**Episode 11: The Back-to-School Transition**

**HOST**: This is Autism Points of View, by Autism Speaks. I’m Felipe Maya. With summer break coming to an end, students across the country are gearing up to head back to school. And as we all know, the first day of school can be difficult for anyone but it can be especially difficult for students on the autism spectrum. In this episode we’ll meet the Monville Family who are preparing their son SJ for his first day of kindergarten. They let us into their lives and shared with us their hopes and fears for SJ’s transition from a classroom for kids with developmental delays to a traditional kindergarten classroom. But let’s start by getting to know the Monville’s.

**STEELE**: My name is Steele Monville.

**KAYLA**: Hi my name is Kayla. We have two children. My son’s name is Steele Jr., we call him SJ and he’s 5. And then a girl named Reagan Grace and she's 3. Both of my children have autism. So that is something different than typical families.

**STEELE**: I'm learning more about the autism spectrum every day. I had no idea anything about it going into it. My wife is all about that and she knew a lot of stuff which I'm blessed for. So me it's really reading some things but living it.

**KAYLA**: I am a special education teacher. And when we found out SJ has autism we were in denial at first. My husband just thought maybe I was being a little judgmental of his delays because of my profession. But after he started to see the signs and read more about it we knew we needed to take him to get evaluated.

**HOST**: While Kayla noticed the signs of autism early in SJ, the signs in Reagan were less apparent at first.

**KAYLA**: It was a shock when we started seeing signs of autism with Reagan because when she was born she did everything opposite of SJ. And then about eight months we started seeing everything, she started flapping and she started rocking. Her speech was delayed and all of the signs of autism that we saw with SJ we then started seeing with her.

**HOST**: Even though SJ and Reagan are brother and sister and both on the autism spectrum their challenges and strengths are very different.

**KAYLA**: If you've met one person with autism you've met one person with autism and that's so true to our family. Being autistic they're total opposites.

My son is very verbal and my daughter is non-verbal. At this time we are working on speech and it's coming along. She may always be non-verbal. We're not sure but she's trying. She's really trying to talk.

**STEELE**: And you know SJ he's become verbal over the years and Reagan's working her way there. So it's just like I said, same mom and dad same circumstances and it's just two different kids but it’s a learning process for sure.

**KAYLA**: SJ’s a little celebrity in this town I go to the grocery store and people will come up hey SJ and he remembers their name and their face and he usually has something important that he has done with them.

**STEELE**: He just has a way to connect with people. That's really unique. And uh, given with his diagnosis we didn’t know if that would be possible. The things we read but he just loves being around people, making people laugh with his interactions.

**HOST**: SJ loves connecting with people in the community but he can get overwhelmed in certain situations and may have a meltdown, which the Monville’s say is unfortunately often misunderstood as bad parenting.

**KAYLA**: SJ gets easily overwhelmed with lots of people or activities that he did once and he's back in that same environment and he doesn't get to do that activity again. So that upsets him because he associates things with one another. So if he doesn't get to do it then he gets a little overwhelmed and frustrated and he doesn't always know how to vocalize that his speech is delayed and his processing is slower so he doesn't know how to say I'm overwhelmed and it is something he's working on and has made a huge progress in that area.

**STEELE**: What you want to say what you want to say is that, “Hey my child has autism. They don't understand exactly how they're acting right now. And they don't want to act that way.” It's tough when you're in a situation and there is a meltdown or something along those lines to walk up to the 7 or 8 parents that are looking at you and explaining that. And like I said it's not that they're being a brat or this or that but I guess I just like parents to understand that you know, don't always judge a book by its cover. That's cliché but just because one child acting that way. There could be other things going on.

**HOST**: While SJ and Reagan are very different socially, together they’re inseparable.

**KAYLA**: Their relationship is unique. They don't play like typical kids but they do have their own fun play together they chase each other. He loves to cuddle with her. He's very protective of her. Everywhere he goes Reagan has always been, even school they go to school together. So this transition to kindergarten is going to be tough on both because they've always been together.

