

A PLAY Project Parent Story: *Meghan Griesemer* *Columbus, OH*



Meghan Griesemer (Finn's Mom)

My son's name is Finnegan Thomas O'Keefe, Finn for short. He's four years old and our first PLAY Project visit was March 30, 2015 when my son was two years old and five months.



I am a single mother, an expert on the film Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory, and a big Mr. Rogers Fan. My biggest claims to fame are that I've met Regis Philbin (briefly), have an autographed 4x6 glossy photo from Richard Simmons himself, and once Kurt Vonnegut and I made eye contact. I am a proud former member of the short-lived Ohio State University officially sponsored club S.W.A.B H.A.M.S.T.E.R. (students with awfully bad haircuts and made-up silly theories evading responsibility).

How did you learn about The PLAY Project as a possible therapy for your child?

I was lucky enough to attend one of Dr. Solomon's presentations at The Childhood League Center where my son has been receiving early intervention services since he was 23 months old.

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It was mentioned to my son's speech therapist and his teachers, but I didn't understand what it was or how it worked before I had attended his presentation. That's when the lightbulb went off, and I truly began to understand how much of a game-changer this program was in terms of efficacy.

What autism therapies has your child experienced?



My son has attended weekly speech therapy since he was 18 months old, but that was not directly aimed at treating his autism. It was beneficial though, because the speech therapist was able to validate me. She saw what I saw—that Finn has signs that indicated he was on the autism spectrum. Sensory aversion, lack of speech, disinterest in the activities that typical children would find engaging. Despite months of speech therapy, we had little progress with his expressive speech. We also had a number of evaluations through Help Me Grow that failed to identify a developmental delay, much less the fact that he was on the spectrum (despite the fact that I had been raising concerns with doctors and Help Me Grow since before he turned 18 months old).

At 23 months Finn began attending The Childhood League Center which is an early intervention preschool for children with developmental delays. He finally qualified because he was identified as having a speech delay. He did not begin receiving any Autism specific therapies, however, until we began PLAY Project. Not one day of ABA. And the rest, as they say, is history.

A grayscale photograph of a woman and a young child running together in a park. The woman is wearing a striped shirt and the child is wearing a dark shirt. They are both smiling and appear to be having fun. The background shows trees and a path.

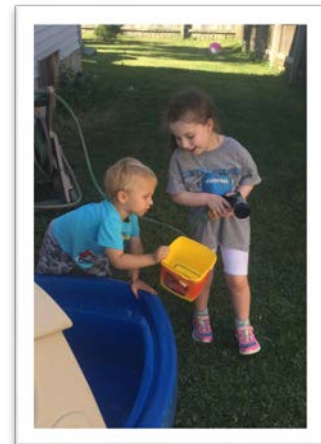
"I got my miracle, my happy ever after, and I am eternally grateful. I HAVE MY SON BACK!"

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From when you started with The PLAY Project, what differences have you noticed in your child?

There are few pictures of Finn smiling before PLAY Project. There was a song we used to sing—*Where's Finn? Where is Finn? Is he in the kitchen? Does he have a pumpkin? Rema teama ting ting. Monkey watermelon.* Finn wasn't really *with* me. That song is reminiscent of the one sung by Julian's mother in the presentation Dr. Solomon showed. She'd say, Where's Julian?

Subconsciously, we are desperately wondering where are children are hiding. We cannot reach them. He used to spend a lot of time in the corner playing by himself. We used to call it his office, and he was putting in a lot of hours there, entertaining himself, ignoring the family who only want to be a part of his world, unable to connect with him. There are only a handful of pictures where I could coax him to smile. I usually had to resort to tickling to get him to crack one. A month before PLAY project started, I had written a journal entry where I said "I cried a lot today about Finn.



His speech therapists think he will talk, but I am not convinced." I also wrote, "I am anxious to get started with ABA and PLAY therapy. These things take time and the ball is rolling but I feel inadequate to help him." I felt like I couldn't get through to him, but it wasn't for lack of trying. For where we are now, all of my wildest dreams have come true. I have everything I ever wanted. I got my miracle, my happy ever after, and I am eternally grateful. I HAVE MY SON BACK! And he is the most wonderful little boy—he's more wonderful than any little boy I could have imagined. And I appreciate every moment because all of the wonderful things he's doing weren't a guarantee. I say I love you, and he says, I love you too. Before, he had no words. He came up to me, smiled and said "I'm so happy, Mommy." When he said that, I knew that that was because of PLAY Project.

What were your initial thoughts about The PLAY Project as an autism treatment? Have those thoughts changed since, and if so, how?

