00;00;09;23 - 00;00;34;27

Alyssa Flowers

She came out saying that she had autism. And I didn't cry because I was sad. I cried because I finally got the answers. And now I'm able to provide my daughter with the best possible care.

00;00;40;20 - 00;00;52;11

Courtney Ringstaff

Welcome to Adjusting the Sales. A podcast for parents, caregivers and Service Providers for Children with Disabilities. I'm your host, Courtney Ring Staff, and this is my co-host, Marlina Danko.

00;00;52;21 - 00;00;55;14

Melina Danko

Hi, everyone. We are so glad you've joined us.

00;00;55;22 - 00;01;24;25

Courtney Ringstaff

Melina is the assistant director of communications and marketing at the Center for Excellence in Disabilities and the project director of the West Virginia Family two Family Health Information Center. I'm a social worker in Morgantown, West Virginia, and I've created this podcast to be a platform for parents. Caregivers and service providers can come together, exchange information, educate one another, and find support and connection through the relatable topic discussions.

00;01;25;19 - 00;01;40;18

Courtney Ringstaff

We cannot change the direction of the wind or the strength of the storm, but together we can adjust the sails.

00;01;42;08 - 00;02;13;00

Alyssa Flowers

I am Alissa Flowers. I am a mom of two little girls and my oldest Isabella. She'll be six and she was diagnosed with autism back in August of 2024. So we are very new to this journey. But just because we're new to this journey, we're not unfamiliar with the autism life because it can be the most challenging, rewarding just all the feelings in one.

00;02;14;24 - 00;02;54;14

Alyssa Flowers

Isabella was a very easygoing baby. The was very quiet. She didn't cry a lot. And knowing what I know now, I would've put more stress into getting that looked at, knowing what I know now. But just because my your baby isn't talking or whatnot, that doesn't automatically deem it as they're on the spectrum. But just knowing what I know now, I would have definitely asked her pediatrician if that was normal, the order she got, you know, she just loved crawling nonstop.

00;02;54;17 - 00;03;25;19

Alyssa Flowers

She was constantly jumping. She was constantly. What I know now is stemming and sensory seeking. She was always into things. She was just never sitting still. So I just thought she was just a just a little bit more hyper active child compared to others. And I think it really started dawning on me that there may be a little bit more to the story when she turned two, and that was around the time that I gave birth to my youngest, Leila.

00;03;26;27 - 00;03;47;16

Alyssa Flowers

We lived in a town home and garden downstairs. It was an open concept and when I tell you she woke up, she was running in circles through all the rooms. And then, like the time she went to bed, she was always running. You gave her a tumbling mat. She was flipping and she was she had to be doing something at all times.

00;03;48;09 - 00;04;11;01

Alyssa Flowers

It kind of raised suspicion for me. I'm just, you know, talking to my husband, talking to my friends and relatives, you know, and you're just being told that, you know, it's normal features, like kids being kids. You know, it's okay. You're doing great. Okay. So I would just keep pushing it aside. I was introduced to a former coworker.

00;04;11;06 - 00;04;43;04

Alyssa Flowers

She was talking to me about how her son had autism and something inside of me was just telling me to just ask questions. So I was fully invested in knowing and learning her son's story, like what characteristics he had, what were some of the early signs like what were his triggers? And she every time she was like telling me different things about him, I was mentally doing a checkbox.

00;04;43;12 - 00;05;18;19

Alyssa Flowers

And again, I'm like, I think there's more to the story. And then the people that were around me were say, Now she's just kids being kids, you know? Okay, so again, I just kept pushing it further and further down. And then I had an amazing opportunity to work in a autism room as an aide. And it was the most challenging, rewarding, fulfilling thing I have ever done in my life except for being a parent.

00;05;20;07 - 00;05;47;25

Alyssa Flowers

It was just such an amazing experience, you know, being able to celebrate the victories that you thought that they weren't going to be able to achieve. And just seeing their faces like light up whenever they're able to drink out of a normal cup without spilling it. And then just like the little tiny victories and then of course, being in that room, you know, I was like, Oh, Isabella does that.

00;05;48;05 - 00;06;10;16

Alyssa Flowers

Oh, Isabella does that do? Or I'm like, Now, you know, now I'm working in the room. Now I'm probably just like being too, like hyper fixated and hyper focused on it. Like, I'm probably just reading too much into it. So I just kept pushing it down further and further and everyone around me was telling me the same thing.

00;06;10;16 - 00;06;44;03

Alyssa Flowers

So even though my mom was telling me something wasn't right, I just naively just kept pushing forward. And then I was able to experience a summer without working for the first time as being a mom. And that was the summer of 2024, and that's when Isabella was able to get comfortable. She was able to be home in her safe space for long periods of time.

00;06;44;18 - 00;07;16;25

Alyssa Flowers

In that, what we call like masking, she was able to take that mask off and Isabella was there, like she was able to stem, she was able to feel all of the feelings. And it caught me off guard because I wasn't expecting what I was witnessing. It was walking on eggshells in our own home, not knowing what was going to set her off.

00;07;16;25 - 00;07;51;21

Alyssa Flowers

I feel I could tell that she was struggling, not being able to regulate her emotions, not being able to explain how she felt. She wasn't able to. And she still isn't able to explain like how like you're feeling. She's just really struggles with emotions in general. When she would have like episode, I would say it was a couple of times a day and each of those episodes would last from an hour and a half to 3 hours, and it was just screaming.

00;07;51;21 - 00;08;15;02

Alyssa Flowers

It was anything she could get her hands on. She was throwing things. I was the target for the aggression at the time. So like the hitting, the biting. And I knew right then and there something was not right and I feel guilty about it now. Looking back at it as a parent, I was just like, you know, better, like, stop doing this.

