

**U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT  
FOREIGN SERVICE INSTITUTE**

**ADVOCATING FOR YOUR CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS:  
OVERSEAS SPECIAL EDUCATION WORKSHOP**

**PARENT TO PARENT**

**SPEAKERS:  
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**THURSDAY, MAY 28, 2009**

*Transcript by  
Federal News Service  
Washington, D.C.*

JOAN ROONEY: Welcome. As you can see, Diana Rooney and Joan Rooney – we told you about not being related, but friends. And you want to tell a little bit about yourself just to start out?

DIANNA ROONEY: My background is being in the Foreign Service since 1985. I've raised two kids overseas – almost exclusively overseas – the older one with ADHD/dyscalculia – just kind of a group of things. I would say its mild disabilities. When we were in El Salvador, Rose Likens was our ambassador and she suggested I start a parent-support group, which I did, and I did it at a couple of posts.

We moved back to D.C. a few years ago and got a job working in Fairfax County Public Schools Parent Resource Center, which I can just rave about. If you need services, if you're in Fairfax County, they serve parents of kids receiving special education and they're fabulous. They have a great Web site. And Arja Nadeer (sp) asked me last year if I would come over as a parent for this workshop, which I was thrilled to do, having raised my two boys overseas. And then I recently got a job in the family liaison office. But I'm here today just as "Mom."

JOAN ROONEY: And I'm Joan Rooney. I work here at FSI and I'm a civil servant, but they let me participate so I'm happy about that. I've learned a lot from all of you. I am a single mother. I have two children. I have a 6-year-old boy with significant autism. He won't be going to college, probably, or things like that, but who knows? I just heard there's a new program at George Mason University. But he has significant autism.

And then I have a 15-year-old girl who is in the gifted program at her high school. So I've got, you know, the gamut, as many of you probably have, too, as well. So we're really happy to talk with you about what we've learned about being parents of special-needs kids. All right, and our objectives are, is how to form collaborative partnerships with schools and other care providers overseas.

Some of us were not as collaborative as we wished we were, starting out. And there's a lot of reasons for that. So we're very big on forming collaborative partnerships. We really hope that you manage your stress effectively. Taking care of any children, regardless of if they're special needs or so-called "normal," is very stressful and we want to share some of the things that we have found that have been extremely helpful to us in managing the stress of raising a child with special needs.

And finally, we're going to tell you some of our tips and techniques for raising a child that we've come to through hard experience that we just want to share. And also, please share, yourself, what you've learned because we want this to be an interactive session.

DIANNA ROONEY: "Welcome to Holland."

JOAN ROONEY: So we just want to read this to you and have you listen to this and then we'll get going with our presentation. Do you want to start?

DIANNA ROONEY: I'll start. Okay, "Welcome to Holland" by Emily Perl Kingsley:

I'm often asked to describe the experience of raising a child with a disability to try to help people who have not shared that unique experience understand it, to imagine how it would feel. It's something like this: When you're going to have a baby, it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip – to Italy. You buy a bunch of guidebooks, you make wonderful plans – the Coliseum, the Michelangelo (sic), the gondolas in Venice. You might even learn a few phrases in Italian. It's all very exciting.

After months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later, the plane lands, the flight attendant comes in and says, "Welcome to Holland." "Holland," you say, "what do you mean, Holland? I signed up for Italy. I'm supposed to be in Italy. All my life, I've dreamed of going to Italy!" But there's been a change in the flight plan; they landed in Holland there you must stay.

The important thing is, they haven't taken you to a horrible, disgusting filthy place full of pestilence, famine and disease; it's just a different place. So you must go out and buy new guidebooks and you must learn a whole new language. And you'll meet a whole group of people you never would have met. It's just a different place. It's slower-paced than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But after you've been there for a while and you catch your breath, you look around and you begin to notice that Holland has windmills and Holland has tulips and Holland even has Rembrandt.

But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they've had there. And for the rest of your life, you will say, "Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I planned." And the pain of that will never, ever, ever go away because the loss of that dream is a very, very significant loss. But if you spend your time mourning the fact that you didn't go to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things about Holland.

I think that's a really great reading and it really says a lot. I'm so excited to be here today and I feel energized when I get to talk to other parents. I wish that we had something like this when I started out my journey going overseas years ago – just to be able to share information and talk to people that have great resources.

