

Episode 51: Rashelle Chase-Miller

[00:00:00] **Rafael Otto**: Welcome to the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. Thank you for listening. You can always catch us on the airwaves in the Portland Metro area on 99.1 FM on Sundays at 4:30 PM or you can tune in at your convenience wherever you find your podcasts. That includes iTunes, Spotify, and Amazon Music and as always on our website at childinst.org. I encourage you to visit.

Today I'm speaking with Rashelle Chase-Miller, who is an activist and a mom. She's authored many articles and works in early childhood curriculum development. She's also founder of Mxm Bloc, a Black mxm led mutual-aid group, supporting Black families and Reproductive Rights PDX.

Rashelle, welcome to the podcast today.

[00:00:44] **Rashelle Chase-Miller**: Thank you. Happy to be here.

[00:00:46] **Rafael Otto**: We're going to start things off. My colleague has joined us today, Kali Thorne Ladd. She is going to start with a few questions for you to get us going. Kali, I'll turn it over to you.

[00:00:55] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: Thank you, Rafael. Well, it's such a pleasure to have Rashelle on the podcast, especially this week. That was a week really heavy when it comes to children. And I know you both as an education leader, early childhood leader, but also as a mom, and an activist from that place as a mother and also a Black mother.

And so, as the founder of PDX Mxm Bloc and how you engage Black moms or Black affiliating moms in the movement of Black Lives Matter, I think as a Black mother, we carry this other burden for our children around their safety. And I really want to hear from you about how this week impacted you and the people in your community, and any words of wisdom that you have to give to people.

[00:01:45] **Rashelle Chase-Miller**: Yeah. You know, this week was ghastly, I think, for parents. But you know, anyone who cares about children, it was a ghastly week in a series of, pretty ghastly weeks. I think that what happened in Texas and the victims being young children, the level of horror is hard to articulate with words. But of course, that also comes just a couple of weeks after the shooting in Buffalo, which was primarily black elders. And so, as someone in my forties who has young children on the one hand and older parents on the other end of the spectrum, phew, it's just been a, you know, the experience of like, walking around with your heart in your throats just for weeks now. I think that the community response that I've witnessed has really just been this collective grief and anguish and feeling of, you know, I was going to say feeling of helplessness. And I do think that there's some of that, but I also think that there has been more resistance to the idea that this is just how it is. Then I recall seeing and feeling and experiencing in the past, and from the activism spaces that I operate in, really just seeing folks unwilling to throw their hands up, unwilling to believe that there's nothing that we can do about this. And I'm really seeing folks lean in and engage. And whether it's the small things like signing petitions online and writing letters, or the larger things like showing up for in-person actions or participating in general strikes. I think that there's this collective recognition that this is intolerable and we can't continue on this way.

I'm certainly not the one with any particular wisdom, I think in the face of just events that you just can't understand. But I do think that these kinds of events are as preventable as they are predictable. How we care for our most vulnerable people, how we show up for our children, the kinds of climates that we foster in our schools and the kinds of supports that we give to our families have everything to do with who our young people grow to be. Whether they feel so disconnected and alienated that they turned to violence, or whether they have the skills and the resiliency to persevere through challenges and come out on the other side. So, I do not know that there is a silver lining to be found. But I do think so much of what we're experiencing now and struggling with, we have the knowledge and the skills and the tools to combat. I think the question is do we have the will.

[00:05:10] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: I love that. And we talked about that a lot here at Children's Institute and the fact that we can create better conditions for our children

to deal with hard things in ways that don't yield violence, and how we see each other's humanity matters. And given that this happened on the anniversary of George Floyd's murder, it was so surreal for me and I imagined it was for you. I thank you for that message of hope though. And that wisdom that we can do something every day and we can create conditions where children thrive and families thrive and can be supported. And we can see one another's humanity, both in schools and in community and how important that is.

I would love, you know, because we are coming out of, you know, this second anniversary of George Floyd's murder. You have been so engaged in helping the community come together in a both healing way and in an activism way in that devastating week. And I would love for you to just speak a little bit about what you've done in community. I know you haven't done it alone and you are very, sort of, collective in your approach and which is fabulous. But it was very unique. And that moment in time, when so much was happening, I saw you emerge as a... and your... and that net organization emerge as a breath of fresh air. And I just would love for you to be able to talk a little bit about it.

