**Episode 1: Milan WAM Podcast – Early childhood screening and timely intervention**

**Host:** This is autism points of view by Autism Speaks. I am Felipe Maya. Welcome to Autism Points of View, If you didn’t know, April is World Autism Month, a time when Autism Speaks invites friends and neighbors around the world to come together to pledge to light it up blue to increase global understanding and acceptance of people with autism. Join us by pledging your support for a more inclusive world at autismspeaks.org/WAM. Every April, Autism Speaks spotlights the stories of individuals with autism and we’ll be telling some of those stories on this podcast. This episode focuses on Milan, a precocious 9-year old boy with autism. At first, his parents say, they didn’t really notice the signs…

**Janira** (Milan’s mother): I think he was funny and challenging when he was a kid before he was diagnosed.

**Host**: This is Janira, Milan’s mother.

**Janira**: We kind of thought OK something's off but none of the teachers are telling us that there's anything wrong. They always said, “he's so creative, he's so brilliant, he's so smart, you should hear what he said today” or “he led the class in something today” and this was like two years of pre-school and kindergarten and they were just so impressed with him and he was always the kid that when I came to the door It's like, “we need to talk he had some issues today.” But no one ever said “Have you considered testing him?” or “we suspect…” because he was verbal. He was so smart and so charming when he was happy, and it wasn't until he got to first grade that he had a very experienced teacher and she said “You know I think he has more anxiety than is normal for a first grader,” and I agreed. I was like “yes, yes that's exactly what's going on.” We could see that in first grade it was more structured. They expected him to sit down and he had to comply with what everybody else was doing and it was really challenging for him. And just the social structure of the classroom was just really difficult for him. And I didn't understand like how did this perfectly charming happy kid, turn into this kid who is so anxious and can't talk to his peers anymore? Kids he had been in school with for years.

**Host**: Dr. Teri Bish, Milan’s school psychologist discusses her assessment of Milan at the time.

**Dr. Teri Bish**: Milan is an exceptionally bright boy with a great sense of humor. He’s charismatic. So, I think everybody grew to love Milan right away in kindergarten. He had difficulty with regulating his emotions and staying in the classroom, as well as some impulsivity. So, as he continued at Waiting Lane some of his challenges grew and he needed some additional services. He was identified initially as a student needing special education services in first grade. And that was actually before his diagnosis of autism.

We used a variety of techniques and strategies. You know every child with autism is unique and Milan was so creative that we used curriculum such as the zones of regulation or Michelle Garcia Winter's work with social thinking and the Super Flex curriculum. And Milan had a way of infusing his own ideas into those curriculums. So he actually expanded on all of them and we used that to work on flexibility, to work on peer interactions, you know, how he can approach friends at recess, the things he wanted to do, and also learn to use coping skills in moments of frustration.

**Host**: Milan’s Father, Jose.

**Jose**: Yeah, Milan is very good with grown-ups and older people anywhere he goes. He has some difficulties with the younger kids, but no one would know that he is autistic because when he comes in the room is the life of the party.

**Janira**: So she said, “maybe we should have a school social worker work with him for a bit because she might be able to help him work out these social issues and maybe his anxiety” and he worked with her for a couple of months. She was awesome. All the staff at the school were awesome and she said… “You know, I don’t want you to be alarmed, but I think there might be something else going on than just social anxiety.” And she told me her personal experience that she'd had personal experience with a child with autism and she said, “It might not be, but you should test him and see what happens.” And that's exactly why we went to our pediatrician and said these are the concerns and she wrote this letter to the school saying we want this kid tested. And she also referred him to a therapist for his anxiety, and so it all happened pretty quickly. Was this in the second grade or first grade? Towards the end of the first grade. It all happened pretty quickly. I think that conversation with the social worker happened in February and by May we had like all the testing done on their part and we had a working diagnosis and then we also went to a development pediatrician and said, “well were just going to verify and make sure that were all on the same page,” and then our pediatrician said, “yes” and then they did the ADOS testing, “It’s not like he’s a little bit on the spectrum. He is on the spectrum there is no doubt. You know you have an autistic child here and then there’s also ADHD.” And then from there we had a better idea of how to proceed. He started second grade with a diagnosis already. We were all on the same page. He had a fantastic team; the school psychologist, the special Ed teacher, OT people, everyone in the school was just awesome and on board. And so we just really worked together to help this kid.

**Jose**: I come from a family of 10 kids and where the structure was a very important thing for the family. You know, as a young parent, you try to emulate what you learned from growing up with a big family and try to raise a kid, but you don’t know what kind of kid you have. Sometimes it was a challenge for us. And you know, with friends, you want them to behave a certain way and your kid is not behaving the way you want to see it’s very frustrating in the beginning. And then after words to understand what kind of kid you have and sometimes even he said we wanted him to be flexible but we are not flexible with him. It’s a challenge for someone who didn’t grow up understanding that and to learn that you have a different kid.

**Janira**: I tried to explain it as best as possible to my mom and she was like, “well is there a cure? You know, can he learn? Is he mentally disabled?” And I was like “nope, the kid is fine. He’s gonna learn like every other kid, maybe differently but he’s gonna learn. He’s gonna be fine. We are going to get him help. He’s young. He’s gonna get a lot of intervention now and hopefully he’s going to be just an awesome young man in the future.”

I think we've been really lucky in the people who we've encountered to help us. And the school was amazing. Everyone at the school was just so helpful, so cooperative, and just supportive. If we had a concern, if we learned something from his therapist, we would share it with them and they would incorporate that into his work in school. His pediatrician was amazing - she's also a mom from the school and she was like, “I got a kid like this. Let me tell you. This is what we're going to do.” His therapist was awesome. She connected us with this amazing therapist that he still sees today, and she helped him through social issues. She helped him with group therapy, talking, like the kid is so aware of himself now because of all the interactions he's had with her. She's just amazing and she's also helped our daughter and she's helped us understand. Sometimes we're like “We're not sure what's going on here.” So we would talk it out and we figure it out.

Everyone, his developmental pediatrician was amazing, his psychiatrist is awesome, like everybody has been really good and the other parents were an amazing resource too because he'd been in school with some of these kids since preschool. And they also noticed like something's off with Milan and they would say, “He’s still doing that he's still running like that.” And this was like in the second grade or the first grade I said, “This is what's going on with our kid. Now we know, and they were like, “ooooooh OK, we're on it.” And they would explain to their kids, “You know Milan has some difficulties with these things.” And it was just fine. The other kids were very accepting, very kind, if he was having a hard day they were like, “OK Milan’s just having a hard day we'll let you be,” and no one ever said to him later, “Oh, you did this you.” No, there was no teasing. It was just awesome.

**Host**: While Milan was diagnosed in first grade, autism can be reliably diagnosed in most children by age 2. Autism Speaks offers free resources for families who think their child may be exhibiting signs of autism or for parents who recently received an autism diagnosis and don’t know what to do next.

Visit autismspeaks.org/podcast to download those resources and make sure to subscribe to Autism Points of View to get updates and new episodes.

This episode was written by James Fitzpatrick and edited by Dax Schaffer.

I’m Felipe Maya, thanks for listening.