

Genia: Folks, most of the GTIL podcats episodes are clean language –wise. In this episode, there’s a little bit of swearing. So if you’ve got kids around, you may want to use some headphones. And if you found swearing offensive, you might have a couple of uncomfortable moments. I hope that that doesn’t stop you from enjoying this really powerful episode about what is possible when people come together and support each other.

Genia: Welcome to the Good Things in Life podcast, I'm Genia Stephen. I've been talking with a ton of parents since the COVID-19 pandemic shut down schools. Some of us have actually enjoyed the break from therapy appointments and from all the little demands that pull us away from time with our kids. And some of us have been really well supported by our schools, but most of us have experienced poor support, inappropriate support, inaccessible support, or no support at all from our schools. We're worried about what's going to happen in September. Are our kids going to be left behind again? I mean, maybe the schools will figure it out better in September because they've had time to pivot and to plan. But if your child's school wasn't rocking inclusion before COVID, there's little reason to expect them to do a good job during and after COVID. Some of us will send our kids back to school full time in the fall.

Genia: Some of us are facing hybrid home and school models, and some of us will be facing homeschool, whether we like it or not. Either way, we need to set our priorities and focus in on what's going to make the biggest positive difference for our kids while reducing our own overwhelm and stress. And we need to make decisions about what suggestions, recommendations, and ideas are in or out. I've been around the inclusive education and disability world since I was in early elementary school because I have a younger sister with a disability. I've seen trends come and go. I've seen successes and failures and parents and educators use a ton of time and energy on stuff that frankly doesn't make that big of a difference. I want it to be more straightforward for you, especially right now. And that's why I created the Special Education Priorities Matrix.

Genia: This brand new free masterclass will help you focus on what matters most without overwhelming your child, yourself or your school team. I'm really excited about this. The matrix will help you set powerful IEP goals, explain your rationale to educators and specialists with confidence and allow you to quickly evaluate and rule in or out new recommendations, suggestions, or ideas for your child's special education without second, guessing yourself or worrying about whether you're making the right choice about what is best for your child. You can find out more and register at goodthingsinlife.org/matrix. Today's podcast guests are also focusing in on what matters and making sure that kids with disabilities have access to the supports they need to succeed academically during school closures and I guess, probably adaptations because we're just at the beginning of this. So if you're not getting the support that you need from your school, today's podcast episodes, not today's podcast episodes.

Genia: This podcast guests have your back. Sophia Johansson is the Northeast Regional Coordinator for Mass Families Organizing for Change. She first connected with Mass Families in 2013 when she attended the family leadership series as an economically vulnerable single parent to a young child who had recently been diagnosed with a developmental disability. Just two years later, she was rolling out the inaugural round of

advocacy bootcamp in a role as Board Chair and Northeast Regional Coordinator, she empowers other families to articulate and realize their own visions. She brings to this work, her passion for social justice and a talent for bringing people together to accomplish individual and shared goals. Emma Fialka-Feldman has been an elementary school teacher in the Boston public school for seven years. And educator with a deep belief in the power of inclusive schools, she's worked to promote inclusive practices in her school, her union and district. She's written and presented nationally about the importance of inclusive education and how to lead individualized education plan meetings with compassion and equity.

Genia: For the upcoming school year, she'll be a principal fellow in the Boston public schools through the Lynch Leadership Academy program, developing her skills to be a school leader who promotes equity, inclusion, and joy in schools. Emma and Sophia, thank you so much for joining me today. I'm really excited to be speaking with you. When Sophia, you sent me information about MatchUS, which we haven't included in your bios, I was so excited because it's the, exactly the kind of creative and out of the box, sort of non-siloed school-by-school, school board-by-school board thinking that can really make a powerful difference in the education of kids during COVID-19. So thanks so much for being here today.

Emma: Thanks for having us.

Sophia: Yeah. Thank you.

Genia: I'd love it if you could introduce your selves a little bit and just let me know sort of how you came to this point in your lives, your relationships with people with disabilities, and your focus on inclusion. Emma and Sophia are pointing at each other on Zoom here. You go first. No, you go first. Sophia, why don't you go first?

Sophia: All right. Well, so, I should share that the bio that you shared was not totally updated because I'm no longer the board chair of Mass Family. So I get to be focused more on my region and do something that I like to call like lead from the side, which is just support other people that are moving into leadership roles within Massachusetts Families Organizing for Change. Which I'm very proud to say is celebrating its 30th year in existence, which is really unusual for a family organization. But I think that, you know, it's funny because a lot of people will say, well, how did you get into disability? Or how did you get into this field? And I don't think I ever had a choice. My birth mother was actually institutionalized in the state hospital system. And so she, I was raised by my maternal aunt, her sister. And so it's just been something I've grown up with. And I remember sitting at the leadership series in 2013 and hearing this information about the institutions and seeing some of the pictures that were really familiar and realizing that this was actually part of my birth mother's story in a way that I hadn't realized before.