[00:06:38] [Rashelle Chase-Miller](#): Yeah I'd be happy to. So... man, traveling back in time in my mind to the summer of 2020. We're all home with our kids. The protests are happening. George Floyd was murdered and the feds came to Portland and everything was so surreal and dystopic feeling. And one of the movements that emerged from that time was Wall of Moms. And so there were two or three weeks where we saw moms women, femme-identifying people, showing up on the front lines of protests and putting themselves directly in harm's way. Ostensibly, what I had heard early on, and at this point I don't know if this was the intent, but I had heard early on that part of the call was for non-Black moms to show up in a meaningful way and engage on the front lines. Because Black women have been doing this work for so long and putting our bodies and our lives on the line to do this work. Initially I had heard that Wall of Moms was kind of an allyship movement, where, you know, other moms were showing up in support of Black moms in the Black community.

What ended up happening... Initially I began observing from the outside and kind of just watching to see how things would pan out and as I followed the social media

and the Facebook posts, I noticed that there was a lot of white saviorism happening in the comments. A lot of, you know, just some problematic language and ideas. And so that was initially how I got involved was through helping to support the social media side of things and keep conversation centered around the needs and rights and experiences of the Black community, and making sure that the conversation was staying focused on Black lives, on George Floyd, on our ongoing work for equality and justice and peace, and that the focus wasn't becoming these white moms on the frontline suddenly of these protests. Because that was what the media was really paying attention to. So we really wanted to make sure that narrative stayed centered on Black Lives Matter.

It didn't stay centered on that though. And so what ended up happening was that myself and many other Black moms, we would get into chats, sometimes in the evenings after the protests and just talk about what we were seeing, and talk about the leadership that was happening and our observations that Black voices weren't being listened to or centered, Black leadership wasn't being respected, and that in a movement for our lives and for our community, we were really being sidelined in that. And so, out of that came Mxm Bloc and Mxm Bloc, we spell M-X-M Bloc. And that is a nod and inclusion towards the idea that, you know, moms are cish-het-women, moms are also non-binary people, moms are also transgender people.

Mom is not necessarily who you are in the body that you're born into, but the energy that you bring with you, the care, the organizing. The if you're someone who shows up to feed people when they're hungry and, find someone something warm to wear what it's called out, you have mom energy.

So what we had realized through the Wall of Moms experience is that even though there were some very valid critiques that we had, we noticed that what was really cool about that experience was that white women and non-black women had picked up on this call to action to show up and that they showed up with all of their skills with them. Moms that work in tech, we're getting infrastructure set up and websites and things going on the backend, and moms that worked in marketing were producing flyers and getting the word out, and moms that had particular skills were organizing security and doing all of these things.

So, you know, as moms, we know we can multitask, we can wear a thousand different hats. But most of us are also working moms and we have strong professional skills. And so what was really dope in that moment was that moms were showing up with all of their skills and leveraging them towards the movement.

So we knew that we wanted to keep that going. We knew that we wanted to center and elevate Black leadership, because we are the experts on our community. We know what our families need. We know what our communities need. We have the expertise and deserve the respect of being listened to and allowed the autonomy of leading our own movements.

But that does not mean that we don't value our allies, and that we don't recognize that we are all in this broader struggle for peace and justice and autonomy. We're all in this together. So our idea was really that under the leadership of Black moms, we bring together all of these other moms and leverage their skills and gifts and passions and talents in service of supporting our families.

And that for us was Black families, Black community first and foremost, because that is who we are and who we come from, and the community that we know needs care and equity and reparation at this time, but also BIPOC communities in general. And of course, like we are all interconnected. And so, any child who is hungry, we feed any kid. Any family who is in need and we have the ability to help them, of course we do.