**HOST**: SJ and Reagan have been attending a pre-school class for children with developmental delays but this year SJ will be moving on to a mainstream kindergarten class.

**KAYLA**: There is a huge transition coming up in SJ’s life. He has been attending the same school. Since thirty two months old and now he's transitioning into kindergarten and he's not really sure of what is going to happen. He knows about kindergarten but he truly doesn't understand until he gets there and realizes this is his next stage in life. This is where he'll attend it'll be different because the teachers and staff will all be different. He won't have that comfort of knowing who to go to when he has a problem.

He was a baby and growing up there and now he's changed into environment that is going to be more kids. A bigger school, instead of just a little classroom his entire school to try to navigate. He's going to be transitioning in and out of classrooms to go to music and arts and gym and he's never done that before. So it's going to be difficult.

**STEELE**: my excitement is for him to interact with friends and be in a classroom that is very inclusive. You know and if he needs breaks he goes to his resource room to be inclusive with lunch with outside activities and in the typical classroom is what we're excited about because SJ is a very smart individual, very capable and it’s just a matter of him being given the opportunity and the more inclusive he can be or any child with autism can be, is 100 percent better.

**KAYLA**: It makes me very nervous and I'm excited for him to be with his peers and with typical peers and learn and grow so much. But I am so nervous for this transition in his life. I will be building relationships with his teachers just like he will and I was comfortable with him in that classroom and that support that I received from his teacher as she texts me daily and called me daily and now I have those same expectations for his kindergarten teacher and she's got 20 you know maybe 30 children, she can't do that. So not being able to know about his day when he comes home he doesn't know how to express – “I did this or I had fun doing this.” Sometimes he says it in forms of questions, he'll say, “did you have fun today?” Because it's a memorized response but I'm not sure that he actually had fun and I don't get to hear about specific details of his day unless his teacher tells me, so that makes me nervous.

**STEELE**: Well fear is of course that people treat him differently and you know name-calling and things like that that can be hurtful and damaging to someone you know and I think back when I was younger and making the same mistakes you know realize it then but when you get older you start to realize how those things can have an effect on an individual, so that's the biggest thing.

**HOST**: Change in routine is something that SJ, and many children with autism have trouble with so Kayla and Steele are working hard to make sure the back to school transition is as smooth as possible.

**KAYLA**: Routine is extremely important for SJ because it's predictable. He needs to know what's going on in his day so that he can plan ahead. He has a lot of anxiety. And the more things that we can forefront to him and tell him that's going to happen the more comfortable he is. So usually at night when we're laying there we go through what the next day's going to look like. Tell him if he has school or if it's “Mama SJ Ray Day” - the day I'm home. He’s really into summer break right now. So it's “mama and SJ summer break.” Then he can plan in his head and be a little bit more relaxed about what his day will look like.

**HOST**: One of the ways that schools support many students with disabilities is through an individualized education program or IEP. This provides personalized learning and behavior supports based on a student’s individual needs to ensure they can access the curriculum and learn to their full potential.

**KAYLA**: So to prep him for kindergarten he will be taking in his IEP. He'll be taking frequent breaks and one of those breaks will be him being able to have access to an iPad or tablet for him to look at different pictures and videos. He loves watching videos of him and his sister and him and I and my husband on different outings that we have had to the zoo or waterpark and we've taken, everywhere we go we take videos. So he'll be able to watch those see pictures of us when he has those breaks just to feel like we’re they and comforting. I want people to focus on their ability and not their disability and capitalize on their strengths and not focus on their weaknesses.

**HOST**: One unique way that Kayla and Steele will be able to let SJ Know that they are thinking about him on his first day of school is through a special treat in his lunch box. Kellogg’s Rice Krispies Treats has partnered with Autism Speaks to give families touch and feel sensory love notes they can stick onto a Rice Krispies Treat.