The first thing I want to tell you – I'm going to talk just as a parent – that's my role today – and tell you what it was like for me raising two boys overseas. It's very different – when you go overseas, remember, you're not in Fairfax anymore. You're not here. It's a totally different experience. You may not find IEPs. You might get good special education services in unusual places – places you just don't expect, which I think Pam addressed.

You need to remember to tread gently. You don't – if you go into an IEP meeting here, you can be armed with regulations and laws and advocate – you can threaten to call your lawyer.

That's not going to work in these private, overseas schools. Before you go, do your homework. And it's all – I like to say, it's really up to you. We have these resources, we have wonderful people. The Web site may say that the Munich International School deals with children with mild disabilities and you get that from the Office of Overseas Schools, but in fact, when you call them, maybe they don't. Maybe they can't take your kid – they're overloaded right now. So it really is up to you. And I say you're the advocate for your child.

Make contact directly with the school – e-mail, phone call, whatever. I think it's amazing what your gut instinct will tell you. If you call a school and you're sitting there – and I've done this – and you're getting knots in your stomach as they're asking you more and more questions, you know, listen to that. I think we all have a pretty good instinct and we know our kids better than they do. Use all the resources that you've found today – the overseas briefing center, the employee consultation service, the office of overseas schools. We have resources, so be sure and use them. And you're really lucky that you've been able to put faces with names so it's not just an e-mail anymore.

As soon as you get to post, I think it's really important to go visit the school and, if you can, take your child with you. And I'll say this a little bit more later, but taking your child with you – giving your child a little bit of control in these transitions – let them pack their own backpack to bring on the airplane when you're traveling, let them have some input – if you're going to go around and visit two or three schools, there's no reason your child can't have a pros and cons list, too, and have a little bit of input into the situation. I think it's never too early to start.

Meet staff at the school, visit the classroom, look at what kind of extracurricular activities they have and what other resources there might be outside the school. Look for online help. I've put together resources for you – and I cheated and got a lot of them from Fairfax County, where I work – the list of homework resources that you can access online are just incredible. So you can find things to help supplement.

JOAN ROONEY: And this is on your CD, too.

DIANNA ROONEY: It's on your CD. And I've got resources – these are just for kids to go online. There are some that are really good. You should look at them first before you put your kid on there. The one called dontbecreepy.com is actually for teenagers with Asperger's so you really want to look at these before you let your kid loose on them. And just, all the Web sites and the resources there are out there. So be sure and use your resources. See what's at post.

And when you get to post, I always say learn the languages, if at all possible. And I know you're wondering why your kid's in an American school, after all, or an international school. But it's amazing how just those few words of German or Spanish with the secretary or some of the staff at school that really might appreciate it – and it's amazing how many people will help you if you show that little bit of initiative.

When you're actually at the school, you've made your decision, be present. Volunteer. Some of you – I know there are tandem couples; I know there are single parent here. It doesn't matter. Go to school events in the evening or on the weekends. Find some way to volunteer and contribute, whether it's sending in cupcakes or, you know, anything you can do. I think a lot of success I've had has been when I've seen teachers informally.

It's not when you're sitting at the official meetings across the table with all your papers and your notebooks, but it's when you see a teacher – in Germany, you'll be out drinking a beer together at a school function, so it's kind of fun – but when you see a teacher in an informal setting and you can really just talk in a casual way where it's not threatening to either the teacher or yourself. And nurture those relationships. Teachers here are not in it for the money, and overseas, they're really not in it for the money. They're in it because they love teaching. And so really pay attention to that and to those relationships. I send notes, send in cookies sometimes. Say thank you.

JOAN ROONEY: Food is always good.

DIANNA ROONEY: Food is always good. Say thank you as often as you can, but really build on that kind of relationship. And let the staff know that you really care about your child. And it sounds simple, but it's amazing how many teachers I've had say, oh, it's so nice that you're really working at home on these issues, too. So I think it's really important to be very present.

When you're at meetings at the school, I think it's important for you to set the tone yourself. Don't just go into – I've gone into meetings and they go around and they tell you all the things wrong with my child. You can change that. And I used to get so depressed I didn't even want to go to some of the parent-teacher meetings, because everything was, "he doesn't pay attention," you know – it just went on and on. So I think you can set the tone yourself, a lot of times.