So after we formed, we, as a leadership group, we're very much our own microcosm of the larger moms that we saw. We all had our areas of expertise and what we were passionate about. And so we all kind of showed up with our own ideas of what we wanted to lead and help support. And so, gosh, in the two years since we began, well almost two years, one of the first things that we did right after we formed was when the forest fires were out of control, the air quality was really bad and Portland public schools had suspended meals service to the PPS families they had been feeding while everyone was home and in quarantine. So Mxm Bloc stepped up and our partners stepped up and we fed hundreds and hundreds of Portland school kids all around town. And then we did the same thing in the winter when the snows were bad. And we did the same thing last summer when we had record heat and our

community wasn't ready for that. During that record heat of last summer, we funded and sourced dozens, if not tens of dozens of air conditioning units for vulnerable families, and got even more families into hotel rooms to ride out the heat wave. We do a lot around holiday times in terms of providing families with food and gifts and cash support.

We do a lot of domestic violence micro-grants, bill pays, we have a cool event called Wish Wednesday, where you can come to our Facebook page and share a big wish and a small wish, and we make each other's wishes come true. So our work is very much about identifying what the needs are in the community, and then filling those needs in real timely, practical, hands-on ways. Whether that is like somebody needs cash right now, whether somebody needs food delivered at their door, or whether someone needs to get out of a dangerous situation, we just all lean in and do what we can to make that happen.

[00:14:48] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: It's a beautiful thing. Um, we are working on launching our own sort of mom campaign, not in a service delivery way, but to get more moms involved in Children's Institute's work. Because we know about the power of moms and you've just articulated so clearly how moms are so key to the future of not just our communities and state, but our children of course as well. And so thank you for your leadership and I'm gonna turn it over to Rafael. I'm not an expert interviewer but it's such a privilege to talk with you a little bit today.

[00:15:21] **Rashelle Chase-Miller**: Thank you, Kali.

[00:15:23] **Rafael Otto**: Thanks Kali, it's been great to have you join us today. Take care. Rashelle. It's been great to hear about the activism that you're involved with, and I, I've read a little bit about the story of your son. And I know that that story has been important to you and maybe something that was a driver for why you got involved, and why you're so involved as an activist.

Could you share that story with us?

[00:15:46] **Rashelle Chase-Miller**: Yeah. I began my career as an early childhood teacher. I have worked with young children basically since I was a child. My first job in a center was an after-school job when I was in high school. I did a lot of babysitting, all of that. So I've always worked with little kids and I always wanted to be a mom.

So when my son Leo was born, I walked into motherhood pretty confident 'cause I had been an infant teacher and I'd been a toddler teacher, preschool teacher. I didn't think I knew everything, but I had some skills and didn't feel like a fish out of water necessarily.

[00:16:25] **Rafael Otto**: Well, certainly you had skills that a lot of parents don't have, right?

[00:16:30] **Rashelle Chase-Miller**: Yeah.

[00:16:31] **Rafael Otto**: Myself included. 'Cause I know I certainly wasn't that prepared when my first daughter arrived.

[00:16:36] **Rashelle Chase-Miller**: Well, you know, I did myself a favor also. And I had spent my career taking care of other people's children and I really wanted to be able to spend my own child's infancy with him. I wanted to, you know, I had taken care of so many babies and I really wanted to be able to be home and take care of my own.

And so, living in the United States with the lack of, uh, support and infrastructure for, uh, parents that we currently experience, the best way for me to do that turned out being was going to grad school to get my masters. And you know, I had resisted doing that, because I worked in early childhood and I made like \$12 an hour. Why am I going to take out more student loans when I will not necessarily be able to pay for this education? But I had a baby on the way, and I knew I wanted to, um, have the time home with him. So I enrolled in grad school at PSU and while Leo was an infant, I was doing my graduate coursework.

And so when he was, let's see, when he was about... well it was, when he was six months old, I thought, okay, we're six months old. We're gonna introduce solid food.

We're going to do baby-led weaning. I had all of these ideas. I think this is like, you know, just so quintessential to parenting. Like you go into it and you have these ideas of how you're going to do things, and this is how it's going to be and it's never like that.

[00:18:02] **Rafael Otto:** Right.

[00:18:03] **Rashelle Chase-Miller:** Life has its own plans and your kid is their own person. So...

[00:18:07] **Rafael Otto:** Yes. Most definitely.