Sophia: And so, as you know, I've gone along in my, as I've gone along in my parenting journey, I've learned that my birth mother was really doing a lot by showing me how my son could live as an adult. Because I think both of them had very, have very significant support needs. And yet my birth mother, she's passed away, but she really, she modeled, you know, she was in control of all of her routines. She lived in her own

apartment with a lot of support, but it was reciprocal support with her mother. And it's just, you know, so I, I will say though that, um, you know, there's a different flavor to family leadership or parent leadership in the context of what some people will describe as the family movement. And I really have to credit that to Ariel Gore's pregnancy book. And some people, she's this amazing woman, amazing leader. She's famous for, in the United States going up against Newt Gingrich to debate welfare on MTV. Because she was a welfare recipient at the time that she had her daughter and she was a teenage mother and she wrote this amazing pregnancy book. And that really gave me my voice. And so when I took the leadership series, it all just came together and I was like, Oh, I was just kind of born for this. Perfect.

Genia: It does sound like sort of the perfect, the perfect storm, if you will, of family experiences, personal experiences and the opportunity to come together with others to sort of deepen your knowledge around disability issues. Emma, how about you?

Emma: I also didn't have a choice whether I was going to join the movement around disability justice and disability rights. I am the younger sister to an older brother with an intellectual disability. He's four years older than me. And he grew up with my two parents who were products of the sixties and seventies. And when they had their son with my brother with an intellectual disability, they slowly began to realize that their fights for racial and economic justice would segue and give them the skills to be a fighter for inclusive opportunities for their son. So they have set a foundation for me to think about what in my brother's story was unique in a painful way. Like why is my brother's journey around inclusive education still unique as I am now a public school teacher and seeing the great inequities that exist between families who can figure out how to navigate a system that was never designed to work for them or the teachers that support their children, and provide families the resources that were so instrumental in my family's story.

Emma: So I know this is for a Canadian audience and Inclusion Press and the work of Marsha Forest and Jack Pearpoint were absolutely instrumental in helping my family broaden their vision of what they thought would be possible for their son. And my, one reason I wanted to become a teacher was how do I help families get connected to the privilege of resources that do exist out there and the stories of families and advocacy organizations like Mass Families who are out there doing the work, but there are often these disconnected bases that families just don't know how to reach other stories and be part of a movement to.

Genia: Yeah. I really relate to what you're saying about that, the experience of you don't. So now we're at, I have a younger sister, she's three and a half years younger than I am. And you know, so when I was in the earliest of elementary school grades, my parents had to buy a property so that they could pay taxes in a school district, 45 minutes away from where we lived because that was the closest place where my sister could go to school and have some inclusion, you know. And then eventually she was able to come to school in our neighborhood school with me. But you know, that's sort of our origin story as a family. And I'm still having conversations with parents today about the possibility that the mind-blowing insanity of buying some little pocket of property, 45 minutes

away from their home, so that they can pay taxes so that they can send their child to an inclusive school.

Genia: So that feeling of like, "Seriously?" Like we're still having some of the same conversations and that despite, you know, all the success stories that are out there, if you can just find them, despite a massive body of research evidence, and experiential evidence that, you know, doesn't leave it open really for debate. It's like, you know, whether or not the earth is flat or not, like the ship has sailed, we, you know, we know, we know what's wet around this, and yet we're still having some of those same conversations. So I really relate to that. So what, so tell us about MatchUS. What is MatchUS?

Emma: So I, when school closed in mid-March, Mass Families started community calls and I'll have Sophia talk more about what community calls looked like. But I joined, it was a space for families and anyone else who wanted to join the calls to connect around. Oh my goodness, we're living in a crisis. What are we going to do? And as I listened, I joined the call. I know, I still don't exactly know, it must've been on Facebook and I just said, okay, like I'm out of school. I don't know what I'm going to do either. They're no one knows what they're going to do. I might as well sit on this call.

Sophia: No. I totally reached out to you. And was like, "Emma, you have to be on this call."

Emma: I knew how we knew. We, like, I know that there's like a connection, but you anyway, the right, the right things aligned. The right.

Sophia: I knew what it is. Yeah, no, you need it to be on this call, cause you had, yeah, it was clear. And we had connected around another family.

Emma: That's right. That's right. I always forget that. Yes. So you were helping him with another Boston family. And just as a side note, so few of us was catching with me to connect with the Boston family because I, as a special educator, didn't know how to support the special ed family within the system that I navigate. So like, that's a whole another layer to this. So I sat on this initial call and I listened. And I listened to families talk about how scared they were. I listened to families talk about how no one from their school was reaching out and saying like, we know what we're going to do either, but we're going to be here for you. I was listening to families, say all the supports that allow my kid to be brilliant are now stripped away. And I was listening particularly to families who had kids with significant support needs that weren't in my purview.

