

Episode 53 - Lacey Hays

[00:00:00] **Rafael Otto:** Hello everyone. This is the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. I appreciate you tuning in. You can catch us on 99.1 FM in the Portland Metro on Sundays at 4:30 pm or tune in at your convenience, wherever you find your podcasts, including iTunes, Spotify, and Amazon Music. And as always on our website @ childinst.org. You can visit us there and stay up to date by subscribing to our newsletter and podcasts. Today, I'm speaking with Lacey Hays, a parent and advocate in Washington County here in Oregon. She's currently co-chair for the Early Learning Washington County Steering Committee and a member of both the Preschool for All Technical Advisory Committee and the Organizing and Outreach Committees. All of that work is in support of establishing Preschool for All in Washington county.

Lacey, it's great to have you on the podcast today.

[00:00:51] **Lacey Hays:** Thank you for having me.

[00:00:53] **Rafael Otto:** Lacey, would you be willing to share the story of your son? Because in talking with you, it's my understanding that... that has been a driver for what you're doing these days as an advocate for young children. Would you mind sharing that story with us?

[00:01:06] **Lacey Hays:** Yeah, my son is the reason for all of this. He was born in 2013, just a normal childbirth. And for the first few months of his life seemed to be, or everyday typical baby, sleeping, crying, eating. And around sixteen months though, we started to notice that while he was walking and crawling and meeting other milestones, he still wasn't speaking. So we weren't getting "mama," we weren't getting pointing. So during his 16 month checkup, we talked to his doctor and she said, "Hey, I can send you guys over to early intervention, but if you guys wanted to wait just a month or two, just to see if he catches up, because it's still a little early and he's not outside the range of normal we can do that, too."

We got the early intervention referral in and we decided we were going to wait before we actually called on it. At about 17 months, we were giving him a bath. We had these little foam letters that you can stick to the wall in the bathtub and we'd tell him the letter name. And so he picks up the "O" and he goes, "Ooh." And I look at him and I'm like, "Well that's just a coincidence. Babies make lots of noises." So we stuck it to the wall and he picks up the "T" and he goes, "Te." I'm like, "Okay, that's getting kind of strange." So I pick up the "E" and he goes, "Eh." I'm like, "Okay." I have a background in English education. It's my degree. And one of the classes we're required to take is language acquisition and immediately I was like, "Well, that's very unusual, kind of backwards language acquisition. He can't speak, but he's reading letters. This is really unusual." So we went to early intervention and we found out that he had a receptive and expressive language delay.

They also looked and said, "Does he ever stop moving?" He's my only child. I said, "well, no, but he's one. It's not normal?" And they said, "Well, he's moving a little bit more than you would

expect for a, for a one-year-old, 12 months plus." They thought that maybe he wasn't slowing down long enough to focus on the environment around him to actually take in language.

[00:03:28] **Rafael Otto:** Okay.

[00:03:30] **Lacey Hays:** So we went on this adventure with early intervention. We started having home visits and they were wonderful. Our teacher, Amy, is still holds a really special place in our heart. And as we started exploring more over the next year. We realized that he could also read a little bit by the time he was two. He wouldn't do it on cue, but he would just read something off of a sign every once in a while.

And so we had a little bit of hyperlexia, and then by the time he was two and a half, we were seriously starting to consider autism as a potential diagnosis. So for the next year we went through another set of evaluations and doctor visits and they did conclude that he was autistic. And throughout all of this, we were in early intervention and then it came time for preschool. They said, "Well, we have an autism pre-school that we can send him to." Unfortunately it's only 12 hours a week. For his level of autism, we would expect, for services, you would expect to have a little bit more hours than that. But staffing shortages and inability to find proper childcare, creates less slots than you would need for children like him.

But he did amazing in preschool. Better than any of us even expected him to. We thought he'd do okay, but he did amazing. He thrived. By the time that he finished their preschool through their autism classroom and their regular special needs classroom, they said, "Well, really, we need to put him in a community preschool. He needs to be with typical peers. We think that he has the kind of personality that's really, really going to thrive when he's around typical children." So my wife and I started looking and we realized that we could not afford preschool for him. There was no way in a high quality center. It can be \$45 for a half a day and over \$60 for a full day of preschool.

And so they told us that they had a handful of community slots that early intervention has. And it's pretty competitive 'cause lots of children need those slots, but they would put Rory on the list. We were very fortunate and he made it on the list and he did stellar. He was there for his September birthday, so he was there four years old and five years old. And by the time he started kindergarten, he was ready for school. He knew how to act in a classroom. But then COVID happened and we lost half of kindergarten, all of first grade.