[00:18:08] **Rashelle Chase-Miller:** So Leo was six months old and, you know I sat banana down in front of him or an avocado or something. And I... you know, was expecting him to play and explore and start engaging in food, um, in an experimental way. The way that babies do and putting food in his mouth. And he didn't, he wasn't very interested in that. I had already noticed that he was a bit wobbly when it came to sitting up and did not like tummy time. But you know, a lot of babies don't like tummy time, and I knew that physically babies all develop at their own rate and in their own time.

So I hadn't been too concerned, but when we introduced the solid foods and he just had no interest, I kind of started connecting dots and instead of seeing certain things in isolation, I was seeing them as part of a larger pattern. And so at that point I did know that I could self-refer to early intervention. I was a grad student so I gave him an ASQ at home on my own and was like, okay, this is low. So I referred him to early...

[00:19:18] **Rafael Otto:** You... you're capturing your own data?

[00:19:21] **Rashelle Chase-Miller:** He was my little, uh, test subject at home as I was working on my degree. But, you know, it also really helped me to advocate for him. So we've self-referred and got him assessed and initially he was assessed with kind of just a general gross motor delay. So we started receiving early intervention services.

We started doing feeding therapy and we were introduced to that world of early intervention. We're going through those processes. Our early intervention provider referred us to Shriners Children's Hospital. Which like, those people... that hospital's tremendous, the work that they do is really incredible.

So we have now spent so much of Leo's childhood at Shriners. At Shriners, we eventually were able to receive a diagnosis for Leo of spastic diplegia cerebral palsy. That was when he was about 18 months old. But what happened at the same time was our private health insurance was able to get us into a neurologist as well. And the neurologist that we saw at Kaiser had a different opinion. He thought that based on the MRI we eventually had done that it looks like Leo had a form of leukodystrophy that they called vanishing white matter disease. And that is a condition where the white matter in a person's brain basically erodes and they lose skills. And so for a child with vanishing white matter disease, they'll build skills to a point and then start losing their skills, and eventually that is a fatal condition.

So we had two doctors, one was telling us that they felt like this was a really serious and devastating diagnosis. The other was saying to me this looks like cerebral palsy. Go ahead and do all of the tests and the things because it's all just more information. But try not to live in despair, keep hope, and that was what we did.

So we just worked on helping Leo develop skills. At the time nobody was really sure how much he would be able to accomplish or what level of supports he would need. But as a little tiny, cute toddler. So he's, like 18 months old when all this is happening, he's not walking yet. He's kind of just graduated from like an army crawl to a hands and knees crawl.

But man, those physical therapists that Shriners were so great, and in no time he's toddling around on a tiny walker. He had this little golden walker that he would use and race around. Around this time I had finished my master's degree. I had gone back to work in the classroom. And so I was having kind of this parallel experience of having my own child who's newly diagnosed with a disability and navigating the world of services and early intervention, all of the things. And I'm back in the classroom after a hiatus of a couple of years and we were both... because I was able

to take Leo to work with me, we were both at a really cool center, Peninsula Children's Learning Center, which is no longer in existence, heartbreaking. But Peninsula had a great reputation for inclusion and working with kids with disabilities and special needs.

And so in my class, I had a preschool class. I had threes and fours and I had a child on the autism spectrum. I had a child in my class with cerebral palsy. Let me think, I had a child who was hearing- impaired, gosh. And that's just the three that come to mind right off the top. But it was an amazing experience because, you know, I'd just finished my graduate degree. So I was more informed on inclusion and inclusive teaching and supporting children with varying needs than I had been earlier in my career, and that was experiencing early intervention as a mom. And I was experiencing early intervention as a teacher and partnering with providers in my classroom as they came in to work with my students.

So that experience was one of the most powerful experiences in my career, because I was really able to live both sides of what that is like. But also really able just to see the incredible power of an inclusive classroom and the support and empathy that happens when children, who are typically developing, are able to get to know children in their class, their peers with disabilities and learn that we can talk about our differences and we can learn why Leo walks and moves differently. And we can learn how to support him in the classroom and we can learn how to support each other in the classroom and truly building inclusive community where everyone is valued.

[00:24:23] **Rafael Otto**: How old is he now?

[00:24:24] **Rashelle Chase-Miller**: He is nine now.

[00:24:26] **Rafael Otto**: He's nine, okay.