00;08;15;02 - 00;08;39;08

Alyssa Flowers

You know, you're not allowed to hit. You know you're not allowed to throw. Like, what are you doing? What are you thinking? And I don't know. I just woke up one morning during the summer and I'm like, What are you doing? You work with this every single day, you know, your child is asking and begging for help in her own way.

00;08;40;07 - 00;09;01;23

Alyssa Flowers

The best way I could explain these episodes was like a nightmare, but she was awake, he had nightmares, and I wish she was younger, but it was like she's in a trance and it was just never ending. It's the hardest thing as a parent to see your child struggle and have such fear in their eyes and not being able to help them.

00;09;02;05 - 00;09;30;09

Alyssa Flowers

So I was like, okay, like the initial shock is done. I need to get my child help. And so I was talking with one of my friends. She has a plethora of people that she knows for resources, and she pointed me in the right direction to get a diagnosis. So we went to I'm unlocked in Vermont, West Virginia.

00;09;30;19 - 00;10;02;02

Alyssa Flowers

They were absolutely amazing. The atmosphere in that office is just so welcoming. And you just knew walking in that you were seen and heard and they were going to help you get some kind of answers. So we traveled to Vermont, just Isabella and I and we stayed in a hotel to get the diagnosis. And the funny thing is, it was raining that day.

00;10;02;02 - 00;10;25;17

Alyssa Flowers

We were getting out of the parking lot to check into the hotel. And she fell. She scraped her knee. And the one thing about Isabella is she is petrified of Band-Aids. She is petrified of blood. So I just knew that I was going to be in for it. So I picked her up and she just wasn't wanting to move.

00;10;25;21 - 00;10;52;28

Alyssa Flowers

So it was her and I in the pouring rain there in between my car and somebody else's car, a little tiny like kid umbrella, like holding it over her. And I'm just letting her just get it all out, you know, just trying to get her to regulate a little bit. The best I'd like the best that she possibly could so I could get her into the hotel room.

00;10;52;28 - 00;11;15;18

Alyssa Flowers

And so we were out there, it's crazy to say, but we were out there in that rain for 25, 30 minutes. And then once she was able to finally come to, I was able to get her into the hotel lobby. And we were checking in and I was checking in and I was like whispering to the guy like, Do you have a Band-Aid?

00;11;16;02 - 00;11;44;13

Alyssa Flowers

And he's like, What? And I'm like, Do you have a Band-Aid? It's like, Yeah, Band-Aid. And then Isabella started sparkling again in the in the lobby for another, like, 10 minutes. But I knew that I was I was going in the right direction because that is not normal behavior that I was in the right place. So the next morning we took her to her appointment and she came out saying that she had autism.

00;11;45;00 - 00;12;15;02

Alyssa Flowers

And I cried. I didn't cry because I was sad. I cried because I had a little bit of guilt because I waited so long to do it. I should have just listened to my mom died, but I was crying because I finally got the answers. And now I'm able to provide my daughter with the best possible care and knowing she can see certain therapies.

00;12;15;13 - 00;12;44;20

Alyssa Flowers

So, okay, so now I have the diagnosis. Now I can start getting her into like occupational therapy. Abbott Therapy, which we're struggling trying to get, but everybody is. But once we got that diagnosis, it was a breath of fresh air. It didn't change anything. Like we were still experiencing the long episodes. But once all started and got her in like a little bit of a routine, it worked out really well.

00;12;44;20 - 00;12;51;15

Alyssa Flowers

We anticipate those episodes to creep back in during the long breaks.

00;12;51;15 - 00;12;57;22

Courtney Ringstaff

So before the diagnosis that she was five or six when she got her diagnosis.

00;12;58;05 - 00;12;59;05

Alyssa Flowers

Yes. She was like.

00;12;59;27 - 00;13;16;28

Courtney Ringstaff

So in the time when you first started having like some questions like in your own like mom gut, did you ever talk to your pediatrician at all about it or could you just like keep putting it like in the back of your mind? And if you did, did they ever mention like early intervention or anything like that?

00;13;18;27 - 00;13;44;16

Alyssa Flowers

That's a really good question. So we ended up switching pediatricians now, but the old pediatrician that she was with, you know, it was it was the same thing that I was hearing from anybody else. Her actions, her characteristics are behaviors. It's just normal kid behavior. You're doing a great job like you're a good mom, like she's in good hands.

00;13;44;28 - 00;14;15;19

Alyssa Flowers

So that definitely did not help at all. But when it was the summer of 2024, when all this was being thrown at us very quickly, just because she was able to take that mask off with me being home from work for this whole summer, we just had to find a new doctor because I am a mama bear. I am now her advocate.

00;14;15;20 - 00;14;49;03

Alyssa Flowers

I, I am able to I'm her voice like I have to surround myself with the best team possible for my child. And that was a no brainer. I had to do a lot of research to find a doctor near us that had knowledge of autism and created a safe space within their office as well. Because just because they have knowledge of autism does not mean that your child's born.

00;14;49;03 - 00;14;59;17

Alyssa Flowers

I feel safe in that room. We luckily were able to find amazing care with Cardinal Pediatric. They've completely changed our life.

00;14;59;17 - 00;15;23;24

Courtney Ringstaff

But we used Cardinal Pediatrics, too, and some of the early screening that they did, like just in time for your well-child, like for your vaccinations and everything, they always screen like you have to get on there and check in and answer all the questions. And my son was flagging autism way before we got our diagnosis. And so we that's why we pursued early intervention initially.

00;15;24;04 - 00;15;32;03

Courtney Ringstaff

But anyway, we really loved the pediatrician, too. And I was just wondering with those questionnaires if she was flagging things there and if they ever told you that.