Take a short bio of your child. Don't talk about just the disabilities; talk about the child's strengths and talk a lot about the child's strengths and what the child can do and how the child can contribute in the classroom. My son's an artist – he's extremely gifted in art, which is not a class that comes up all the time overseas. But he was able to help a lot in the classroom in that way. Bring photos of your child to the meetings.

And one of my favorite books, which I didn't write down on any list, but the Web site is on here, it's called "Wrightslaw." And if you don't know it, you should know "Wrightslaw." They've written a book called "From Emotions to Advocacy." And what I like about this book – a lot of it is about IEPs and legal things, but what I like about this book, there's a whole section in there on working with groups in a school, who you want to be talking to, how to deal with difficult people in a meeting. And I just think it's a really helpful book. So it's called "Wrightslaw," and it's "Emotions to Advocacy."

JOAN ROONEY: They also have a very good Web site.

DIANNA ROONEY: Yeah, great Web site, which is on the list, here. And I mean, they'll say things like, if you get real emotional – I think, if I ask how many people have cried at an IEP or school meeting, I know every hand would go up. So it talks a lot about how you can kind of depersonalize that a little bit and talk about “the student” instead of your child's name. There are good tips in there so I really recommend that.

Some of the barriers to communication are just getting off to a bad start – it might even be with your initial e-mails to the school. It might be – I always say you should forgive people their first few weeks at a new post because you're just under so much stress in general moving that you might just have a misunderstanding at the beginning. So that's one thing that can happen to set you off on the wrong foot.

Emotional responses – the way we feel about our child when we're in these meetings. You could go in with too much jargon. Some of these schools have never heard of an IEP. Go to a British school or some of the little, tiny missionary schools and go in talking about IEPs, 504s, PDS, ATS and see the kind of looks you get. So forget the jargon.

Fear of intimidation – I don't know how many of you have been in these meetings – I'm sure you all have – where you're the parent and there are about 8 other people around the room. And that can really be difficult in a meeting. And cultural differences – and that's something we haven't really talked about but I think it extremely important. The way different cultures feel about learning disabilities – I actually had my son's German-language teacher tell me that he was just doing terrible in the class, he'd been in Germany long enough; why didn't he speak better German?

And I said, well, you know, he has a learning disability. Oh, I thought he was intelligent. (Laughter.) They just do not deal with it the same way we do. She wasn't being mean; it was just culturally, it's not addressed the same way. You would be in a special school already by the time you were in about the fourth or fifth grade there. Germans have a real – in German school, they don't have volunteers in the classroom; that's just not done. So you need to really educate yourself and be aware of some of the cultural differences you might encounter when you go overseas.

When I was posted to El Salvador and my kids were in the upper end of elementary school, our ambassador was Rose Likens, who I think will be coming by in a little while. And she asked if I would consider starting a support group for parents at post. I said, well, I've never done a support group and I have no idea how to do it, but I did start one by just, kind of, making it up as I went along. And we ended up – we had 14 families at that one embassy that kind of came out of the woodwork that had kids with special needs. And some thought their children might have some issues, so it was really a great group.

And I really think that the experts in the room are all of you guys. You know your kids and you know – you have great tips. So if we were sitting here today and sharing tips of what's worked for your child, even with different types of disabilities, if you can take away one thing, you've learned a lot. And I think it's amazing what we can share. You can often find speakers

in the most unusual postings. A lot of these guys come to posts to look at the schools so you can invite them to speak to your group. And the other thing is, keep it really simple.

Order a video, you know. These Web sites will have a lot of information. We had one meeting where we just asked everybody to bring a book that meant something to them, you know, to do with special needs. And it was really fascinating, the books people brought. You can invite school staff to come, either as participants to lead a discussion or to learn a little bit. And I always say with a lot of the schools, sometimes you need to educate the staff, but do it very gently and don't go in just, you know, shoving stuff at them.

Be very gentle. Invite them to come and see a showing. I don't know if any of you have seen the Fat City series by Rick Lavoy. It's priceless. And if you get a teacher to come watch that, it will really make a difference. And ask the school if you can start a living library with videos on the topics. And so there are ways to kind of get in there in a kind of back way. A part that I didn't address last year but I think is so important – and you'll hear a lot about this issue, now – is advocacy – self-advocacy.