But because he had such an amazing foundation for education and this understanding- autistic children need structure, they need to know what to expect- so he had these years that were provided to him to teach him what to expect in a classroom. So when he started in second grade, he started like just right out of the gate doing wonderfully. He's now in the Talented and Gifted program and his teachers love him. He's just like, everybody at school loves him. He is a gregarious child.

He doesn't always understand what the other children want from him, which you would expect for a child with autism. But he's thriving and it's that access that he had that so many other children don't have that gave him this foundation. This ability to move forward in his education and thrive.

[00:07:20] **Rafael Otto:** And the availability of the ability to have the resources there through early intervention to begin with. I mean, that was kind of the starting point, right? And it sounds like overall your experience from that point on, and kind of moving through the system and finding supports for him, has generally worked pretty well for you.

[00:07:40] **Lacey Hays:** It has. It's been eye-opening. I found leadership skills and abilities in myself that I didn't know that I had. Because you have to... I am an educated person who speaks the language in our area, and the system at times was even difficult for me to figure out what to do without having these folks around me in Early Childhood Education, who could help me navigate it.

And so I started noticing early on that it's hard to find the services that your child needs. It's hard to read all the paperwork that you're given. And it's hard to understand what the laws that govern taking care of your special needs child, and making sure they have a proper education. And that's with help with education, with speaking the language. And so, by the time he was around three or four, I was starting to look into how can I make this easier for other parents to navigate.

[00:08:46] **Rafael Otto:** Sure. And he's how old now?

[00:08:48] **Lacey Hays:** He's eight years old.

[00:08:49] **Rafael Otto:** He's eight years old. So for a while now you've moved into sort of this advocacy role and it's become... I know you're quite active in Washington County. Say more about what that work has been looking like for you.

[00:09:01] **Lacey Hays:** At first it was an invitation to join the Early Intervention Advisory Committee. It's required by law in the state of Oregon that every county has an advisory committee for their early intervention, and that parents must be part of that voice. Oregon is absolutely astoundingly amazing at recognizing the power of parental voice in education.

It's unusual how involved parents are in our community and it's brilliant. So I started there and I started to get more involved, and after about two years, I became a co-chair before the Early Intervention Advisory Committee. And it's about that point where a woman who was on committee and the Early Learning Washington County Committee said, "Hey, we have this other committee that could use a strong parental voice. And we don't have anybody currently who, aside from me, who's advocating for special needs children". And so I was like, "Okay, I'll give it a look."

[00:10:09] **Rafael Otto:** You got, you got recruited.

[00:10:12] **Lacey Hays:** And I joined their Parents' Advisory Committee and about a year into that, they were like, "So we've been trying really hard to get some parents on our steering committee." And the Parent Advisory Committee is conducted in multiple languages with simultaneous translation and it's usually conducted in Spanish. And I got to wear the cool little headset that gave me simultaneous translation with our rock star translator. They were looking for somebody who could probably jump right into the role on the steering committee. With a little bit of support, who might be able to, after a while, start supporting other parents in joining the steering committee. Especially those who might not speak English as their first language, or might not have the same educational background.

So I was like, "Okay, yeah! I'll give that a try."

[00:11:03] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:11:04] **Lacey Hays:** So now I'm stacking up committees. At that point, my son was moving out of early intervention, and I had a bad car accident. But it wasn't a bad accident, but it caused injuries that were not fun. And so I stepped out of the Early Intervention Committee and gave my role to another parent who, was... she's amazing, she's absolutely amazing and her child was just entering the early intervention. And so I stepped out of that and into the steering committee, which turned into the executive committee as well. So the people who make the agenda for the steering committee and kind of filters everything.

And now I am chair of the Early Learning Washington County. Well co-chair with, um, a wonderful woman from the library.

[00:11:51] **Rafael Otto:** Well, congratulations. It sounds like you have a lot of work on your hands. How do you manage it all?

[00:11:57] **Lacey Hays:** I do it while my son's at school and they actually have been very helpful at first. My son was little, he wasn't in school and for the Parent Advisory Committee, they actually provided childcare and dinner. So we'd go there and there'd be catered food, and there'd be like five other kiddos that he could play with, and somebody there to keep the kiddos, kind of in check while all the parents met and spoke and did important work for the community. They provide parents with technical support. So equipment and help using the equipment like iPads and stuff for their meetings. And stipends also for the time, just in case you have to miss work or you need to find childcare. They actually on a few occasions paid for my son. So early intervention paid for half day, three days a week, half day school for him. And for about a half a year, the Early Learning Washington County actually paid for the second half of the day on days where we had meetings because it was pre- pandemic so we were still meeting in person.