00;15;32;18 - 00;16;00;03

Alyssa Flowers

Now the previous what? The previous doctor's office now in again looking back what I know now and see, because Isabella went through a very pro long time of having severe digestive issues, like not being able to go for like a long period of time. And I didn't know that possibly be an early sign like I, I had no idea.

00;16;00;03 - 00;16;23;16

Alyssa Flowers

And I kept bringing it up to her old doctor and it was like, Oh, now, like, she's fine. Like, they were some prune juice. I'm like, well, the prune, she's isn't working. Like what? Like what else can I do? It's like, well, take your diet. And I'm like, she's barely eating. And that is, again, knowing what I know now, she has her safe foods, but it was just very defeating.

00;16;23;16 - 00;16;45;20

Alyssa Flowers

And so once the summer 2024 hit I, it was a no brainer. I had to find a new provider that listened to me because as parents, we know our child better than anybody. I'm her voice, I'm her advocate. My husband is her voice is her advocate. It was a no brainer that we had to do some research to find the best possible care for her.

00;16;47;03 - 00;17;06;16

Melina Danko

At that point. Once you had that summer, did he start to notice things? And then was he like, Yeah, all of a sudden he's like, That doctor's got to go. We got to get a different one. Or, you know, were there things that you guys had to figure out how to get on the same page with?

00;17;06;16 - 00;17;32;25

Alyssa Flowers

We're young parents, so Isabella was our first baby, so it was all it's a trial and error with the first baby. He has always been supportive and he knew my concerns and it was either, okay, so what can we do about this? Or you're you're a new mom. Like we're new parents. Like we've been hit with the COVID pandemic.

00;17;33;04 - 00;18;06;07

Alyssa Flowers

We've been hit with moving from Georgia to West Virginia last minute. You're like, now you're pregnant. You know, it was like kind of like concerned, more so. And just, like, not really knowing what we should do. When we were able to get Isabella over the summer, he yeah. He witnessed it. He, we were both just shocked him more so because the behaviors that I was seeing and the aggression that I was seeing, that's what I did for work, you know.

00;18;06;07 - 00;18;38;00

Alyssa Flowers

And so I if I could go back and just give him, like, a big bear hug and say it's okay, like I'm okay, like I am perfectly fine handling this because I've been trained to do it. You're still an amazing dad like, I will go back in time and do that because I know he struggled watching his daughter struggle and watching his wife get punched bit and like not knowing what to do.

00;18;38;15 - 00;19;03;25

Alyssa Flowers

He played a huge aspect. On just getting Lyla, our youngest, into a different area of the house, getting her into a safe space and playing with her and distracting and kind of talking with her like to see this is fine, you know, this is just having really big feelings and she's just not able to handle some of her emotions, you know?

00;19;03;25 - 00;19;30;14

Alyssa Flowers

And mommy and daddy are working really hard to get answers and help Cissy out. And he played a huge role in that because I was absent being a parent to Lyla for an entire summer. Once we got the answer, yeah, he was like, We got to you tell me because you have more knowledge. You tell me what we need to do and we're going to do it.

00;19;30;20 - 00;20;23;09

Alyssa Flowers

It doesn't matter if he didn't understand 1,000% of what kind of therapy we were going to get her signed up or whatever the like technique was going to be for her de-escalation for that day. He was on board. Whether he fully understood it or not, he was going to support her. And now he will come up to me and like tell me to like step away and then he'll handle the situation and like, that's just a huge, huge improvement of what the summer looks like because we were both just completely caught off guard and just struggling, like just not knowing what the next segment was going to look like.

00;20;24;29 - 00;20;54;13

Melina Danko

I think so many families will resonate with the things that you're saying because when as new parents, you never know. You don't know what kids are supposed to be doing at certain ages. And then also there's kind of the rose colored glasses like, oh, everybody else's kid, you know, can do this, but, you know, mine can't. And you start to wonder like, oh, no, no, I'm just, you know, I'm just being too critical or whatever.

00;20;54;13 - 00;21;17;13

Melina Danko

So I think a lot of families will relate to that, especially as first time parents. You just you don't know what you don't know. And then when it's when you have other people telling you, you know, it's fine, then if everybody else is saying that, then it's I can understand that a lot of people would feel that way.

00;21;19;00 - 00;21;36;04

Courtney Ringstaff

I agree with that 100%, especially because our kids are similar in age. And we were also dealing with the COVID pandemic. And I think that added a whole other layer. Everyone was like, Oh, he's fine. He's just not socialized. Oh, he's fine. He just hasn't heard words, or he hears words with masks over your face. That's why he has a delay.

00;21;36;29 - 00;21;53;25

Courtney Ringstaff

And so you kind of in your head start to think of like all these other things that are contributing to the delay or contributing to the behaviors or the lack of social skills. Maybe, maybe it was a little bit of that, but primarily it was not. It was his autism, and we were just covering it with all these other things.

00;21;54;13 - 00;22;09;28

Courtney Ringstaff

But you're listening to your story. Like, there's been times where I've felt emotional because I'm like, Yes, that is exactly how it felt, you know? So if it's helping me, I know it's helping other families to hear this because there are certainly things you said that I'm like, Oh my God, I wasn't alone in that, thank goodness.

00;22;11;07 - 00;22;47;25

Alyssa Flowers

Yeah. And that's what I think is so special about like this podcast is because it doesn't matter what disability your child has or what your family is dealing with, you know, we're all in the same boat and we all are wanting the same outcome at the end of the day, and that is providing our family with the best resources and the best amount of love that we can possibly give, and just wanting the best for our kids and our family.

00;22;47;25 - 00;23;07;28

Courtney Ringstaff

Thank you for saying that. That's the point of the podcast. So we're really glad that you are here to share your story to too. So right after getting that diagnosis and now all your gut feelings have been validated, what are some of the first resources you were connected to and how did they start to kind of change life for you and for Isabella.