**CHRIS**: Hi I'm Chris Banner senior vice president for Global Corporate Affairs for Kellogg Company.

You know I think change is often very difficult for children with autism and certainly the back-to-school timeframe can be a time of anxiety for all children. And I believe that's especially true with children with autism. Often social skills are one of the challenges that they face. And of course the school environment is fraught and filled with opportunities and challenges in the social arena. So it's really I think a very appropriate time to reach out to children with autism and ensure they're getting the right start to the school year.

So what we're doing with the Love Notes program is offering special stickers for children who enjoy tactile experiences, in this case. So these are what we call sensory love notes. There are four heart shaped stickers and they have a variety of textures and including silk, fleece, faux fur, satin and velour. And so they're designed for kids to those touchy feely experiences are how they connect them with the world on screen.

**HOST**: Families can order their own free sensory love notes at ricekrispies.com/lovenotes. Kellogg’s mission to be more inclusive of kids with sensory differences is also a personal one.

**CHRIS**: I am a mother of a teen with autism and so this initiative touches me very deeply it's near and dear to my heart. My son is 15 years old his name is Liam and he was diagnosed about a decade ago with high functioning autism. He's a really sweet and wonderful young man great sense of humor that he faces. Of course many of the same challenges that other kids on the spectrum do. And one of those challenges is how he best give and receive love.

**HOST**: Kayla and Steele are looking forward to including the sensory love notes in SJ’s lunch box when he starts kindergarten.

**KAYLA**: SJ calls Rice Krispies treats, Christmas trees because he thinks they sound so similar. And he's obsessed with Christmas. So that is his favorite holiday.

I think it's great that Rice Krispies treats as providing a way for parents that have children with autism to send a message to their kid when they're going to school something that they can touch and feel the love from home and not something that they have to read because a lot of kids on the spectrum are not there yet. A lot of 5 year olds going to kindergarten are not there yet.

SJ seeks that sensory, he's a sensory seeker. He will come up to people a lot of times and just touch them. He wants to feel like the different textures of their clothing and the softness sues him. And that's why I think his blanket is so comforting for him it’s a little heavier and it’s soft.

**HOST**: Kindergarten will be just one of many firsts for SJ, and like all parents, Kayla and Steele can’t help but think about their hopes for SJ and Reagan’s future.

**STEELE**: Obviously the number one goal I think for any parents is you want the child to be happy. I don't necessarily need him or want him to have a ton of friends, but I want him to have some couple few close friends you know course outside of his family. I think its important have those social interactions with people outside of your family the people you can trust. So if he has a few close friends he's happy and hopefully he can be gainfully employed somewhere and it shows up on time and works hard and keeps his head down, keep smiling that’s all I want for him.

**KAYLA**: I want SJ and Reagan to be the most independent they can. I want them to be able to be functioning adults and that is our main goal for them. Not to be doctors lawyers to be functioning adults that can take care of themselves communicate their needs and wants. Because the world's not going to just know and they're not going to take it easy on them just because they have a defined disability.

We don't know where he will be in life or what he will do. I hope that he never loses making people feel important no matter what his career is. I hope he does something that’s social and that he gets to be around other people. His dad's in sales and she's a pretty good negotiator so maybe something in sales or who loves animals. He always talks about being a zookeeper. He says I'm a zookeeper when we go to the zoo. So anything's possible whatever he wants to do I just hope that he is interacting with other people and that he makes them feel as loved as he does now.

**HOST**: Thank you for listening to this episode of Autism Points of View. Make sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts to get future episodes as soon as they’re available. Special thank you to the Monville Family for sharing their story and Kellogg’s and Edelman for providing audio included in this episode.

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This episodes was written and produced by me and edited by Dax Schaffer. Original theme music composed by Dustin Gledhill. I’m Felipe Maya, thanks for listening.