[00:24:28] **Rashelle Chase-Miller**: And he is, gosh, when he was five he went off to kindergarten, at Kairos, uh, which is where I met Kali.

[00:24:36] **Rafael Otto**: Okay.

[00:24:37] **Rashelle Chase-Miller**: And when he went into kindergarten, he'd graduated to a shiny red walker, but he was in a walker. That was kindergarten. The beginning of kindergarten, I think, midway through the year. is it even midway... he graduated to forearm crutches. And then when he started first grade, we went in and we had that IEP meeting, his physical therapist at school recommended not using adaptive equipment. She said that she thought he could be successful without it. And he was willing to give it a try.

I remember one time we were in a movie theater around this period and we had just seen Wonder, which is about a kid with disability. He came out of the movie, he threw down his sticks and he goes, "I'm independent Leo," and he just starts walking down the hallway of the movie theater. And, uh, we had many such mornings at Kairos. His physical therapist said, "I don't think that he needs this anymore. I think he can go on his own." And ever since then, he has been independent in terms of his mobility.

So he's nine now. He's a total rock star, hilarious, wise, capable, competent. But there were so many points along the way where advocating for him was really necessary. One of those times was in 2016 after Trump was elected. There were so many battles that we were fighting during that time. But one of the early ones was around Obamacare and his attempts to rescind that and losing that coverage would mean for kids like Leo.

By that time we did have our own insurance, that he had been on, I was confused. The Medicaid, Medicare, whichever is the one that we used to support kiddos and folks with disabilities. But we relied on that for a long time. Uh, when I was a single mom, when I was an early childhood teacher, that was how he got his care.

[00:26:32] **Rafael Otto**: Given all of the personal experience you had with your son and your studies and early childhood, and some of the writing that you've done, what advice do you have for the system for teachers and providers to really think about transforming things, and really strengthening the way that we serve kids like your son and all kids?

[00:26:55] **Rashelle Chase-Miller**: Yeah. From my perspective, the most important thing that we can do in our programs is really just foster those communities so that they feel like a home away from home. So that all of our kiddos and all of their families can show up as they are. As the human beings they are in the fullness and complexity of their identities as I like to say. And our kids know who they are. They're telling us who they are right now,

[00:27:28] **Rafael Otto**: Yeah, all the time, right?

[00:27:29] **Rashelle Chase-Miller**: All the time, from the moment they're born. And all we really need to do is listen to them and get out of their way. Whether we are educators or family members, I think that our role as the grownups is really just to facilitate their experiences. To be that safe place for them to land. Be that homebase and that source of security and stability and trust and nurturing. We don't do that by clinging to them, right? We do that by setting them free by presenting them with possibilities and options and opportunities and experiences and letting them navigate that. And in doing so, you know, really giving them the opportunity to learn about themselves and learn about one another and construct knowledge for themselves through their experiences. And then when they need us, we're there. But not only in doing that are we giving children the opportunity to learn and grow with autonomy and freedom and agency. We learn so much through letting them do that and watching and observing and learning from them.

We do ourselves as adults a disservice when... Well, gosh, here in 2022, I don't know that any adults think that we have any of the answers at this point. Um, but we can, uh, let up on some of the pressure that I think we put upon ourselves. We don't have to have all the answers. Our kids, they are not like prefabricated, right? Like they will reveal to us who they are as they discover that. If we don't know what to do or we have questions or we're unsure, that's okay. We can figure that out alongside them and we should really follow their lead and listen to them.

[00:29:25] **Rafael Otto**: We can be in a learning mode too.

[00:29:26] **Rashelle Chase-Miller**: We sure can.

[00:29:27] **Rafael Otto:** We need to be.

[00:29:28] **Rashelle Chase-Miller:** Stay curious and really own that we should be lifelong learners and co-learners with our kids. Just stay open and stay flexible and trust them.

[00:29:40] **Rafael Otto:** Rashelle, I have one more question for you. Just in the context of what's been happening in society. There's a lot of talk about how to manage the intensity of these events, the trauma that is associated with it. And I know you've done some thinking and I think some writing around trauma responsiveness, and what that can look like in early childhood settings.

Talk a little bit about what that looks like. And what we need to be thinking about right now in the context of the news and the events that have been happening around the country.