00;23;09;12 - 00;23;38;07

Alyssa Flowers

Leading up to the diagnosis, I message my friend, she is a pediatric occupational therapist. She used to work in the schools and that's how I knew her. And I just messaged her one day and I just gave her a list of what I was experiencing and she was like, I can help her. Like, let me see my schedule and we'll get something worked out for her and Isabella instantly clicked.

00;23;38;24 - 00;24;07;24

Alyssa Flowers

It's such an amazing feeling on my, like, my, my heart, because Isabella has she's always been outgoing. But when it comes to any kind of like medical care or anything of that sort, she just just just goes into a shell. So Miss Miss Lauren was her friend. So we're going to see her friends. And that really helped the situation, getting her into the door.

00;24;07;25 - 00;24;45;10

Alyssa Flowers

But Lauren, she wanted to focus on helping Isabella with transitions from activity to activity, because at that time it was her way or no way. And also going over like the zones of regulations, which I didn't know what any of that was until Isabella started doing it. And it's just helping the child learn what emotions fit with what scenario, help them understand what they're feeling on the inside is okay.

00;24;45;26 - 00;25;09;16

Alyssa Flowers

But let's like put a color to it. Like, are you in the Green Zone? Are you in the blue, though? Because it's just easier to say I'm I'm in the red, I'm in the red or I'm in the blue and kind of like pulling out like our toolbox, which was like Play-Doh or and pulling out the trampoline that we have.

00;25;09;16 - 00;25;38;09

Alyssa Flowers

And whatever zone she was in, we had like a little toolbox that we pulled out to help with the scenario, and that has helped so much. Like I could honestly cry with the transformation that she has had since the summer to now. And it's all because of occupational therapy with Ms.. Lauren, and she is now back in the school systems.

00;25;38;09 - 00;26;19;27

Alyssa Flowers

So we're looking for an O.T. right now. She still loves her friend, Miss Lauren. We are out of O.T. right now, but is doing good. We have the resources. We are properly equipped for the time being, but oh my gosh, I could not recommend O.T. because you can do O.T. with honestly anything. And people don't realize that, like, they only don't realize that it comes to, again, like the transition that I was experiencing with Isabella, the emotions with Isabella, like not being able to regulate, just like the basic like coordination, like hand-eye coordination, like, like the list goes on and on and on and the family like a family is experiencing.

00;26;20;22 - 00;27;05;13

Alyssa Flowers

I am pretty confident that somewhere down the road there's an O.T. that will be able to help in some way with making their lives a little easier. And then also with the support and the resources is my friend Whitney Price's support group, I'm Puzzle parent group just being surrounded with families and that just completely get it, you know and being able to go to Starbucks once a month to to sit down with these parents and just just talk.

00;27;05;20 - 00;27;19;07

Alyssa Flowers

They have been they have been amazing. And I have formed really good relationships and friendships with the people that I met through that local support group.

00;27;19;07 - 00;27;45;10

Melina Danko

I love that you guys have found your Miss Lauren. And I think it's important because I'm glad that you're telling that story because I want families to know that if they haven't tried what they can and if they are trying to O.T. and they're not getting what their child needs, then they can find another one. If I feel like that's something that we hear a lot.

00;27;45;17 - 00;28;09;05

Melina Danko

And so maybe could you start to talk? Because I'm thinking too, like people would say, oh, they get t at school, we know, oh, they might get 15 minutes twice a week. And so could you start to talk about like some of the things when that you had in place when she started school? But then also, are there things that you try to do still outside of school to supplement that?

00;28;09;05 - 00;28;17;13

Melina Danko

And then since you were in the school, you have a more knowledge about that as well.

00;28;17;13 - 00;28;47;12

Alyssa Flowers

So now we are going into school for the first time with a diagnosis and that was really nerve wracking as a mom because just because I worked in the autism room doesn't mean that I was fully prepared to send my now newly diagnosed daughter to school for the first time. It's completely different whenever it's your own child, but with the help with Ms..

00;28;47;12 - 00;29;40;26

Alyssa Flowers

Lauren, with like the O.T., I was able to help her. Isabella's pre-K teachers be prepared, so we provided the noise canceling headphones. We provided little fidgets and little tips and tricks sheet that could help if Isabella were to have really big feelings and not being able to regulate them. Even though I'm a call away and I would never expect my child's teacher to deal with one of her episodes, I still want to provide them with the best possible resources because once Isabella leaves, it doesn't mean they're not going to experience or haven't already experienced.

00;29;41;10 - 00;30;41;24

Alyssa Flowers

And Isabella and so I've been very fortunate to have that background as a teacher's aide and knowing what my daughter needs now, as of right now, we don't have an IEP set up for her yet. She's just in pre-K. But I'm confident that we'll probably need one in the next, like coming year or so. But I know that I can advocate and fight for that because if my daughter's right and she deserves to be seen and heard at school and yes, we can provide schools, can provide services, but at least in the county that I'm in, it's only 12 minutes once a week.

00;30;42;13 - 00;31;07;07

Alyssa Flowers

And I know my daughter is going to need more than that. So being able to have the resources that I've had with Ms.. Lauren, I can still implement them at home. So we have like her mom, calm down corner, not really a corner anymore because we kind of just take the basket wherever she is. So it's like a calm down basket, really.

00;31;07;07 - 00;31;42;04

Alyssa Flowers

But again, we have that toolbox, like whatever zone she's in, I will get the Play-Doh out, I will get the sand out if she's just wanting to listen to music. Okay, here's some music because, like, I really try to have like an open line of communication with Isabella. Like, I want this to be a safe space. I want her to feel comfortable coming to me just because she's not able to express how she feels and what she wants and need at that time.