Emma: Like I weren't, I wasn't thinking about kids with those particular needs. And at the same time I sat there thinking like, I'm a teacher, I'm texting with my friends. We're all like, what are we going to do? Like we're already sharing resources. We were figuring out like how to connect families with food. We are figuring out how to get kids laptops and internet. We were being creative, but I saw this incredible void between what families were saying, what teachers were doing and how come these two groups that had to be working together, weren't working together. And I, and I desperately want families to know that there are teachers out there who do want great things for kids, as much as

there are teachers that don't, there are so many. And so I just talked with Sophia after and said, I think there's an opportunity to just like, create two Google forms, one for families to say, like, here's what I need.

Emma: And one for teachers to say, like, here's what I'm good at. And to figure out what would it look like? One people fill out these forms to then match them and say, I don't know what you're going to come up with, but why don't the two of you talk and figure out a way to support each other if that means like another person that's just listening to families talk with that means, a teacher saying, "You know what? Try this one resource", as opposed to here's 10,000 websites that are all gonna be great for your child's education. A customized part to that.

Genia: Yeah. I love the, well, I love it all. I love it all. And I, there's a couple of, there's a couple of other organizations historically that have tried to do similar things. One is Citizen Advocacy, which connects people, vulnerable people with citizens in the community who can make a voluntary connection and support people with whatever their sort of advocacy, crucial advocacy needs are. So that's one really good example, but there's not many. And it strikes me that that is sort of a limiting mindset or limiting belief or mindset issue around how we can be approaching community, how we can be approaching education, you know. In Ontario where I live, there's conversation, lots of conversation about, I'm sure this is not unique to Ontario. Lots of conversation about sending all the kids back to school in September, because when people are looking at the of harm and they are considering children who are vulnerable because they don't have, you know, they may be living in abusive homes or they may be living with parents who are just stretched way too thin, or, you know, who don't have, whose parents don't have the capacity for any number of reasons to be helping their kids to live.

Genia: You know, with some richness of experience, if they're home all of the time, you know. And so we'll send all the kids back because we're worried about this substantial number of kids in our community. And I mean, there's all kinds of reasons why, you know, stage in this where return to school is possible. That would be great. But the idea that returning kids to school on mass is the only way that our society has of potentially figuring out how we can be one, maintaining meaningful connection with each other. And two, supporting each other so that if you are, you know, if our social systems are not functioning in the way they typically do, which frankly is often not all that great to begin with. That there might be alternatives. You know, that are really good. So anyway, I I'm in love with this. So tell me what's so you said let's have some Google docs and then what happened?

Emma: I want to, before I answer that, I want to say two things based on what you just shared that connect around when COVID hit. A lot of communities started developing mutual aid networks as a way to resource share. And I think like, just like, the work, the group that you named, this was just a, this wasn't like a random aligning of stars. This is because of the work of folks that have showed that when we can't rely on institutions. Institutions have failed us always. And so why do we, why do we look to our school leaders as the people who are supposed to come up with the solutions when, you know, the people who are on the ground can just like develop great creative solutions.

- Genia:** The systems don't help people, people help people.
- Emma:** Yeah, exactly. Which is hard when we also like need systems to function with some sanity, because kids need to get food and, you know, so,
- Genia:** But they're the, they're the tool, not the nourishment. And I think the, that's the piece that, you know, when as a society we become so habituated to a particular system's response to human need, that when that falls apart, you know, one, the system has a hard time pivoting because it also is, you know, just habituated to a particular way of working. And as a community, we also struggled to think of alternatives. So yeah, I've heard, you know, I was having a recent conversation with my sister who's an educator. She's a grade six teacher. And she was saying, she said something about, you know, kids need other kids. And I was like, that's a really, like culturally specific statement about how we've figured out how we're going to provide social opportunity and, you know, connection and play-based learning.
- Genia:** Kids don't actually need other kids, like if they were in a multi aged community where there was, you know, people of all different ages and that's the way they grew up, that's not less healthy from a child development perspective than congregating a bunch of children of the same age in a classroom. Which I actually think is kind of a bizarre way of approaching things like, you know, no role models really, and, you know, especially for teenagers. But anyway, that's another podcast episode. Yes. Anyway, I'm just, yes. I totally agree with you.
- Sophia:** Yeah. And I also, I want to just chime in there because I think too, that one of the things that we've been battling in this it is, or one of maybe, maybe we've been battling isn't the right way to say it, but I find that things like Citizen Advocacy or other types of matching programs, that a lot of families are very reticent to engage in them because they don't believe that their loved ones with disabilities have anything to contribute. Or they are so connected and dependent on a publicly-funded eligibility-based service system that doesn't treat any of us well, that we start to really internalize.
- Sophia:** You know, I've seen a lot of families internalize these messages around, Oh, like the system needs to provide this care because I can't expect the community to take on this burden. Whereas I like to think of it like, you know, when I, and this is kind of how I feel like we need to be approaching this. And I think MatchUS is kind of grown out of like a core foundational component to the ways that both Emma and I approach things, even though we have very different manifestations of these approaches is this idea that I really believe that everybody has the right to contribute.
- Sophia:** And that if we don't give an, if we don't give that opportunity, that we're actually stealing things from them and we're not, and we're stealing things from their communities. So, so what we did was, you know, we signed up for a farm share and we signed up for a full farm share. And our, my family doesn't eat vegetables. They're like chicken nuggets, mac and cheese, [inaudible] whatever. Momma eats vegetables, working on getting my husband eat vegetables. But, you know, we've, we, that's another thing about my bio is that I, yeah, I'm married now. I have three kids, ten, six, and one. And what we decided was, what I decided was, you know, what we're going to