[00:13:10] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Talk a little bit about the importance of parent voice in all of the things that you're advocating for. But the development of policy or trying to improve access to early intervention, early childhood special ed, preschool, all of these things. Because

one of the things that you mentioned to me at one point was that, as a parent, your voice is one of the most powerful voices in the room. And I think, in committees or in situations where there's leadership or policy makers or county leaders in the room, sometimes that can feel like it's an intimidating place to be, right. If you don't have a job or a role. But parents and families have a really important voice in the work. So say more about that from your perspective.

[00:14:01] **Lacey Hays**: So it is, it's really intimidating to walk into the room. The first time I was in a meeting with the governor, I was like, "Oh my God, I'm not going to be able to speak, because I'm in a room with the governor and all of her assistants and what am I going to do here?" But the parent voice is the most important because we are the ones who are accessing these services.

So policy makers and many of them are parents themselves. But often they're parents who have not been in the system for a long time after. So a lot of them have older children or they're just now starting to access the system and face the same things. But knowing more about the field, they have an easier time accessing supports and accessing what their children need.

Being professionals, they have contacts, they know who to talk to. But everyday parents don't often have this knowledge. And we're coming in brand new, exhausted, because I don't know a single parent that's not exhausted every single day.

[00:15:09] **Rafael Otto**: It's true.

[00:15:10] **Lacey Hays**: And a lot of times lacking the same education, in many cases lacking the ability to speak the language that everybody else is speaking.

[00:15:21] **Rafael Otto**: You've mentioned that a couple of times and it's like, say more about that. Because it's like understanding sort of the language and the lingo and the way, the way that we talk about policy and all of these things. It's its own language in a lot of ways.

[00:15:35] **Lacey Hays**: It is. There's so many abbreviations. I still like... I've been doing this for like five, six years now and I still look at an abbreviation on the paper sometimes and wonder what I am looking at. So there's both legalese that is spoken, there's jargon and the jargon is different at a political level and at the early childhood level. And then there's sort of weird combinations of all of those things that find their way into these policies and this paperwork that you're looking at and trying to understand. And so without that inside information, we parents come in and we're like, "Well, you're the administrators. Tell me what I need to do."

[00:16:20] **Rafael Otto**: Yeah.

[00:16:21] **Lacey Hays**: What we find in a lot of places- and thankfully it's less so in Washington county because we have such strong parent voices- is that what policymakers think is good for the family isn't actually good for the family. It doesn't work for them. There are barriers to access that people at higher socioeconomic levels might not necessarily know, or people who speak English as their first language might not necessarily recognize.

Let's face it, most of these rooms are white in the State of Oregon. We have a very large white population. Cultural expectations that parents don't necessarily know. Even in some cases, my family is LGBTQ and we run into it a little less often, but sometimes there's language barriers or expectations that don't take into account two mother, two father households.

[00:17:19] **Rafael Otto:** Yup. Absolutely.

[00:17:21] **Lacey Hays:** And so when you get the parents, every day parents into a room, they start poking holes in your policies.

[00:17:30] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah. And that's where the power comes from. Right? That's why it's so important to have... Everyday parents are you know, people who are coming from this place of lived experience shaping the decision-making.

[00:17:42] **Lacey Hays:** Yep. And, I've also found that a lot of parents have connections with each other. So when you get one person's... one parent's voice in a room, you suddenly have 10 to 15 other parents that this parent is in contact with, who are also saying, "Hey, you know, I had this experience and it wasn't great." When you get enough parents in a room, you end up with the voice of a community of parents who are accessing all of these services. So it is the most important. And provider voices are also the most important in the room. Anybody who's daily accessing or doing the daily work is important anywhere where policy is being made.

[00:18:27] **Rafael Otto:** One of the things that you're working on is the Preschool for All effort in Washington County. And in some ways it's been modeled after what happened in Multnomah County, in terms of Preschool for All passing that initiative. And things have launched. That program has started in the very early stages. And I know that might not look identical in Washington County, but there's a similar idea there that this would be sort of universal access for young kids to preschool. Tell us a little bit more about that effort and what you're hoping to achieve with a Preschool for All passage in Washington County, what would that look like to you?

