a week. I don't want to bombard them, but I do want them to know that I'm here if they need me.

MILLS:

And if they're open to it, I've been trying to do some Zoom session. Evie's not so much into it. We've learned through speech therapy. So I've done more of a-- I'll send Google forms or a Google document to their email, and they can try to do it at home. And I've offered that I can talk them through it on the phone if they need

that support.

With Damian, he's been rocking the Zoom. So that's kind of what we're sticking with with him. So I've been-- we're doing a little bit more work because he has an IEP meeting coming up next week. But I try to do that at least once a week with any students that are open to that.

SIMON So you meet with the students via Zoom?

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL Mhm.

MILLS:

SIMON Wow.

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL Yeah.

MILLS:

SIMON And would you say that you're able to instruct them that way, or is it more of like a social connection kind of thing?

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL Yeah, it's more of a social just-- I want to see your face. And we can talk. I don't-- I don't know that that would be real productive to try to get them to listen to instructions and have instructional time.

MILLS:

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL So, yeah, I just decided to do more of an informal thing, except for I've been collecting a lot of data with Amy. So that's worked out.

MILLS:

SIMON I wanted to touch a little bit on the social aspects. How are you all doing-- how are your children doing with the stay-at-home measure?

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET Damien is pretty much a home body. And, again, because of such a large family, we do a lot of FaceTime-- my family lives in Middleport -- so that he can see the family and talk with them. And we're fortunate. We have a big backyard, so it's not like we have to try to get out in order to have exercise.

KELLY:

SIMON So he's pretty comfortable and OK?

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET Yeah. He's fine. In fact, we had to talk up the fact that Ms. Mills was going to get
KELLY: ahold of him. He's like, no, she's at school. I'm staying at home.

And I'm like, oh, no, no, no, you're going to talk to her on the iPad. On the iPad? Yes. On the iPad. But I'm staying home. So he took to it like a duck in water. He didn't care that he wasn't going out.

SIMON OK. So you may have the problem when school is actually back in session trying to
BUEHRER: get him back there. Ben, what about on your end? How has it been having the stay-at-home order in place and trying to deal with that?

BEN BERGER: Initially, it didn't really seem to faze her.

SIMON Really?

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: And probably a week or two ago, out of the blue, she's like, I miss my friends. I miss my speech friends. I miss my Girl Scout friends. I miss my-- and she just started naming people. I was like, I-- she never really talks about anybody. You never see her have a bond with any of her students.

I'm not really sure if she does or not. I know in kindergarten, she did. There was a little boy. They were always together and doing stuff together. I'm not sure if she really has another friend like that this year. But we do FaceTime with my dad because he's in an assisted living, so he's in lockdown.

SIMON Oh, wow.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: But we will FaceTime. We try to FaceTime with him when we can. And he gets to see them, and they get to see-- they see each other. And then my father-in-law, they go to sometimes on the weekends when both of us are working. She goes today with grandma and grandpa. Both of them do.

We'll go, grandpa. Call grandpa. Go to grandpa. Christy will call grandpa. And he'll

get on the phone and say something to her, and she'll get all bashful and hide her face. So we try to do things that way. We have a decent sized yard too, so they'll go out back and play.

Carpenter bees are out right now, and she's not real keen on those. So she goes, I don't like those. But once we get her past the deck and out in the yard, she's usually OK. And then there's a stray cat that's been living in our yard that she's been playing with.

SIMON Oh, cool.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: So when it's not been raining or cold, we've gotten to go out back and go play. We did some gardening the other day, and they were playing with the shovels and the rakes out in the yard.

SIMON Cool.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: They seem to be doing better with it than I think most adults are.

SIMON Yeah. Yeah. Well, that was going to-- that was going to be my next question for all three of you. As adults, how are all three of you? Rachael, maybe we could start with you. How are you doing with the stay at home order and being isolated from your colleagues or your friends or family?

RACHAEL MILLS: Yeah. Definitely, being home makes me realize how much I rely on a team just for emotional support as well as problem solving through different behaviors we're seeing because it's just a little bit more difficult to talk to everyone at once. So you realize how much you really do lean on each other when it's a little bit harder to do collectively.

I mean, I think I'm adjusting. I've been busy. I don't have a lot of time to think about all this. So I'm just trying to adjust and create new ways of doing things.

SIMON Yeah. Yeah. Do you have weekly check-ins with any of your colleagues or other folks that you work with, the occupational therapist, the speech therapist, or any of those folks?

RACHAEL Yeah. We have a group text with all of us.

MILLS:

SIMON Oh, a group text. OK.

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL Yeah. Yeah.

MILLS:

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL So that's kind of how we've been bouncing things off of each other and staying in contact.