do is we're going to give half of our, we're going to give away vegetables from our farm share to our neighbors because we want to contribute to them. And we were actually approached about potentially going back to school because we're in a situation where we for the life of us could not figure out why we just couldn't make it.

Sophia: There were a lot of factors, but we did not have complimentary commitments to an inclusive education for our son. So we were, so he attends a segregated, he attend school in a segregated setting. But we opted to keep him home over the summer, even though he was offered the opportunity to return, because we disagree with some of the ideas around what we feel like, where we feel like he's growing. And also we disagree with this idea that, you know, we're when we make that decision to send him back that we're, we're not just making a decision about him. We're making a decision about our upstairs neighbor, who we share a hallway with, who we can't social distance from. We are making a decision about our neighbors that my son loves to visit. And we're making a decision about the neighbors that our daughter loves to visit and our daughters possibility for exchanges. And so we figured that this is our contribution in that way. I have kids joining me. So, I apologize.

Genia: That's okay. That's okay. Yeah. I appreciate what you're saying about, you know, people's right to make a contribution. And also I think, and I think you would agree Sophia, I think it's part and parcel of what you're saying, but also people's responsibility to make a contribution. And you know, there are certain, there are harms that come to us when our rights are violated and of course that can take many, many shapes and forms, but there's also a harm that comes to us when people deny us the opportunity to fulfill our responsibilities. You know, that sends powerful messages to us about our value or lack thereof and our, you know, what we have to contribute. So I think it's, I think it's a really great point. So, okay. So let's get back to the Google docs. So we started with the idea of just a Google doc system.

Emma: And so the, we, I was so privileged with the opportunity to have a student teacher this school year who speaks English and Spanish. And so I asked her if she would be willing to translate it because I, like we have to ensure access from the beginning. And then I reached out to some friends who are teachers in different capacities who were like looking for what they wanted to do during this time and didn't really have a directive from their school district and said, would you be willing to like, look at the forms when they come in and figure out how to match? And they both love Google forms and spreadsheets. So they figured out and taught me how to sort it so that it could be efficient.

Genia: Yeah. Thank God for the people who love spreadsheets and Google forms eh. Thank goodness for them. Yeah.

Emma: Exactly. For me, it goes back to what you were just sharing around how do we, how does everyone get to feel useful in this moment, feeling like they're contributing something. And people were hungry to be useful, especially in the beginning, right? Because it was just like, we're all in a pandemic and people, especially those with resources wanted to feel useful. Because we were so privileged, right? We had food, we had shelter, we had internet, right. The privilege was so clear. The disparities were so

clear, so wanting to be useful, so essential. And then, Mass Families sent it out to lots of people. I sent it out to lots of people. I sent it out to different people who I know were in touch with different disability communities in different places across the United States. MatchUS, I think, if you Google it is also an online dating site. [inaudible], you know, like this was just very, and so we, I, there was no reason it had to be Massachusetts specific because anyone could have a phone call with anyone anywhere.

Emma: So, we tried to do work to make sure that people knew it was open. But it was definitely Massachusetts heavy. And I worked with teachers in different school districts and my own teachers union was doing a lot of work around how can teachers be activists during this time? And so they put it as part of their ongoing volunteer email blast that they were saying. Like, while some teachers were delivering meals to families, if you want to do something at home, this was a way to do something that involves social distancing as part of the built in structure of it. So there were initially, I mean, still to this day, there are way, there are more teachers that have filled out the forms and families, which is always a good thing because it means you can sort and be really intentional about what a family is requesting.

Emma: And I would continue, and I've continued to be part of the community calls that Mass Families has organized and would talk about the impact that the matching was having on families. After the first wave of matches, then we created a Google, like a reflection tool so that the families and educators could talk about, did they match with their match. [inaudible] their useful. And then that way I could follow up with families who said, my match actually never got ahold of me. And so I could say, okay, great. Like I can, we can sort the form and then figure out the next person. We figured out which emails were going to their spam. And, you know, just some of those logistical pieces that would get in the way. We've matched over 190 families.

Genia: That's amazing.

Emma: Yeah. And it's all from two Google forms. Like this wasn't, uh,

Genia: I'm just shaking my head with like, incredulity. Like that's amazing. And this is like 190, sorry I interrupted you. I'm a bout, it was rude. I just like, it's not been that long. Right. So it's not like 190 families over two years. It's 190 families since March? Four months. Yeah. It's amazing.

