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[00:00:00] **Speaker 1** I have a son with disability means that I started here when he was nine weeks old. So, you know, brand new mom. He had a ton of surgeries. And so I really developed the mission, working with families with disabilities, trying to navigate those systems, and so became the disability coordinator and then the health advocate specialist. And then I moved into the director role about right before COVID. So that was fun coming into leadership and overseeing health and mental health right when COVID hit.

[00:00:29] **Speaker 2** Sure, that's a good test.

[00:00:31] **Speaker 1** Yeah, right.

[00:00:33] **Speaker 2** It's probably a sliding scale. It's like, relatively speaking, you're doing fine.

[00:00:36] **Speaker 1** Yeah, right.

[00:00:37] **Speaker 2** Right.

[00:00:38] **Speaker 1** Absolutely.

[00:00:39] **Speaker 2** The way it was for everyone. Yeah.

[00:00:42] **Speaker 1** Yeah, It's definitely a learning curve.

[00:00:45] **Speaker 2** Um, yeah, there was often you just listen to the horror stories like, well, I guess I'm not as bad as them, so.

[00:00:52] **Speaker 1** Yeah, try it. I had yeah, it was interesting moving to virtual for a little bit of time. We did and then coming back, but. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:01:02] **Speaker 2** Okay. I'll say. All right, you just talk to me. Okay. So I guess give me a sense of it's part of the story that we're working on has to do with speech and language delays that have been on the rise since COVID. How do you how do you see that coming in when you talk about the pillars underneath you? Where does that fall into your.

[00:01:19] **Speaker 1** Yes. So we have actually seen a very big uprising in speech and speech impairments and language impairments. And basically, I mean, if you think about it, they say, you know, 4 to 3, that that that time frame is such a window of opportunity. And we're really seeing our COVID generation as kind of how I refer to it. These children are really were born either during or right before the pandemic. And so they are they are now, you know, coming in with really like sponges, like they were sponges during that time of all the good but all the bad. Right. So they had they were facing isolation, stress with their families, trauma, things of that nature. And so they're coming in now with really like some challenging behaviors, speech delays, things of that nature. I think we're up about 10% right now in children who who have speech delays diagnosed.

[00:02:20] **Speaker 2** And I know people often want to see what actually caused that. And there's you know, there's obviously the conspiracy wing of like the vaccines. And there's the masking question. There were parents on their phones too much? Was it simply mental health of everyone in the household? I mean, can you pinpoint anyone or is it all of the above? How does it.

[00:02:40] **Speaker 1** Yeah, I mean, I believe that it's all of the above. There's not because I would say there was speech, a speech. Delays were on the rise even before the pandemic. And I would definitely say, you know, being on screens a lot, Matt, you know, when we started masking masking, you know, became an issue because it does take actually seeing your mouth and understanding how to move your your mouth and your motor in order to to speak language. So I would definitely say it's it's all of the above. There isn't a one set variable that's that's cause the speech delay but essentially it exasperated it immensely.

[00:03:19] **Speaker 2** Is there I mean at some level is there a point to even worrying about what may have caused it as opposed to just understanding it's here we have to deal with it?

[00:03:27] **Speaker 1** Yes, exactly. Because I think there is not ever going to be an answer on what is causing this. And we just need to start doing the early intervention services and really changing the the stigma and taboo behind that. A lot of times families are really afraid of their children being diagnosed with any type of disability and speech impairment is a labeled diet disability. However, once they are in early intervention services, oftentimes kids have learned that the techniques and learned and grown within those services that they can dismiss those services as they get older. It's not for every child, but a lot of times this is why we do early intervention services.

[00:04:09] **Speaker 2** When you look at the statewide picture, because obviously it's not just here, right? I'm just this neighborhood. Who does anyone have the full capacity to deal with the amount of resources that are needed to deal with this issue?

[00:04:27] **Speaker 1** I, I believe we are definitely in a dire state right now. I think with the shortages in all over the country, in all types of careers, especially early childhood and education and all the extra speech pathologist, occupational therapists, things like that that we need in order to help with this. We are we are really in need of looking at what do we need to do next in our policies and whatnot in order to help increase services. Not to say we don't have we're not like we're completely out of the game here, but we really need to focus on this. Otherwise, you know, we have increasing numbers but lowering staff and that's inevitably going to bring some hardships on and all the children.

[00:05:19] **Speaker 2** What you as an advocate, how do you work with parents to know what is the difference between between like a normal speech pattern for age appropriate versus like this is actually something that needs to be addressed or looked at?

[00:05:32] **Speaker 1** Yes. And that and that's so much easier, I think, for parents when they have multiple children and they can kind of see that on their own. However, typically, we see a lot of parents come in who have one child are really starting to learn the ropes. And so the biggest thing is, is letting them understand, like giving them the education knowledge behind what are the developmental milestones for children, especially with speech and their we birth to three is an agency that services those children if they are in need of services. So we often we can go on the website and actually do what's called an askew screening for them and that is an ages and stages questionnaire. And so that helps the parent really lead that their knowledge is the one who is they know their child best. So they put down what their child is or isn't doing in different domains, communication being one of them, and then they're able to see are they at risk? Are they much lower than the average child? And if they are, then we explain the services that can come with that and do a referral. So I really, really think it's about parental education and just letting them know that they know their child most and and are there their first teacher and that there are resources that don't cost money, that they can get some early intervention services and that also with birth to three they don't diagnose children. It's just identifying developmental delays so their child won't have a labeled disability at that age.

[00:07:03] **Speaker 2** So do you work with the Lena data as well?

[00:07:07] **Speaker 1** I do not. I know of it in here, right. I shouldn't say I don't work. I don't work directly with it. I work with with Tony, our director of educational services, and what she's seen within the data. And then that helps us inform like where we looking at more, Who are we working with more intensively to get to make sure, which is it's usually our one year olds, our toddlers, and then the two year olds as well.

[00:07:34] **Speaker 2** So if you're interacting with the family, trying to explain, Hey, here's what we've seen, here's what our data is picking up, are you kind of helping translate for them?

[00:07:42] **Speaker 1** Absolutely. Yes. Yes. Yeah. In more, I think, in layman's terms. And that's for me, too. And just having a child with us with special needs, you want to be able to hear hear it in a way that you can receive that. And so, yeah, I feel like my team and myself, we are pretty good at being able to put that in knowledge and put that into data that really not data, but just everyday knowledge that a parent can understand and really be empowered to do something with that.

[00:08:14] **Speaker 2** Okay. Anything else along these lines that you want to add?

[00:08:18] **Speaker 1** No, I don't think so.

[00:08:20] **Speaker 2** Okay. Can I get you to spell your name and give you a title? Sure.

[00:08:23] **Speaker 1** So it's Nicole Spooner, and then it's spelled and ich0le and then Spooner. Just how it sounds, ESP or any. And I'm the director of comprehensive services at Next Door Foundation.

[00:08:36] **Speaker 2** Perfect. Thank you so much.

[00:08:38] **Speaker 1** Yes.

[00:08:39] **Speaker 2** One, two, first.

[00:08:39] **Speaker 1** Oh, yeah, I forgot. I have this.

[00:08:43] **Speaker 2** Excellent.