00;31;42;18 - 00;32;10;26

Alyssa Flowers

It doesn't mean that I still can't help her as a mom, and it's feel like it's a huge accomplishment. It's a great feeling when your child comes to you whenever they just need a hug or just the other day, Isabella was like, Mom, I'm overwhelmed. I'm like, okay, I love your words. Like like what makes you overwhelmed? And she was like, I'm just tired.

00;32;11;09 - 00;32;40;09

Alyssa Flowers

Like, it could have been me too, you know? So then we are able to sit down and talk about what relaxing looks like for her at that time, because for me, it's lounging on the couch and watching like I Love Lucy or something like that. It's like, that's my form of relaxing. But with Isabella, it's probably just it could be jumping on a trampoline because she's able to just completely just zone out and relax her mind.

00;32;40;22 - 00;33;17;19

Alyssa Flowers

Or it can be coloring her. Relaxation looks different every single day. And I understand that there's a lot of families that are probably not able to have these kind of conversations with their child. But there's so many tools and resources that's out there, free resources that can help you and your child communicate. Because a lot, at least with Isabella, a lot of the behaviors was because she wasn't able to communicate how she felt.

00;33;18;08 - 00;33;49;24

Alyssa Flowers

And just having that communication barrier, it's so frustrating. Like, I know whenever I am trying to get my words out and I just start stuttering and mumbling, I just get frustrated. I was like, All right, forget it, forget it. Like, I don't wanna talk about it anymore. I can't imagine what these, like, little minds are thinking too. I just think communication in any way is so important for these little minds and for these, like.

00;33;49;26 - 00;33;53;28

Alyssa Flowers

Like the family dynamic.

00;33;53;28 - 00;33;58;16

Melina Danko

What are some of the things that Isabella likes to do and that she's interested in?

00;33;59;18 - 00;34;26;18

Alyssa Flowers

She is b she's a little thespian, I like to say, like she's just so theatrical. She I have to laugh and, like, have to think for a second because she just love so much because she's always on the go, go, go, go. But she just loves dancing. We've tried dance classes. That was a big no no at the time because it was just too overstimulating for her.

00;34;27;04 - 00;34;55;15

Alyssa Flowers

And it was she dances her hard on at home. So getting me and my husband into the family room and she'll be in the hallway and she'll say, All right, say Isabella to the floor. And I'm like, okay, now Isabella to the floor. And she'll just come bouncing in and just start doing like a block dance, which is mostly just her jumping around and not having like any, I mean, her former dancing, but she's like jumping up and down and doing flips.

00;34;55;15 - 00;35;22;27

Alyssa Flowers

Like she loves doing, like, gymnastics. We had to pull her from gymnastics because she just was going in overwhelmed with that. But in the she loves Barbies, she loves coloring. She does she can draw like a stick figure better than I could ever imagine myself doing. Like, she's so creative. I think that's what's so beautiful with just like, kids minds in general.

00;35;23;13 - 00;36;03;21

Alyssa Flowers

But children who are on the spectrum, their mind is so beautiful. And you'll see whenever I was in the classroom, I would see a student just, like laughing to themselves in the corner, like by themselves. And to some they people would be like, okay, like, what is he? Okay. So, like, I knew that his imagination was going wild that moment and I would have loved to see what he was feeling at that point in time because I bet it was just so magical and so beautiful and so funny with Isabella.

00;36;03;24 - 00;36;36;12

Alyssa Flowers

She just it comes and goes and what she's really interested in, but having her own form of dance and just having an open floor for her to do flips and tricks, that's just that's where she's like the most happiest. Now, a lot of times when she is getting whenever she is having access to a lot of like, physical activity, that's when we notice, like sometimes she'll spiral a little bit because she's just not able to like regulate.

00;36;36;12 - 00;37;05;28

Alyssa Flowers

So being able to help her under trying to understand her own body of like needing to take a subject, need to take a break because it's really hard to stop her from spiraling once it starts. But I'm just so proud of her just from how far she's come so far. I mean, she's almost six and she has a lifetime of achievements to go and I've told my students parents this and I'm telling myself this the power of not yeah.

00;37;05;28 - 00;37;15;01

Alyssa Flowers

Is so strong just holding on to that because just because she's not able to do something right now does not mean that she's not going to be able to do it in the future.

00;37;16;26 - 00;37;41;25

Courtney Ringstaff

I'm wondering if you could talk about some of the resources that you're that you're hoping to access because you mentioned Abby. I don't know, Isabella. I don't know if you're planning on pursuing Weaver or if there's something else that you're thinking about accessing for her. But like, what are your plans for those kinds of at this point?

00;37;41;25 - 00;38;17;05

Alyssa Flowers

The main thing that us as a family that we're really trying to get for Isabella is a a therapy, because there's a lot a lot of people that have like different feeling about ABA therapy. But me personally working in the school systems, I've seen how amazing ABA therapy can do if you're with the right people. And so it's just a never ending wait list to be able to get to that.

00;38;17;26 - 00;38;50;04

Alyssa Flowers

Now, honestly, when it comes to like, like, like visa waiver or anything like that, we have it really cross that bridge yet we may like down the road, but we just haven't personally haven't done that yet. But we're always open to do doing like whatever is best for her and right now we're just trying to get her into occupational therapy because we know how well it how well it's done for her since the very beginning.

00;38;50;04 - 00;39;23;09

Alyssa Flowers

I mean, it hasn't been too long, but it's like the transformation in that short amount of time is just absolutely amazing. So and I think just now, just trying to find the resources to get Isabella prepared to meet new providers, getting her to understand that she's going to be making new friends in the providers and that they're going to love her and help her just as well as Miss Lauren did.