Sophia: Well, and I think that that's, that was the key because everything that's coming out now, people are so saturated that they're not paying attention in the same way. And so it was this like urgency, like, you know, I think Emma and I, we exchanged messages where we were like, this is the moment we've both been trained for. Burn it all down. Let's rebuild. Like, and it was just like all of this work that we've done to acquire these skills. They really, they they're transformational under, under pressure. And so, the fact that we were able to do this while people were still running on that really helpful mix of cortisol and inspiration, and, you know, I mean, if we had tried to start it now, it would not [inaudible].

Genia: I appreciate, I appreciate that, the timing piece. And I'm, I'm feeling like, kind of emotional about this. And I hear what you're saying about, you know, the sort of a lifetime of skill and ability sort of made you ready for this moment. But what's making me emotional about it is how, in some ways easy, this was how powerful it was and how fucking hard parents have to fight and are told it can't be done. Like your kid is too hard, too impair. There's not enough resources. There's, you know, they're a drain on the system. They're, you know, we can't afford them. They're going to be a burden to other children. You know, your expectations are unrealistic. The, like the amount, and it's like, Emma and I were talking about at the beginning, like we are seeing the same shit we were seeing when we were kids. It's the same shit. And yet,

Sophia: Yeah. We have the artificial Gates that we've created for ourselves that are there. And I think that, and I think too, like we even saw something where a resource or an organization that compiles resources had reached out to kind of inquire, are you confirming that these educators and related service providers have the credentials to be doing this? And I think that, like, I mean, I get it. Like, there is a big risk, like, yes, that's right. We don't know, we don't know the liability if there is one. We don't, you know, but it's like, we just want to put people in touch, you know? And I think that that's, there's just this power in like, trusting that, you know, what we're going to trust the intentions of people that need to be connected. And we're going to trust that, like in asking that it's going to work out. And I think that like, in hearing people talk about things like Citizen Advocacy, Tom.

Genia: Doody?

Sophia: Sorry, what?

Genia: Tom Doody?

Sophia: Yes. Thank you. Tom Doody says something really, really amazing, which is, you know, you match people and it's of the community. And so you're not in control. So you feel like you just do the match and then it becomes theirs, and then it becomes what they want to do with it. And, you know, I understand. I understand the structures, the systems, the bureaucracies, the things that we've convinced ourselves that we need. I, you know, I don't envy people who have to manage those systems or bureaucracies, because I do think that they fill valuable roles in some ways. But I think that we've gotten to this point where we are, we've convinced ourselves that they matter too much in these circumstances where, you know. Like families just need other humans to connect with because, you know, I mean, we're all of families where we've had to figure out inclusion and it works.

Genia: Yeah.

Sophia: Go ahead.

Genia: I was just going to say, and I, I know, that, you know, when I'm saying like all these barriers that parents face when they're advocating for inclusion, I'm not, and what, this

is so easy, I'm not suggesting that the work of inclusion or the work of supporting all kids is easy. You know, you were saying earlier that you originally met because Emma was reaching out, looking for some help to figure out how to support a particular student or a particular family. That's, that's not the case. I think it's the gaslighting that's making me emotional. You know, like the sort of venturing of, you know, all these systemic barriers in a way that makes it like the, it doesn't own any responsibility for that. And sometimes actually you can just figure it out if you decide you're going to figure it out. But so often there's no responsibility taken. And in fact, parents are gaslighted around, you know, why inclusion is not an option.

Sophia: And made to feel like the onus is all on them.

Genia: Yeah.

Sophia: And then, Oh yeah. I remember being in a meeting where somebody was saying where I was saying, I just don't think you have a commitment to our son. And they were saying, Oh, my teachers and my staff are not the ones who are in the wrong here. And it was like, no you're, but what, but, and the implication, I can't remember exactly how this person said it, but the implication was that my son was fucked up. And he was seven. No seven-year-old is fucked up. And that's where, that's where, you know, we can, it's so frustrating because I feel like the families that go from feeling disempowered by that, to having more of an attitude of just pushing back against that, is as someone who works with family leaders and develops their skills, that's beautiful. And that's where I've hoped a lot of these, cause Emma, there have been some of these connections that have sustained like long time. And my hope is that these families are starting to see these amazing things that their kids can do simply because they're in these circumstances that we've never been in before.

Emma: I think families, as much as the system failed families, these relationships will model to families that it's about the individual relationships with their children's teachers that will, there was almost healing for some families that went on in that. Like, I can think of this one family who shared a testimony that was like, we live in Arizona. No one's done anything right. Like we don't get any resources, but my kids, through MatchUS, have had sustaining relationships with one person who helped my son with cerebral palsy, prepare for the AP exam. I had one sustaining relationship that got my kid to enjoy reading. And she's never liked reading before. Right later, there's like a healing about systems and institutions that have demonized their kids. And now they're like, it's the institutions to be mad at, not necessarily individual teachers. Even though there are teachers who are in the wrong, but gaining of trust again.