[00:30:08] **Rashelle Chase-Miller:** Yeah. As a mom and as an educator, it's always been incredibly important to me that I'd be honest with my kids, so that I can be someone that they trust. Age-appropriate, but honest. But I gotta tell you, this week that's been hard. I don't want to tell my kids anything that's happening.

I mean, that's my emotional reaction, right? I want to shield them from this horror as long as I can. However, that's not possible, especially for my oldest, for Leo, you know. He's in third grade and he's aware of things that are happening in the world. And if we don't tell him, he'll hear about it someplace else.

And then my youngest, Luna, is four and they are in preschool. So not hearing about the super scary things happening in the world so much. But of course, they have active shooter drills in their classroom. They have lockdown drills. and that's, that's just, that's just the news of this week.

They've spent the last two years of their lives growing from the pandemic and everything that, that has involved the protests, the violence in our communities, all of

that. As much as we try to protect our kids and keep them from the really hard things that are happening, they find their way home.

For me, the best approach that I have found is to be honest and age- appropriate. To give children the information that they need in this moment. But not a lot of extra to answer the questions that they're asking us, honestly and simply. But not going into a ton of detail that they haven't asked for. I think that kids let us know what they're ready for when they're ready for it. So I think we answer the questions that they're asked. We make sure that they know that we are available. Anytime they have more questions or want to talk, we do that in a way that is sensitive and wise.

There's honesty and there's the brutal truth, right?

[00:32:08] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:32:08] **Rashelle Chase-Miller:** We don't need to go to a hundred here with our young children. But I think the other component to that is letting them know that the grownups in their lives are here. We're here for them. We've got this. We have plans to keep them safe and healthy, and we will do our best to do all of those things. We can talk to our kiddos about what we're doing to stay safe or healthy.

When COVID was the primary concern, you know, kind of at the height of the pandemic, that's when we're having conversations with our children about wearing masks and why we're wearing masks and how not only are we keeping ourselves healthy and safe, but we're keeping others healthy and safe. Or you know, we're social distancing for these reasons and letting kids know that it's not all hopeless. That there are things that we can do that are effective to take care of ourselves and to take care of each other.

I just spent a lot of the last two years debating other adults about our COVID responses and whether or not what we're doing is right for children. There's so many opinions out there about that. But I think whatever your perspective is, having those conversations with children and helping them understand the why and not just what's happening in the moment is critical, right?

Like, my kids didn't struggle with wearing masks. They had good modeling for wearing masks and plenty of conversations about why we were wearing masks that made doing so something that they wanted to do, because they wanted the pandemic to be over. They wanted to go back to school. They want to spend time with friends. And if this is how we get from here to there, they were game for it.

That's how we help children develop resiliency. We have to give them hope. We have to show them the light at the end of the tunnel. We have to let them know that we have agency, that there are things that we can do to make right now a little bit better and to help us get through this thing that is super hard. So I think whether we're parents or teachers or other caregivers, helping our children to experience both empathy and optimism, modeling that as a huge part of it, which is not easy to do these days.

[00:34:31] **Rafael Otto**: No, no, it definitely isn't. But we have to keep trying and I think we have to help our kids understand that they're part of a bigger community too, and they have an important role and voice in that.

[00:34:44] **Rashelle Chase-Miller**: Mental health since the pandemic I don't think has been good for anyone. I think children have suffered tremendously and I think adults have also suffered tremendously. So much of that has been the isolation. And I think that when we teach our kids that they are a part of something larger and that even if we're at home right now, and grandpa and grandma are at home right now, and our friends are at home right now and we cannot be together, the we're still connected and we are still part of a larger community. Grandpa can drop off blueberries and wave to us from the porch, right? And we can do socially- distanced play dates or things that we did to stay connected. Just reminding children that, even if geographically we are not together right now, that we are still part of vibrant, caring, loving communities and keeping those connections strong.

You know, I think that does wonders for our children's mental health and for ours also.

[00:35:38] **Rafael Otto**: I appreciate that. Rashelle, it's been so good to have you on the podcast today. Thank you for making time and thanks for the conversation.

[00:35:43] Rashelle Chase-Miller: Thank you so much for having me.