The biggest obstacle to your children being their own advocates are us, I think, as the parents. We have to advocate for our children when they're little. And especially overseas, you're the only person they have. So we're really used to protecting them; we're used to going in and standing up for them, whether it's to do with bullies or getting the right seating in the classroom, just to get the services they need.

But then it's time to step back. When they go off to college, if your child is able to go to college, they have to go in themselves and demand disability services. You cannot go to the disability services office and say my child needs this and that; they have to do it. So I think, as early as you can, start teaching your child by giving them choices.

If your child is really shy, and maybe you think they'll never go ask a teacher for information, talk to the teacher ahead of time. Set it up – say my child is going to come ask you to change her seat in the classroom. Work with your child, do a little role playing and send your child in to do that. But it's good to have the teacher, kind of, on your team at the time so your child starts out with some success.

My son, one time – I came home from a workshop and they said for homework, buy all these colored markers and clear plastic box and all these fun stickers, you know – this will get your child doing homework. So I came home and told me son about that and he rolled his eyes, like, oh, Mom! He said, do you want to know what would really work? And I said yeah, what? “If I get a good grade every week, will you buy me a pack of army soldiers?” I said, that's it? He said, yeah. I said okay and we had bucketloads of army soldiers – (laughter) – which he still has to this day.

And you have to change your techniques along the way, but I think the wake-up call for me was, listen to your children; don't think you've got all the answers. They're really smart. They've got a lot of the answers. Just listen. And I think the earlier you start with that, the better. Give them any kind of choices you can and let them participate. Let them look at the

Web sites for children. Teach them about their disability in a kind of age-appropriate way. You know, talk to them about learning to cope with the fact that they're really forgetful, or whatever the thing is.

And I want to put in a quick plug for something. When I worked in Fairfax County, every other year, they do a great thing called Future Quest, which is coming up in November. And it's a transition workshop for kids who graduate high school, and it's not just colleges, but it is universities and colleges that have a lot of great programs for our kids, but it's also other options, too. And it's absolutely fabulous and totally free and it's at George Mason University. So if you Google it, if you have kids that are a little bit older, it's well worth it. Even if they're in, like, 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I would recommend going.

The other thing is that I'm a very big advocate of – after school, my son used to always say, I need my time. And I thought, oh, he's so selfish and lazy, you know. "I need my time." It took me years to realize that what he was saying to me was, I need down-time. School is stressful. For these kids – a normal kid goes to school and they get kind of energized and they run around and they get A's on their papers and they do fine and they come home and they're ready to go.

But a lot of other kids, it takes a lot out of them to get through the school day. The social side is hard, dealing with the school issues where they struggle, it's really hard. So when they're telling you they need a little bit of my time, give them some flexibility. Don't try and work on all their issues when they get home from school. Find what they're good at and think about what their strengths are and think about ways to address that.

Look for local resources in your community. Look for – we found art classes in the German museums when we were in Berlin. In El Salvador, there was no art in the school and my son was creative, so I said, well, I'll start an art class at the embassy. And we had 10 kids sign up. Every one had ADHD, which made for a wild class – (laughter) – and some great artwork. So it's really a nice social group for them, too. And I let my son be the kind of co-leader of the group, which was great for him.

So let them do what they're good at sometimes. Putting him in a tae kwan do class was a disaster. It's another last place. You know, you don't learn to be coordinated by just throwing kids in. I mean, I've heard people say, if your son's not social, put him in Boy Scouts. Well, how do you think that works? You know, it just – you don't just throw them out there and fix them. So find ways that they can succeed when they're not in school.

Spend time together as a family and find a balance. Make time for your other children if you have more than one. Find a way, because you really need to find that good balance in your life. I'm going to talk about what did not work and what worked, and then I'm at the end and you're going to get to relax here with Joan. What did not work is believing what you read. If you read about a school and their wonderful programs, don't just believe it; find out if, in fact, there's still an occupational therapist at post, if the school really can provide what they say they can provide.

Listening to gossip – when you get to posts sometimes, people will talk about a school one way or the other. Again, see for yourself and what’s good for you is not necessarily the same as what’s good for another person. Following the crowd – I was told at one post, well, no embassy kids go there. It didn’t matter to us. You know, finding a place where my son could succeed was what was important.