Genia: Yeah. And I think that speaks to as well, the possibilities when there are parents and teachers who are, who want to figure it out. There's great possibility in that even when the system is not supportive. And it's not that that lack of support from the system is irrelevant because that's not true. It's relevant and it's powerful. But I know, you know, my part of our experience in the school system is that my son's school is the only French language school within an hour's drive of our community because there's just not enough demand. And so we're part of the Ottawa board, you know, the main city board,

but we're far away. And so the blessing of that is that all of the resources and recommendations of specialists are also far away.

Genia: And so, you know, there's an awful lot of what has happened in my son's school that has been tremendously positive, radically different than what's happening in the rest of the board, just because they decided to work with me to figure it out instead of, and you know, instead of doing what the board does. But there's also that space and, you know, that frees them up and in a way, you know, to be able to do those things. So the system matters, but also just the ability of a student and a teacher or a student and a teacher and some support staff to figure it out, can exist even within a board that is, you know, really pushing for segregated specialist services. Yeah, it's pretty [inaudible].

Emma: An educator wrote when they did their evaluation form. They wrote, it was so nice to talk to a family without an agenda. Like to think about how many times teachers were told how they need to communicate with families about remote learning. And this teacher said, I could just like talk and we could problem solve. And I could be supportive like what a gift this family gave me to be able to do that.

Genia: Wow, that's pretty powerful.

Sophia: Well, this is the magic of the forms, right? Because you're like, it's a good litmus test. Like if you're not going to get through that form, you're probably not cut out to do this. And it's not even like a heavy lift necessarily to fill this out. But if you're not going to take like though, and that's where I think we need to be really thinking about these different ways that we gate opportunities if you want to say that. Like that form is a good, it's a good protective measure because it's like, you're not just putting your name in. You have to give authentic responses about what you feel like you're good at, what your skills are, and you have to be intentional about it.

Sophia: Not so much so that it's daunting and intimidating and that you're not going to get through it, but it's real. You know, so I think that an educator, who's going to look at that opportunity as a gift, you know, they're going to get through a form like that really easily. And an educator who's, who's not going to want to try something new. And sometimes, you know, I mean, I have a complicated. Yes, yes. You're complicated too. You know, it can be very intimidating to do something that might not be something that you're very good at, but I think that there's a vulnerability in trying. And yeah, I think it's been amazing to see the outcome of these matches for sure.

Genia: So we're recording this in July, so, you know, right in the middle of summer or close to the middle of summer vacation for most schools system. And Emma, you were saying that there's been, you know, a little bit of a lull in the demand, which makes perfect sense. What are the plans for, if any, for September for MatchUS?

Sophia: Oh, I was starting to laugh because I thought you were going to say, what are the plans for Massachusetts in terms of education for September? But,

Genia: No. Definitely, I wouldn't. I'm assuming that Massachusetts is, you know, the same as Ontario in so far as we regularly get emails saying we have not a clue. Hang tight and we'll keep you updated about how little we know and how little we can tell you.

Sophia: Well, I think we're getting a lot of messages that are similar to that, but also like, Oh, Hey, we're going to create this type of like segregated space. Or here's guidance that's going to like reinforce these segregated structures. And, but you know, Emma and I haven't had this conversation, I had always assumed that it would just be open and that we would just have to wait and see because the people who are reaching out are going to tell us. But she may have had a different agenda because there's a lot of work that's being done by volunteers who I think are really committed. But I don't know what's going on in their lives because this is our only connection. So Emma, what are the plans for MatchUS in the fall?

Emma: Every so often I will send an email to all the educators who haven't been matched yet and just say like, so like hope you're hanging in there. We continued to have more teacher matches and educator matches and families. Are you still interested in participating? And I think since I've sent it out, maybe three educators have been like, things have changed in my life. I can't be part of it anymore. But clearly educators are like, I'm still, I'm still in it. Like if you need me, I want to be there for families. It is definitely trickling. I think maybe we've gotten like 30 since school's closed in their second iteration for summer.

Emma: I have no plans not to continue keeping it open. And we'll just sort of see what happens. I do think there's a drain that families feel now than in a different way than they felt in March about wanting to get resources and be connected to someone. So I think like the summers opportunity to press pause on being inundated with information, even if it's intentional and thoughtful and all those things, but I have no intention of not continuing that. And I think the people who are doing the matches feel similar.

Genia: So who is eligible from a family perspective from the family end of things. Who's eligible to fill out your Google form and be matched with an educator?

Emma: Anyone. I think the form has a place for people, for families to talk about the needs of their child, what areas they might want additional support in. I particularly, I'm always, chuckle is not the right word when families like check every box. So I want support in every area. I think all families can be specific. And I think that's, that was so hard, particularly in the beginning. Like I need anybody.