MILLS:

SIMON Yeah. But it's obviously different at a distance and through text. Yeah. Ben, what about you? How are you doing personally and professionally?

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: I think I'm doing pretty good. Yeah. I guess fortunately, I go to work every three days. But I have a good group of people there. And we're all pretty close. And we eat dinner together. We play cards together and, obviously, all work together. So there's four other people that I get to kind of go vent to.

With my wife being furloughed, she's been home the last couple of weeks. She really did that harder than me or just screaming out the back door sometimes. But she keeps in touch with their dad and texts with their friends at work and stuff. She's been doing a lot of that.

She just doesn't have the face-to-face time like I get. I get out of the house, and I'm gone for a good amount of time. So I'm ready to come home at the end of the day. It's like I'm ready to go home and see my girls and see Christie and see Evie and Charlotte and get the day going-- a couple of days with them. So it's not-- it's a--

SIMON It hasn't been too difficult for you.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: Yeah. It's not been difficult for me other than dealing with the stuff that's going on at work and all the changes and stuff that have been happening there. But Christie is

here all the time with them seven days a week. And she'll go escape out to the grocery store or something.

There's just no real outlets even for her to go to a store or something because there's just nothing open for her to even get out of the house. So we've been walking through the neighborhood and stuff just getting out of the house and just walking around the block for a little bit.

SIMON Bridget, what about your situation?

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET Well, I was actually taking off work right before the whole pandemic hit. I had a
KELLY: medical condition that put me off of work.

SIMON OK.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET So I-- before, I worked almost 60 to 70 hours a week.

KELLY:

SIMON Holy smokes.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET So it has been a huge change for me.

KELLY:

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET I have gotten a lot of family time. But there isn't really any outlet. I find that I walk
KELLY: around the block by myself. I don't even take my kids with me. It's a high five as my husband comes in the door, and I'm going out trying to get some peace.

And it's not that I don't love my kids, but the adult interaction, being able to have coffee with friends-- the venting outlet isn't there. It's not the same.

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET And every time that I think that I'm going to get to go back to work, my doctor
KELLY: decides we're going to hold off a little bit longer because of the COVID.

SIMON Mhm.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET So for me, it's been a real test of patience--

KELLY:

SIMON Sure.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET --and being able to step back and adapt and try to find new ways and new outlets.

KELLY: And most days, it works, and then other days-- we call it yelling at the rain. I kind of step outside and look like a crazy person talking to myself. But it's just a way to kind of relieve the anxiety and the frustration of not having those other outlets.

SIMON Yeah, I'm sure. Yeah. Well, and I was going to ask if there are any kind of self-care

BUEHRER: activities that any of you engage with. It sounds like yelling at the rain, maybe taking walks. Are there any other self-care practices or activities?

BEN BERGER: I think usually in the evening for us, once the kids go to bed, we'll sit, and we'll watch a TV show or a movie together and just sit there together. We may not even talk, just quiet time and have a little bit of peace once the kids go to bed. And try and not to-- before, we would do a lot of cleaning or something after they went to bed. Now, it's just kind of sit down, relax, blow off some steam, and just have time with each other.

SIMON Yeah, that's great. Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET And we do 10 minute meditation before bed. It's a way to clear-- and actually, my
KELLY: husband does it downstairs. I do it upstairs after we put the kids to bed. So we're not even together. It's just a moment of peace for us to unwind by ourselves. And then we come together for bed.

SIMON That's awesome. Yeah. Rachael, anything that you've been doing or practicing, any
BUEHRER: kind of self-care?

RACHAEL MILLS: Well, my first thing was I have a third grader at home too, and he is on the spectrum. He's high functioning. So the first thing I did was put us both on schedules.

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL MILLS: Just maintain my sanity, I think. And also, I just try to just really do one thing some point in the day that I like to do so I have something to look forward to. And my husband's been really good about when he gets home allowing me to go to the store or just go for a drive or a walk or whatever I need just to get out of the house because I'm the one that's been here, and he is still working.

SIMON BUEHRER: Wow. So I guess we should have gotten into this right from the start. You have a third grader, did you say?

RACHAEL Yeah.

MILLS:

SIMON BUEHRER: OK. And so you're still teaching and coaching. And now, you're a mom and a teacher. Is that right?

RACHAEL I never wanted to be my son's teacher.

MILLS:

[LAUGHTER]

SIMON Yeah. Well, what has that been like?

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL It's been very, I think, anxiety producing for me.

MILLS:

SIMON Really?

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL MILLS: His school-- he goes to a different school district. And so they have moved to completely online learning, Google Classroom. So I usually schedule out each day

on his Google calendars. So that helps take me out of it a little bit. But he does need a lot of support, especially with the writing assignments and reading assignments.