Having unrealistic expectations – and we deal with that a lot in our office – but going overseas thinking you’re going to get what you get here. If you can go and really think outside the box and be flexible, that will really work well. We had a case in Munich – we were leaving. My son was finishing the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, I guess. He had failed anything to do with math, so physics, of course, he just failed physics miserably.

And the principal, as I was leaving, said is your son going to be a physicist? I said, I doubt it. And he called his secretary and said, just bump his grade up to passing. Now, you’re not going to get that in Fairfax County, I can tell you – or Montgomery County or anywhere here. But that kind of flexibility and having the relationship with the school really paid off. Comparing schools – if you go to your post and start talking about, at my last post, when I was in such-and-such, in Fairfax County, you’re going to have to really get away from that quickly and realize you’re in a different place and take advantage of what’s there.

And then what worked was good communication, doing my research and homework, following my instincts and my gut reaction, being flexible myself. If lunchtime means sitting on the floor in the kindergarten class doing your math homework with an ink pen – you know, whatever it is, just be flexible. And enjoy your children – enjoy your child and enjoy your experience overseas. So that’s it. (Applause.)

JOAN ROONEY: Cool, cool. So any questions or comments or other thoughts that you have from what she said, because she threw out a lot of good ideas.

DIANNA ROONEY: And if any of you ever do want to talk privately or just have a cup of coffee, I am in the family liaison office, so feel free to give me a call or come by.

JOAN ROONEY: Okay. So I’m going to talk a little about some of things that I’ve found that worked and some of the things that we’ve talked about. The first thing I noticed it part of my job here is, I teach a stress management class. And when I started doing that, I learned about caregiver stress. Anybody know about caregiver stress? And I wanted to tell you – and you probably already know this, some of you who have been at this for a while – that those of us who are dealing with caregiving, over the long haul, can – it’s a crisis prolonged without rest. And it can have some bad effects on your health.

I know some of us haven’t – I used to say I didn’t sleep through the night until my son was about five. Can anybody relate to that – you know, not sleeping through the night – all those kinds of things? One of the things that’s helped me a lot is to get into a little bit of relaxation and deep breathing. And we’re actually gong to have, via this DVD, we’re actually going to have an opportunity for us to try this just for a few minutes. How many of you do any yoga or deep breathing or meditation?

DIANNA ROONEY: Welcome to a powerful journey.

JOAN ROONEY: I decided that I was in for the long haul, as you guys are with your children, so I had to sort of pace myself. So this is one thing that helped me. For very little money, you can buy things like this or even CDs at Barnes & Noble and bookstores. And I know they say not to do this while you're driving, but sometimes, that's my only time alone. Can anybody relate to that? That's my only time alone.

But I haven't gotten into a crash, yet. (Laughter.) But it's like unwinding – a way of unwinding and a way of kind of getting centered for my second job, which is taking care of children, when I go home. So that's where I got to. The second thing that helped for me was exercise, which we call the magic answer. How many of you are involved right now in an exercise program of any kind? All right! What do you do, back there?

MR. : I run.

JOAN ROONEY: Wonderful. And does that help your stress level?

MR. : Absolutely.

JOAN ROONEY: Yeah, how about you?

MR. : Treadmill.

JOAN ROONEY: Treadmill, okay. Okay, that's great. Over there, I saw somebody's hand up.

MS. : I jog.

JOAN ROONEY: Yeah, and I bet you look forward to your jogging, don't you? Okay. Whatever you can do to exercise, that will help you feel better and it will help with your stress. So we always call it the magic answer to stress. And find – you know, little things make a big difference. You know, people will say, well, I don't have time. I do it here sometimes, because again, work is the only time that I have where I can exercise. As soon as I go home, I'm with the kids. So find a way, even during lunchtime, to walk around or do something to get you moving.

Relaxation we just spoke about. My son actually goes to yoga with me. He doesn't do any of the moves. He's very good at what they call the corpse pose – just laying on a mat. (Laughter.) But he breathes, you know, and I've asked him – he can't talk very well, but he can type – and I'll say, why do you like to come? And he says, I like to watch and I like the music and I like the – he's getting something out of this. And neurologists will tell us that it doesn't matter whether you're doing it or not; you still get the same benefits.

So he comes with me to yoga. And a lot of times, he claps at the end. You know, he claps at the end and that's what we get out of him. But he always wants to go with me. So he's

actually getting benefit out of it, too and he's a regular member of the yoga class. And it really helps me a lot. So anything you can do to relax, then please do it. Anybody here like to laugh? Okay, what makes you laugh?