Genia: I need it all. Yeah. And I think it's been stoked from me. I need it all. Yeah.

Emma: Exactly. I think as families have gotten clear about what they want, it's easier to make matches that are more thoughtful. Like I really just want help with speech right now, where I really just want help with like social skills, naming that and helping families be like, okay, saying how do we help families? Just like, we're going to care about everything, but we can't.

Genia: We can't do everything. That's exactly why I created the Special Education Priorities Matrix because I think, you know, families with kids with and without disabilities are being crushed by the, like all the things. You know, and frankly all the things don't matter. You know, like they don't, or at least even when they do matter, they don't all have equal impact on, you know, positive lives for kids with disabilities or kids, you know, kids without disabilities. So, yeah. So I think this, that idea of, you know, really focusing in on what's going to make the biggest difference, is going to be really helpful in being targeted when you're requesting a match. So when people request a match and develop a relationship with an educator, what can they expect? Like is this tutoring, is this, you know, sort of, you've got grade level achievements you're trying to accomplish, like what, what is this look like?

Emma: It has looked so many different ways. When we send the email to the matches, we'll include a little bit of what the family included on the form of the survey. Like the age range, maybe the disability, maybe if they had a special request. And on the form, it gives a little guidance to families about how to talk about their kid in like an efficient way. I said something like, I know there's so much, you want to talk about your kid, but how do we manage everyone's time? And then also for the teachers and educators saying like, I know you might know thousands of things, but you're not allowed to tell the family thousands of things. There are only a few things. We, on that initial email, we say, we're guaranteeing one conversation. Now some of those conversations have spiraled into tutoring.

Emma: Some have spiraled into bimonthly check-ins. Some have spiraled into, you know, what, maybe I'm not the right match, but I actually know someone who might be a better match. And so like connecting them to another resource. So I think, I don't want to give the false impression that every match turns into a daily tutoring session with like a reading specialist. It could evolve into that, but that's not, the purpose is how do we, and this comes from my own family, recognizing that my brother would only survive and thrive if there was a circle of support who was nurturing my brother. And that meant he needed to figure out how does he ask for help in ways that allow people to tap into what he needs. And so this is like building little circles of support for families so they can find there are other people out there that want to support you in this journey.

Genia: Yeah. It's like you're plugging this masterclass for me. [inaudible] goodthingsinlife.org/matrix. Like this is exactly, you know, one of the sort of foundations to this matrix is the recognition that, you know, people need to have, people are powerfully, positively impacted by the ability to reach out to known people who care about them and, you know, connect, express their needs, express their, you know, original thoughts and be supported in their lives both in the short term and over time. So that's, yeah, totally agree with you. So, all of the links that we have talked about, you know, MatchUS and some of the other resources that we talked about even before we started recording and through this episode, we'll make sure that all of those are included in the show notes. So people will have a quick and easy way of accessing this. For both of you Sophia and Emma, if there was sort of one message that you wanted to give families during this time, you know, what do you think is, what would you say? What do you have to offer?

Emma: Oh, I'll go first for this one. It is scary to ask for help. We live in a world where we are told to lock our doors, stay in our houses, not talk about things that are scary or vulnerable, be independent, figure it out on your own. And what I've learned from my family is that if we don't ask for help in intentional ways, we don't know what's possible for our own kids in our own families. I'm making a little plug for my mom's book, which was [inaudible] Inclusion Press, What Matters: Reflections on Disability, Love and Community, because while I love my mother and think it's a great book, what it shows over and over again, and is now replicated in these over 190 matches is that when people ask for help, when these families say, this is what I need, an educators say, I'm being told by my district that I can't do my job the way I know how to do it, which is love children.

Emma: And they said, okay, here's how I'm going to support families. Beautiful things happened in a pandemic. And I hope that for families who asked for help, they gained another little voice in their mind that will remind them, I need to do this over and over again, because I have to expect that for every hundred ask for help, that I get, maybe I'll only get 10 back, but those 10 are going to be powerful and they're going to be the right people that I need in my child's life to support them. And I'm going to be modeling to my kid that asking for help is powerful. And that's what self-advocacy at its best is. Is people asking for help and saying, this is what I need and not was shamed because we're not going to survive living independent lives. We're going to survive leading interdependent lives.

Genia: Yeah, that's great. Thank you.

Sophia: Ooh, yes. And I, I'm sitting here with my one year old. So she's obviously chiming in by throwing things at the computer. But, you know, I have to build on that to stay that, you know, asking for help is a muscle that's really important to build. And I think, you know, the one thing that I think is really important to remember is that all of these great stories of things that have worked out, they all sound like they're these like unicorns, or they all sound like, sorry about the beep. They all sound like this thing. Like, that's so easy to write off and say like, there's another one. My day is happening around me. You know, it's so easy for families to write it off and say, Oh, well, that could never happen to me because that's just chance and circumstance, but you know what, I don't, I don't think it's that.