My son's Early Intervention team had encouraged me to give PLAY a try. I have to admit, I was skeptical at first. I didn't think this was serious enough, somehow, to be a treatment plan. I fell in the camp of moms who thought flash cards, shapes, puzzles, etc. were the answer. But for children, play is serious learning.

Shortly after my son's diagnosis, I had the opportunity to see Dr. Richard Solomon, the founder of the PLAY Project, speak about PLAY and how it works. I was blown away. They say seeing is believing. When I saw footage of PLAY techniques in action, I was convinced, and moved to the point of tears.

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It was beautiful to see the moment when a child and parent connect — it had me in awe like I was watching footage from the first moon landing for the first time. They said it couldn't be done. I was seeing the impossible.

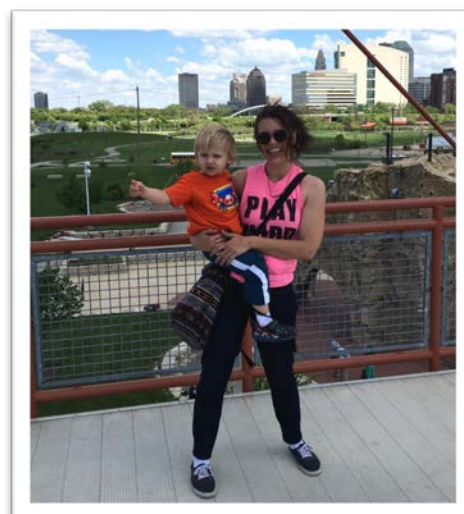
Dr. Solomon has put together the pieces of the autism puzzle. Rules are meant to be broken, and puzzles are meant to be solved. After seeing how my son has blossomed and progressed phenomenally over the course of the past year and a half that we've utilized PLAY, I'm more convinced than ever that this is the answer. And not for just my son — for every child on any place on the spectrum.

What piece of advice can you give to parents who have recently had a child diagnosed with autism?

Start PLAY Project as soon as possible. There's so much to do and so little time. Stop hoping and start believing. Believe in yourself and believe in your child. You are the expert on your own child. Don't put any limitations on your children and hold on tight to all of your dreams while letting go of your expectations—those are yours, not theirs. The best decision I made was putting my son's happiness above all else. Trust in Dr. Solomon, he knows what he's doing. Understand that for children, play is serious learning—don't dismiss it as a break from learning. Trust that this works. Channel your own inner child and be more fun. Make your goal to make them laugh and smile—that means you're doing it right. Turn off the screens and be unselfish with your time. There are times you may not feel like putting in the time—do it anyway-- you get out of PLAY Project what you put into it. And most of all, don't wait. This is a race against the clock. You don't get this time in their development back and it goes quickly. In order to have dramatic results, you have to take advantage of the developmental window. Don't give up on your child, they need you now more than ever. Know that you are the best person to

Can you describe a time that you realized that The PLAY Project was helping improve your child's functional development?

I think I cover this one. The doubters all were stunned. It took about six months of daily play before we really saw his percentages for his developmental levels going up. The first time we played patty cake I cried—he was three. I waited a long time and worked hard for that game of patty cake! The first time he said *I love you, Mommy*—I didn't know if I would ever hear those words. When he giggles uncontrollably and can't catch his breath. When he cracks a joke. (His favorite is Guess what? Chicken butt!)



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When I get his IEP reports, he is in the normal range or just about for all of his goals for his age. When he asks for his friend to come over and play. When he hugs someone without being prompted. When I see him pretend. In each moment where he looks at me and smiles. I see progress and improvements every single day. He continues to blow me away by doing things I never thought he would be able to do when he was first diagnosed. People are stunned when I tell them he has autism—some may not believe me because they see where he is now, not where he was before we started PLAY Project. He is a happy, funny, silly, sensitive, playful, loving little boy. You get out of PLAY Project what you put into it—he didn't come out of a box like that! All of those wonderful traits that are so apparent now took the PLAY project to be actualized.

The PLAY Project's goal is to empower the parent to be their child's best play partner. Do you feel that you reached that goal, and if so, how has that affected you as a parent?

This is how I show my son I love him. I know that he knows that he is loved, and that's all I really wanted for my son, but we got so much more. I am healing my own son. Me. I feel like I can take on the world. I am a happier person. PLAY Project changes your child, but it also changes you. I am a happier, sillier, more confident person. I feel like I could do anything, and so can my son. The skies the limit and we are setting our goals. Now my next goal is to make sure that every child that needs this program so that they be functional and most importantly, happy, has access to it. We will never stop playing, and I will never stop fighting for these children because I know the potential that exists within every single child with ASD. They all can be helped by this program, and it's a fight worth fighting. So let's identify these children early, play hard, go down the rabbit hole and get our kids back!!!!!! The impossible is possible.

- Meghan Griesemer

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