MS. : My children.

JOAN ROONEY: Sometimes. (Chuckles.)

MS. : Laugh or cry.

JOAN ROONEY: Laugh or cry. Anybody else? What makes you laugh? Anybody like to tell jokes? Yeah? What else?

MS. : Movies.

JOAN ROONEY: Movies! A funny movie, okay. At some point, I decided that I really needed to laugh every single day for physiological and psychological effects. So at the time, I watched "I Love Lucy" every day. That's a favorite program of mine, too. I knew I needed to laugh every day to kind of keep myself going, so that really kept me going. The next thing is to do something for yourself each week. I know for some of you, that just seems almost impossible, but does anybody here do something for themselves each week that they can count on that they do? Yes?

MS. : I go to church.

JOAN ROONEY: You go to church. So that's your – you really want to be able to do that every week. Okay, yes?

MS. : Reading.

JOAN ROONEY: Read just for yourself, okay. Again, little things make huge differences. If you can get out by yourself sometimes, it's really helpful. Whatever it is for you, have some time each week that you nourish yourself. I think it's very important to, kind of, get through the long haul.

Nurture important relationships. Many marriages and significant relationships dissolve over the stress of raising a special needs child. This is a fact, okay. So it's very important to nurture the important relationships in your life. And don't forget to go on dates or don't forget to go out together. And also, there are places which will offer respite care, if that's what you need, or special needs care, if that's what you need. But get out and do something.

Nurture the important relationships so that those will be there, again, for the long haul – very important and hard to do, I know – hard to do when you're in the thick of it, but important to do. Anybody have a regular date night or regular going-out thing or something you do with your significant? You said no? No! Okay, no. Anybody?

DIANNA ROONEY: We used to find overseas that going out at lunchtime was something we could do. The kids were in school and my husband was busy at night, so he could come home at lunch, though and we could go out.

JOAN ROONEY: That was your time. Have some time that's just yours alone. I think it's really important. And also, your family members will be – at least they were for me – your biggest support, is your family member or your extended family, for that matter. Here's my very favorite thing for all of you. Okay, I want you to watch; this is very important. What are we saying here?

MS. : Don't vacuum.

JOAN ROONEY: Don't vacuum – I like that, I like that. (Laughter.) It's surprising to me how many people don't get help. Now, I know it's a money thing sometimes, but I remember one time when I was really, really struggling and my boss here – I was working here – she said, what is the thing that's hardest for you to do? And at the time, it was the laundry – keeping up with it, keeping up with the laundry.

And she said, find someone to do your laundry for you. I said, really? She goes, just find someone to do your laundry for you. And so I did. And you know, that sounds little, but it made a huge difference in my life at that time, to find someone who did my laundry. And whatever else you can find someone – see, this is why it's so great to be in the Foreign Service, you guys. Sometimes, you go places where you do have help, right? Sometimes not, but sometimes you do and so you have someone to help you.

Because it's like all these other things pile up, pile up, you know. I remember when my son was young and the house was in a particular mess and we were interviewing a new caregiver and he looked at me and he said, nobody in their right mind would work here. It was such a mess! (Laughter.) But we were running around taking care of him so much that we didn't have time to do anything else. So if you can get help – if you can find creative ways of getting help for yourself, I think it's well worth the money.

Things that we learned – and this is, kind of both of us were talking about this stuff, so we wanted to tell you. We talked about guilt earlier today. Heather was talking about it. I think it's an important topic. Regardless of how much I did, and still do, for both of my children, I still think I didn't do enough or I'm not doing enough. Anybody else relate to that? I still feel – now, this doesn't have anything to do with having a child with special needs, by the way. It has to do with raising children and being a parent.

So realize that, on any given day, you're doing the best that you can do. And so kind of, try to let go of the guilt, or the guilt of thinking that you somehow caused this. I think that was a very good, important point that she made this morning. All of us have kind of – depending on the condition that our son or daughter has – we ask ourselves, did I cause this, or was it something I did? And so, you know, kind of try to let go of that guilt, if you can. It's an important thing.

Trust your gut – and I think Dianna mentioned this, too. If you think something is not right, do something about it. My son was in grammar school and I just had a feeling something wasn't right with the teacher. He was in a self-contained autism classroom, which I wouldn't recommend, if any of you have a child with autism. And I went to see him one time at school and I saw a single tear roll down his face – just one tear. And I thought, something's not right here.