[00:19:05] **Lacey Hays:** So what we want to achieve is a world where every three and four year old is able to go to preschool, and they're able to go full-time if they want to, or part-time if their parents would like to. A world where parents have choices for their children's preschool and education. So if a parent like me feels their child would thrive more in a high quality center then we would have a high quality center that your child could go to. If you feel like your child would do better in an in-home provider with fewer students and fewer teachers, then we want to have that available. If your child speaks a different language or comes from a specific religious background and you would feel better having your child in a religious preschool or a preschool where the teachers speak their language and the teachers look like your students, then we want those to be available as well.

We want it to be equitable. We want it to be inclusive of children with special needs, and children who don't have any special needs. And we want them to work together because in the special needs world, we say that when the tide rises all ships rise together.

[00:20:22] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:20:23] **Lacey Hays:** We have a lot that we can teach each other, and we want parents to be able to access this and navigate the system in a way that is intuitive and makes sense. We want preschool to be this joyful, wonderful experience for kids. We want it to set the foundation for their education so they know what to expect when they step in the school that first day of kindergarten. And we want to make sure that we're catching children, that we're not expelling children who have behavioral struggles, which is something that is unfortunately way too common.

We want to catch children who may have special needs. The average age that a child like my son is when they finally receive their autism diagnosis, and he is a child who is considered in need of substantial support.

[00:21:16] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:21:17] **Lacey Hays:** But the average age that you would catch a child like mine, if they're not caught through early intervention, is about five to eight years old when they start grade school. And they start to exhibit struggles with their behavior, or they start to notice that their social interactions aren't typical.

[00:21:37] **Rafael Otto:** That's an important piece. Because the access to early intervention... it's about prevention and it's about getting the supports in place early so that they can take effect. And children can benefit from starting at a young age and then through their education experience.

[00:21:53] **Lacey Hays:** Yeah. My eight year old understands that he is autistic and he understands that he has severe ADHD. So he knows from an early intervention all the way through now that he has different needs. I think using different needs is probably better than special needs because we all have special needs.

[00:22:13] **Rafael Otto:** Sure. Yeah.

[00:22:14] **Lacey Hays:** But he has different needs than some of his peers. So he was taught to advocate for himself through early intervention and through Preschool. So he was having trouble making friends in second grade. I mean we had a year and a half virtually no proper socialization for our child like every other child in the United States. And he walked up to a special education teacher and he said, "I need a buddy program."

And she said, "well, what do you mean you need a buddy program?" And he said, " I have to sit on the buddy bench and nobody will play with me and I need a buddy program."

[00:22:53] **Rafael Otto:** Oh, wow!

[00:22:55] **Lacey Hays:** And so she worked with him to create this plan together, where they would meet up before recess and they'd come up with a game plan to get him playing. And now he plays basketball almost every day because he found that joy of playing basketball. And he has his normal eight year old ups and downs. So-and-so's my friend today, so-and-so's not my friend today...

[00:23:17] **Rafael Otto:** Sure, sure.

But he's become an advocate for himself. That's a great story and it's like, that's such a powerful thing to keep in mind that kids can also play that role as advocate.

[00:23:28] **Lacey Hays:** Yeah. When they learn early that they have differences, that they are capable of gaining access to the supports they need, then they carry that with them. They can go to school and they can say, "I need help with this." And the teachers can help them. And part of that is catching it as early as you possibly can, especially in children with fairly subtle presentations.

If we didn't have the language delay, we might not have realized, especially- he's my first child, my only child- I might not have realized that he, until he was much older, that he wasn't connecting with peers the way that you would expect a child his age to connect. So it is important and it's important too also catching when there might be struggles in the family. Where there might be less than ideal situations at home going on, whether it's abuse, whether it's not having enough funds for food or clothing, having access to Preschool for every person in Washington County means that we can connect parents to services as soon as we possibly can. If somebody is struggling to clothe and feed their child, then we can get them in touch with DHS. Preschool providers, they're essential in finding things that we can prevent from becoming bigger issues.

[00:25:02] **Rafael Otto:** A key part of this network of support that the community has in place. They can serve as a learning environment and a place where kids can receive love and care, but also as just a resource.

[00:25:16] **Lacey Hays:** It's a community. Preschool in itself gives parents a community. It gives us our village that we don't tend to have. And it does take a village to raise a child, nobody can really do this alone. And I think after COVID we understand this a whole lot more as a society.

[00:25:33] **Rafael Otto:** Right? Yeah, absolutely. Well, wonderful, Lacey, that's all we have time for today. I really appreciate you coming on the podcast and talking with me. And I wish you the best of luck with your advocacy efforts and all of the committee work that you have on your plate right now. Thank you so much.

[00:25:51] Lacey Hays: Thank you. Have a wonderful day.