00;39;23;18 - 00;40;08;20

Alyssa Flowers

Even though Miss Lauren is still a really good friend of mine and we talk very regularly and I know for a fact if I called her, she'll be here in a heartbeat. But it's also really I think it's important and it's good for Isabella to be introduced to new people. We're currently in the process of just trying to find resources that just make sense for her to help with that transition because she struggled with transitions in the past and we're just anticipating her to struggle with it during like the new providers too, which is okay, but just trying to equip herself just to make it easier for her so she's not traumatized.

00;40;08;20 - 00;40;27;04

Courtney Ringstaff

I'm going to ask a follow up question about Abby, because I know a lot of questions about it. Ideally, what would that look like for her in school for you? Because you have been on the inside. And did Abby Therapist come into the school that you were working with? And is that the way that you see it or will you be pulling her out and putting her in a like facility for Abby?

00;40;27;05 - 00;40;32;15

Courtney Ringstaff

You're doing that at home. Like, do you have an ideal way that that will be arranged once she comes off that waitlist?

00;40;33;20 - 00;41;02;26

Alyssa Flowers

Yes. So right now she's on a wait list for like a facility that is close to us. And it's going to be for like after school for a couple hours, for a couple of days a week. So when she goes to Abby, I see the light at the end of the tunnel. I know we're going to get there, but once we get there, I really want them to help focus on her communication skills, since she doesn't know personal space at all.

00;41;04;11 - 00;41;33;00

Alyssa Flowers

And right now, her friends at school are perfectly fine with it, but not everybody is going to be like that. So helping her understand like social cues and being okay, like helping her understand that not everybody is going to want to play with her. She gets very upset. If nobody wants to play with her, it's it's weird because it's if somebody says, oh, no, I don't want to play right now, her mind instantly goes to, Oh, well, they hate me.

00;41;33;00 - 00;42;08;02

Alyssa Flowers

And I'm like, one. Where did you learn that from into like that? That's not the case at all. So having him help her to know some coping strategies when it comes to her peers because her peers are amazing right now, but they're I don't know what the future holds. And I really try to live in the present because if I think too much into it, like I it's just not good for my personal mental health and it's just I need to be available right now whenever, whenever I'm needed.

00;42;08;17 - 00;42;34;18

Alyssa Flowers

So it'll be after school services once the time comes. And then when I feel like she is going to need a little bit more, then we'll look into getting the IEP set up and getting the services and stuff set up through the school. But right now we're going to see if the after school works for her for this time.

00;42;34;18 - 00;42;45;28

Melina Danko

And you tell us a little bit about your work now and how you got into this position, how you feel about it.

00;42;46;09 - 00;42;47;11

Alyssa Flowers

Absolutely.

00;42;48;08 - 00;43;01;02

Melina Danko

And you don't have to like be like, oh, it's great just because we're here. But I mean, like, I feel like there's reasons why that you are here and how you are so good at your position because of your experiences with Isabella.

00;43;02;10 - 00;43;26;23

Alyssa Flowers

Working in the autism room as an aide, you know, I, I absolutely loved it. And then once I got my daughter's diagnosis, I remember the first week of school and I was helping to de-escalate a student and I was holding him, rocking him, doing what normally would work for him at that time. And so I'm like rocking him and holding him.

00;43;26;24 - 00;44;01;11

Alyssa Flowers

I remember actually crying because I couldn't help but think like, Is Isabella ever going to experience this severe of an episode? Or am I even am I going to be able to balance both working in the autism room and going home to it? So I had emotions just all over the place and then I had the opportunity come up to interview for the Center for Excellence in Disabilities.

00;44;01;11 - 00;44;30;01

Alyssa Flowers

As a parent specialist. And so I jumped on that as soon as the opportunity came because I knew I wanted to help my students the best that I possibly could. And with the little bit of resources I was given, I knew I wasn't. I was I felt like I was hitting the ceiling, but I wasn't. I knew there was more out there for me to do.

00;44;30;02 - 00;45;03;12

Alyssa Flowers

There was more for me to do when it to advocating for my child and for the students like they were like my kids, like I would do absolutely anything and everything for them. And I jumped on the opportune city because I just loved what the city stands for. And I so badly wish I would have known about it during my Gezi myself period, because it's like a little hidden gem that a lot of people don't know about.

00;45;03;12 - 00;45;38;17

Alyssa Flowers

And I just whatever I find resource wise, what I'm working as a peer network specialist and I feel like it's going to then help benefit my old coworkers like a training that I did. I'm like, Here's a video I think you should watch for for so and so. I think these techniques will be fantastic with that student. And so I feel so good with what I do every single day.

00;45;38;29 - 00;46;05;20

Alyssa Flowers

I don't question my work. I know I am doing good for my child, for myself or my family, for the families that I'm working with that's been brought to me at the city. And my old students like this because like I'm not there doesn't mean I can't I can't to advocate for them. So can't advocate for my coworkers, you know.

00;46;05;22 - 00;46;33;15

Alyssa Flowers

And I've always had like a very getting heart and it's a blessing and a curse at the same time. But I just feel so good knowing that all of my experiences, all of my turmoil, all of my trauma, all of all of the paths that has been thrown at me has led me to where I'm at right now.

00;46;33;26 - 00;47;01;16

Alyssa Flowers

And it just sitting back and looking back at it now, it is all makes sense. Like, of course I'm working where I'm at now at the Center for Excellence and Disabilities. Like, it makes sense. Like, why wouldn't I be here? It just it just made sense. It's so hard to explain, but such a rewarding feeling. Being able to help families in need, provide them with resources, free resources, if that, and support and guidance.

00;47;01;16 - 00;47;30;04

Alyssa Flowers

The guidance and the support that I wish I would have had. I treat every client as if it was my child, because I just know how isolated and defeated these families feel. So it's just such a rewarding job and I'm so thankful that I was able to have two jobs in my life where I have felt so fulfilled.