And so I went back to watch the teacher and you know, to spend some time there. And it wasn't a good classroom. She wasn't capable or trained to teach those children. And so I reported it and she was – you know, she got put into a better position for her. But if you think something's not right, then trust your instincts, as a parent. You have good instincts. They're built in, so trust those instincts if you think something's not right.

We talked about pacing yourself – you're in this for the long haul. My son is now 6-foot-2 – taller than last time I talked to you – he's 16 years old and I take care of many of his basic needs. I bathe him – he does some of it, but he needs help. I wash his hair. I clip his toenails and fingernails. I do a lot of his care. I also have a caregiver, too, by the way. And I asked my mother, at one point when he was getting taller, I said mom, what am I going to do when he gets so tall I can't take care of him anymore? And she goes, just have him sit down. (Laughter.)

It changed my whole perspective. Because I thought there was going to come a point at which I couldn't do it anymore, and then what was I going to do? But now, he sits down. Because when you're 6-foot-2 and I'm 5-4, something's got to give. Celebrate small successes and know that your children are really – whatever level or whatever they're doing, they're doing the best they can do. They really, really are. Most people are.

So celebrate the small things or the positive things they do – the things they learn how to do or the things they do better. Little things make a big difference. I realized early on – and probably the same thing with you, Dianna – is that ups and downs are natural. So some of us are just closely zeroing in on the progress our special needs child is making. And I don't think anybody progresses like this. We have ups and downs; we have good days and we have bad days and so will your child with special needs have good days and bad days. I think that for me, it was a revelation that now that both of my children are teenagers, that my son, although has significant special needs, is also a teenager. So what does that mean? When you think teenager, what do you think?

DIANNA ROONEY: Hormones.

MR. : Moody.

JOAN ROONEY: Moody. What else?

MR. : Opposition.

JOAN ROONEY: Opposition, hormones, whatever you want to say – defiance. Okay, so try to cull out that piece of development that is absolutely normal for that age that they're at,

you know what I mean? Because we tend to think it's the special need, but it's also that child at that stage of his life – his or her life. So now I realize, oh, he's being defiant and this is normal, and isn't that great? And he's doing it a lot. Okay. (Laughter.)

What else? Forgive yourself and your child for things that go wrong. I can think of, probably, some teachers that weren't so great that my son had and I didn't find out right away. Or something was not – or he was sick and I didn't realize it. He's not able, sometimes, to tell me that he's ill. There are things that haven't gone the way I would have hoped. I haven't been a perfect parent. Once I yelled at him, you know what I mean?

DIANNA ROONEY: Once? (Laughter.)

JOAN ROONEY: No, I'm just saying – I mean, you know, there's been more than once – but you think about these things and you can be very hard on yourself. If you're like me, you can be really hard on yourself for the things that you feel you're not measuring up to. So try to forgive yourself and your child. I think they're doing the best they can do. My daughter, who is completely whatever normal is – again, I say that – is just like, uhhh, about her brother. That's normal, too.

Because I say oh, don't you realize how hard he's trying? But she's a teenager and she's like – she's sick of all this, you know. So that would be another thing I would say, is if you have siblings, please get them into what we used to call sib shop. I don't know if you guys –

MS. : They still have it, yeah.

JOAN ROONEY: Sib shop. Okay, so my daughter, even though she wasn't interested, I would put her in a sibling group so that she could talk about how horrible it was to have her brother, which is normal, by the way. But you know, anyway. So that's a good idea if you have siblings, for your child.

Live one day at a time. Each day is kind of different. It's hard to look ahead – it's really hard to look ahead. Some of the children that Henry was with have done better, have really gotten better. So those of you who have a child with autism know that it can go a lot better – it gets better. And some have not. It's very, very variable. And so you don't know – you don't know what kind of developments are going to happen in the scientific community.

I never would have known some of the things that are available to him now, or available to you now, with your child with special needs, that we never would have dreamt of. The technology is so amazing, that's available, that wouldn't have been available. So what I'm going to say here is, plan for your future but don't worry too much about it because I really think the world is evolving and there are things that we can't even predict that are going to happen that are going to help our children and help us to be able to take care of our children. That's about all I had to say.

(END)