So it's been a challenge trying to work around him. And it seems like I never get anything done because then, I get sidetracked by something. When I get an email or when he needs help, I have to stop what I'm doing and shift gears.

SIMON One of the questions I wanted to ask related to what we're doing with this podcast series-- we're calling it "Voices, Visions, and Victories." What would you say is one of your victories?
BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: I think just being able to-- having this time with my family. Because we really don't see each other as a group a whole lot because the work schedules.

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: I'm just doing my best to help her along and seeing her just-- even if it's a little portion of just seeing something new out of her every day.

SIMON Rachael, what about you?

BUEHRER:

RACHAEL I would say-- I mean, being at home, I have got to spend a lot of time with my son.
MILLS: And also, I think I have got family dynamics of my students and their parents. And I feel like this bonded us together a little bit in a unique way. So I would say that's a victory.

SIMON Do you think that your relationship with both your students and their parents is changing in light of these-- we're all in this together, so let's try to figure it out.
BUEHRER:

RACHAEL Yeah.

MILLS:

SIMON Bridget, what about you on your end?

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET I think the genuine family time.

KELLY:

SIMON Yeah.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET We're back to eating dinners at the same table.

KELLY:

SIMON Wow.

BUEHRER:

BRIDGET Genuinely interested in each other's days. Playing card games. In our everyday life,
KELLY: it's so easy to get so busy and push those little things that you don't realize how important they are until something like this comes along. The family togetherness is probably our greatest victory. I think that we've grown more as a family and are genuinely supportive of one another.

Like I said, I can't speak enough about Medill. What all the teachers and the therapists are doing has really helped grounding him and helped him-- I always say I want him to be his 100%. And we at this point don't know what his 100% is. And I think because of the teachers and the therapists and everybody working together at Medill, his future looks bright. And his 100% is way far out of reach right now. And they bring him closer to it every day.

SIMON Wow. Wow. That's really special.

BUEHRER:

BEN BERGER: The last couple of months, I've told my wife, I am voting for every school levy that ever comes up on the ballot now. The amount of respect and the understanding that I have for Ms. Mills and everybody that works with Evie and Ms. Champlin last year in kindergarten and Ms. Bender in pre-school of just the level of patience it takes to teach these kids that they work with-- I thought I was a pretty patient person, but it's so much different teaching adults, which I do a little bit at work. I have to do some instruction.

But just trying to adapt to teach to her to try to unlock her brain and figure out different strategies, it's almost like a daily-- almost like a daily fight where you've got to find something new to keep them engaged. And just the amount-- I've gained

so much respect for them and their talents of working with these children and my child.

And they'll always be somebody that will always be special, every teacher that ever comes in touch with Evie or works in her life, OT, speech therapy. I don't know. They're heroes to me. And I know that word gets thrown out a lot, but they are genuinely getting them ready for their future so they have a bright future, where when I was growing up, they just got forgotten or pushed aside. So I have just a lot of respect for them now.

And that's what I mean with the frustration. They have so much patience to just keep going it and going at it and not giving up, whereas with me, it's like, I can't do this. It's never going to happen.

**RACHAEL
MILLS:**

I appreciate you guys as parents being so engaged for your kids. I know you feel like you're not doing enough and you're not doing it well enough, but just the fact that you care and you're trying is half the battle. So I really appreciate that I have families like you that I can trust to help support me in your child's learning.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**SIMON
BUEHRER:**

You're listening to *Inspiring Change* from OCALI, our forum of stories and connections from our ongoing work of inspiring change and promoting access for people with disabilities. I'm Simon Buehrer. I was talking with Rachael Mills, an intervention specialist in Lancaster, Ohio. And parents Bridget Kelly and Ben Berger about their experiences with learning from home during the stay at home order.

Special thanks to Rachael, Bridget, and Ben for their willingness and openness in sharing time and words with us. You can learn more about Medill Elementary School through the Lancaster city school's website. That's at lancaster.k12.oh.us.

I also want to thank my colleague, Amy Bixler Coffin, from the Autism Center at OCALI. Amy was the one who initially suggested this podcast episode, and she helped with the initial connection to Rachael Mills. Thanks, dude. It's OK. We call each other dude. That's how we roll.

OCALI is offering an array of supports and services to help families, educators, and

other professionals stay safe, strong, and supported during the COVID-19 pandemic. Go to ocali.org, and click on the link [#HereToHelp](https://twitter.com/HereToHelp). You can also search using the phrase "here to help" with the hashtag or not and either as separate words or all one word. We like to give options. More importantly, we like to help. We're here to help. Please connect with us, and let us know *how* we can help.

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Our series "Voices Visions, and Victories" continues with more discussions and stories during the COVID-19 pandemic. Make sure you subscribe to *Inspiring Change* so you don't miss a single episode. You can find us at ocali.org/podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts.

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