00;47;30;09 - 00;48;22;11

Alyssa Flowers

I will never take it for granted. I remember my first day as an aide in the autism room. Like, I remember what I was wearing. I remember it was raining outside and it was the most chaotic day I have ever experienced in my life. But I loved it. Like I loved learning every single student's different quirks and what academically like what grade level they were in to provide like like special like curriculums for them, like helping the teacher like come up with like different strategies for each student.

00;48;22;11 - 00;48;58;24

Alyssa Flowers

And there wasn't a few days in a row that was the same. You were walking into a completely different scenario every single day, whether it was blissful or not so blissful. I definitely wish that when I was being interviewed for that position that I was given more like actual like proper training for like a special education room, like setting because you don't really know what room you're going to really get into until like you physically get there and I'm in an autistic room or whatnot, like you don't know.

00;48;59;01 - 00;49;36;05

Alyssa Flowers

So just having like proper training and awareness so you're they're able to keep staff. I also wish that I was warned a little bit more about the behavior aspect of it, because kids in general are just so unpredictable and then you sprinkle, oh, whatever diagnosis they had and anything to set them off or you just didn't know. Like I could be breathing heavy and they would be fine.

00;49;36;05 - 00;49;57;20

Alyssa Flowers

And then the next day I would be breathing heavy, and then that would set them off. Like it was like you just didn't know what, what the day was going to look like. I have, I carry a lot of love with me from my pre from being an aide a.k.a some scars just from the scratches and the biting and whatnot.

00;49;57;20 - 00;50;36;13

Alyssa Flowers

Because I do feel that with me having the big heart that I have, I, I just made myself available. Yes, I could have walked away. I did walk away in some circumstances, but I stayed in room during those like escalated episodes to help support my team and to protect the rest of the students in the class and, to help the little one try to regulate, you know, because they're always trying to find the peaceful minds in the classroom.

00;50;36;26 - 00;51;20;27

Alyssa Flowers

And I feel like I was one of them. So they easily clung to me. So I'm carrying a lot of love with me from that position. But being in that room and working in the school systems and now being a parent with a child with a disability, I cannot stress this enough that these service personnel's, these educators, these admin, they they just want what's best for your child, whether it makes sense at the time or not, because I know some feedback is really hard to swallow.

00;51;21;19 - 00;51;55;00

Alyssa Flowers

But if you are as a parent, form a good relationship and an open line of communication with the with your child's student and admin, you're just going to see such a huge difference in your guys's school experience. Granite What you see on the news network and on Facebook, like a teacher got sued for something. And if you dig a little deeper into it, there's a lot of the ties.

00;51;55;00 - 00;52;23;22

Alyssa Flowers

Like they weren't prop, they weren't properly trained to handle that kind of situation. So don't always believe what you see. There are so many good people working in the school systems and they want what's best for your child. With that being said, you're the parent. You're you are your child's voice, you are their advocate. You are allowed to say if you're not happy with something, you are allowed to say.

00;52;23;22 - 00;53;06;26

Alyssa Flowers

I want to revisit the IEP, the IEP plan or I want to revisit the behavior plan. I want to bring, in my child's pediatrician to this meeting like you are in control till you're allowed to say no as a parent to your like your child's teachers and admin but also from both sides. Keep an open mind that you may not get the answers that you are looking for at that point in time.

00;53;06;26 - 00;53;37;09

Alyssa Flowers

Like nobody has a magic wand to just wave it and make things better. It's just so crucial at home to do just have a strong communication and relationship and be open to feedback. Because I, I do, I do feel like parents just training too, because we're always thrown like all these like obstacles and different scenarios and we can try to be as patient and gentle as possible.

00;53;37;09 - 00;54;07;02

Alyssa Flowers

And then it's just not always going to be the case sometimes. But as a parent, I also understand how hard the staff at the school is working. They are doing the absolute best that they can with what? With what's given to them. And being in the state of West Virginia, you know, it's not it's not a whole lot, you know, and it's yeah.

00;54;07;09 - 00;54;50;14

Alyssa Flowers

Your your child and your student is the main concern. I've always said, like my child's comfortability far exceeds like my comfortability. I, I will have these tough conversations that I don't want to have them going to. And I know that I was able to talk to a couple parents of previous students and help them kind of see it from both sides, because you can't help but to feel like your child's either being targeted or just not being heard or they're just like mean people or that that that's just that's just not the case.

00;54;50;14 - 00;55;25;03

Alyssa Flowers

If they're in the line of work, there's a good, good chance that they have a really big heart and they're wanting the same thing at the end of the day, and that your child being happy and working towards achieving goals the best way possible. I will strive every single day to make sure that my daughter is given the best possible resources at school, like I'm going to equip every single teacher that she comes across with tips and tricks of what works for her and what will that may set her off.

00;55;25;03 - 00;55;46;13

Alyssa Flowers

And if it does set her off, I you you can work with her if you want. Here are ways you can work with her, but like reach out to me like I'm not going to be the peer that that's going to be upset that you're reaching out to me during a work day or I'm never going to think that you're calling me because, like, you can't handle it.

00;55;46;13 - 00;56;09;10

Alyssa Flowers

Like you're you're like, you're her teacher. Like, why can't you handle her? Like, this is what you signed up for? I heard that a lot, too. This is what you signed up for. And that's not their responsibility, you know, and they have my team plus other students to worry about, too. Keep a little bit of an open mind that they're doing the best that they can.

00;56;09;10 - 00;56;37;07

Alyssa Flowers

And the teacher knows that you're doing the best that you possibly can. So come together, be a good a good support team for your child because you are able to pay your child way to success. I want Isabella to be successful as possible if I'm not providing the people in her life with the proper resources as I'm setting her back.

00;56;38;08 - 00;56;45;01

Alyssa Flowers

And that's not that's not fair to her. And it's not fair to the people that I'm surrounding her with, to.