Sophia: I think it's about having an open heartedness and seeing possibility. You know, because when, when my family looks around at the support that we have, which is, you know, it's definitely one of our growing edges too, because I'm not great at asking still. You know, I really like to think that I am and that I do ask, but I'm not great at it. You know? And so, you know, we have an upstairs neighbor who sometimes has been watching two of the older kids during this pandemic. That's something that I don't think a lot of families have. And it's partly because like I let, my husband and I, we let our kids impose on her because we just believed in the possibility that like, Hey, if the childcare's there, you, you don't say no.

Sophia: And then, you know, my son has this amazing relationship with one of our neighbors who has a dog. And he goes and visits and it's like one of the most amazing

relationships. And it was all about me and my husband saying, okay, yes, you can go outside of our house, walk around the back of the house and walk across that little street by yourself. And it's turned into this like beautiful thing. And there's ugly parts to those stories. There's unpleasant parts to those stories and sure I'm not going to necessarily talk about those in public, in the same way that I would talk about the good things, but just know that good things happen all the time, all the time. And if it's okay, if I can leave you with a story.

Genia: Sure. Please do.

Sophia: So this whole pandemic, our son has been really, really, really frustrated. He really loves excavators and in particular mini excavators and diggers. And he has been getting very insistent about this. So people that have been on the phone with me during my days have heard him talk about mommy, we're buying this excavator. He's got an eBay account. He's like, knows all about all these different parts of excavators. He adds, you know, \$1,500 items to our Amazon cart, all of this stuff. And yes, that's right. Perfect timing. Yeah. And so, you know, there've been instances. Yeah. I know. There's, there's been instances where it's gotten a little bit tricky because it's like, you know, what we want is what we want and we still need to wait sometimes.

Sophia: Well, I know, I know. We will, and what's going to happen tomorrow? What are you doing tomo?

Ezra: [inaudible].

Sophia: That's right.

Ezra: We can get a shirt for myself. We can ask someone to see [inaudible]

Sophia: And how did that happen Ezra?

Ezra: And then we asked them to see if someone can measure the light. Can we, can we, we can take that. We can take, we can do our online to the downtown.

Sophia: No. Who did daddy ask about? Who did daddy ask to help you get excavators? Did he ask his brother?

Ezra: Yes.

Sophia: Yeah. So I think he might've said, I don't know what to do because Ezra keeps asking to ride an excavator.

Ezra: [inaudible].

Sophia: Right, right. And then who did, who did uncle Brian connect us to?

Ezra: His friend.

Sophia: His friend. That's right. And, and so you, and how old are you again?

Ezra: 10.

Sophia: You're 10. And so you're going to get to try and what? Run an excavator?

Ezra: Yes.

Sophia: Tomorrow, right?

Ezra: Okay, yeah. But the order is weekend.

Sophia: Yeah. So Ezra, can we talk about this after?

Ezra: It makes a little weeping noise.

Genia: I'm excited.

Sophia: I know.

Genia: It's contagious.

Sophia: Yes, but I use it as an example where essentially my husband was complaining to his brother about how tough this has been. Because it's really hard when you've got a 10 year old who has a strong sense of justice in what he wants. It's hard to manage that. But now we've got a 10 year old that is going to be driving like heavy machinery.

Genia: That is an awesome, awesome story, Sophia. And so true. And I think one of the things that's really powerful about that story, or, you know, really illustrates your point is that when you start asking you can't necessarily predict where that positive impact is going to come from. Right. And so not being able to, like looking at your circle of friends or the people, you know, or the support organizations around you and thinking, well, I can't see the help being available in, you know, from any of the people in my sphere, is not a reason not to ask because often actually the way our lives get bigger and richer is from the concentric circles of the people that the people, you know, people that they know and the people that they know and that's how our networks and our social capital grows.

Genia: So just not being able to see where the help might come from is not a great reason to not ask for it. So thank you for that story. So, we will connect all of those links in the show notes, including Emma, your mom's book. We'll make sure that that is there as well. And you know, I hope that we can have a conversation after Emma about how Good Things in Life can be promoting MatchUS and really growing the access or the knowledge around the program. So families can be, can be taking advantage of this. I love it. I'm definitely going to be looking to see, you know, filling out the Google form for my son and not because the school has actually not been supportive. We've actually

had a really good experience, but because I think that lots has been lost during the pandemic for all kids, you know, with school closures.

Genia: And I think that this is a tremendous opportunity to, tremendous opportunity for my son and not just in the immediacy, but again, in building that network of who's around him and who knows us as a family and who can support us over time, even if it's a short term relationship. You know, even if it doesn't end up being forever. So Emma and Sophia, thank you so so much for joining me today. I really am grateful. And if people are interested in setting priorities that are not overwhelming, but have high impact for their kids, then you can learn more and register for the masterclass on setting on Special Education Priorities Matrix again, at goodthingsinlife.org/matrix. Thanks very much and have a great day, everybody.

Emma: Thank you.

Sophia: And thank you so much.