00;56;49;06 - 00;57;11;02

Courtney Ringstaff

What do you feel like is the best way to communicate that to her teachers? Because I feel like most parents maybe don't realize that that is their responsibility to teach the teachers about their own child. And so what do you recommend? Like, should we be scheduling a meeting you know, on the first day of school or should we be sending a message through like the messenger?

00;57;11;03 - 00;57;27;06

Courtney Ringstaff

You know, most schools, I would say, have like the app nowadays, like my kid does. She would be writing it up in a tip sheet for them and sending it along, like, what's the best way to communicate that to teachers? So the parents kind of know, Oh, maybe I should do that, maybe I should schedule this meeting or maybe next year I should do that and think about that as well.

00;57;28;03 - 00;58;06;24

Alyssa Flowers

Yeah, I like to be able to communicate to your child's teacher the first week of school, I was asked to have a meeting with the teacher because her teacher, I open house actually was sick. So it was just the aide. So I was able to talk with the aide and talk about like experiences like back and forth. So it was a really good like introduction, but I wanted to talk to you also talk to the teacher, you know, so you can request a meeting with your teacher at any point in time if their schedule allows it.

00;58;06;24 - 00;58;33;24

Alyssa Flowers

That's okay. Like it could be in-person, it can be a phone call. It doesn't have to be like it's extravagant, like requesting a sit down meeting with like a principal or anything like that. Like, no, it can be a very casual conversation and just talk about how amazing your child is and the things that they struggle with, like with Isabella, like she struggles with loud noises.

00;58;33;24 - 00;59;07;05

Alyssa Flowers

So I'm going to provide you with noise canceling headphones. Is there a safe space for her to keep her headphone case that's going to be easily accessible for whenever she needs it? And we communicated on where a good spot in the classroom would be to have her headphones in a safe space that easily accessible for her. And while we're on that topic, we're going to talk about I want you to get to know like her little cues that she does when she is just overstimulated.

00;59;07;17 - 00;59;38;15

Alyssa Flowers

And if you're seeing that she's not making that first move, maybe if you have time, suggest her gain the headphones or just get the headphones for her like she will just start rocking or she'll start talking a mile a minute. And a lot of the words just don't make sense. Like, I feel like she's making up a lot of words or she will just start crying, you know, like there's like little cues that she does.

00;59;38;15 - 01;00;03;24

Alyssa Flowers

And it's important for the teachers to know what that is. So like they know what to look for. And her teacher was so appreciative with that sit down conversation. And Isabella definitely wasn't the first student that she had experience with, but it was one of the first times where a parent sat down with them and was on their side.

01;00;03;26 - 01;00;25;08

Alyssa Flowers

Like, We're a team. Like I would I'm not going to I'm not going to hold myself to a higher power than you. I'm not going to expect you to parent my child. You know, there's going to be times where I might ask for help, like, hey, like during Isabel's homework, I'm noticing that she's writing her name backwards. It's beautiful.

01;00;25;08 - 01;00;46;11

Alyssa Flowers

Like, it's absolutely perfect. But she writing her name backwards. Like, is she doing that at school? Like, do you have any tips or tricks for that? You know, and reaching out like asking for help, asking for advice, because I don't know all the answers. Like I don't know what she's like in that classroom. I'm going to trust what you're saying.

01;00;47;02 - 01;01;18;03

Alyssa Flowers

And I know with that open mind communication and that relationship, Isabella is going to keep hitting these milestones because the way I'm thinking is there's no tension, like she's going to feel safe going to her teacher because her teacher knows what makes her feel safe and what doesn't make her feel safe. And she knows to come to me and Matthew because we welcome all of that.

01;01;18;14 - 01;01;49;04

Alyssa Flowers

We welcome everything about her, whether it's kicking and screaming or it's just wanting to cuddle like we like we accept it all. And just getting the teachers and the parents all on that same page, you're going to notice a huge change academically and emotionally and personally, because you're creating that safe space for them at school and at home.

01;01;49;04 - 01;02;47;01

Alyssa Flowers

The best advice I can give parents whether they honestly whether they're parents of atypical or if they're parent like these like new young parents and they're just getting a diagnosis for their child or their parents of like multiple kids, you know, have a little bit of grace with yourself because you're only one person and you just being concerned that you're doing enough is praying that you are an amazing parent because not all the parents stop and think for a second like you being concerned on if your child got enough love before bed late enough hugs and kisses like that's just that's just showing how good of a parent you are because you're concerned about that

01;02;47;19 - 01;03;26;07

Alyssa Flowers

surrounding yourself and your child with a village that you specifically chose to be around because you don't have to have 20 plus people that you always hear like back in the back in the good old days, having this big or strong village. But you'll have to have that like it can just be your husband, a partner, your spouse, like it could just be you guys, or it can be like in my, like in my situation, I have like a good like by people that I surround myself with because I know that they are loving and accepting of my family's beliefs.

01;03;26;07 - 01;03;53;09

Alyssa Flowers

And Isabella's needs. And if I say I don't want any red dye given to her because it's going to make her literally try to climb up the walls, they they listen because they they know it's really important to us. So just you are you are in control of who you want in your village and people are going to come and go in your life after a diagnosis and you're going to be heartbroken.

01;03;53;25 - 01;04;15;15

Alyssa Flowers

It's a gamble, you know, and that's okay. It just unfortunately, it just comes with just life in general. But the life that you're going to build moving forward, you're going to be so proud of yourself and it's going to be beautiful in your way, is not going to look like everybody else's journey and village. But you can be perfect.

01;04;15;15 - 01;04;20;21

Alyssa Flowers

It's going to be beautiful.

01;04;20;21 - 01;04;36;09

Melina Danko

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