



TRICIA

Tricia began to notice her son, A.J., was experiencing the world differently when he was still an infant. As he neared 18 months-old, the signs she saw in A.J.'s behavior were too much to ignore despite his pediatrician saying that he might simply be developing on his own timeline.

Her maternal instincts told her she needed to take action as he still hadn't said "mama" or "papa" after 18 months.

"He didn't really make eye contact," Tricia said. "He would sometimes respond to his name, sometimes not. He liked to play alone, and he didn't use his toys the way other children did."

That was when the child care center that cared for A.J. during the day, and United Way Ready Children Impact Partner, Brighton Center, referred A.J. to another Ready Children Partner, Autism Community Network, for a Developmental Diversity Assessment—a screener for children under 5 years old to determine signs of autism and/or developmental delays.

After meeting with Autism Community Network and going through their evaluation process, her observations were confirmed: A.J. was diagnosed with autism.

"If you feel something is wrong, don't let it be dismissed," she said. "You're not doing anything wrong. You have to be your child's voice when they can't speak for themselves."

While the diagnosis was daunting, Tricia felt relieved to finally have a plan. "Without that support, we would have been lost," she added.



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The average age of diagnosis for children with autism in the U.S. isn't until four years or older, often setting back a young child's development in the most critical period of cognitive growth. For Tricia, getting support for A.J. at 18-months-old was life-changing. This early intervention has put A.J. on track to succeed in his education and in life. Since having his needs identified early, A.J. has been connected to other services and therapy that are helping him make tremendous progress today.

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“He is so successful and has come so far because of the resources we have received,” Tricia said.

Tricia says one of the biggest milestones arrived as an early Christmas gift for her. Now over 2.5 years old and excelling in his development since getting support, A.J. finally spoke to his mother directly by saying the one word she had longed to hear him say: Mama.

“I just broke down,” Tricia said fighting back tears. “Without those resources that got him the help he needed, I wouldn’t have ever known what my child’s voice sounded like.”

Tricia has discovered her son’s voice, a way forward and most of all, a community that supports her. Her family regularly attends events and programs that United Way invests in through the Ready Children Impact Area, like “Coffee and Connections” support group, “Fam Jams” and holiday assistance programs. Tricia, her husband and their children receive support through the Strong Individuals and Impact Area through The ACN Pathways Program, which provides mental health support for the whole family as they navigate this journey with A.J..

Through these events and programs, Tricia has witnessed A.J. thriving in ways she never thought possible: approaching therapists, standing near other children and exploring social spaces.

These moments also bring her a sense of belonging, easing the emotional and financial stress she experiences as a mother of a child with autism. “To be able to sit down, take a breath, drink a whole cup of water and know your child is safe and happy... that kind of relief means more than people can imagine,” Tricia said.

Her hope for her son’s future is that he grows up knowing he is loved, respected and accepted for who he is. This confluence of organizations and investments between United Way partners and investments from Ready Children and Strong Individuals and Families Impact Areas to Brighton Center and Autism Community Network has brought Tricia’s family a renewed direction as they help A.J. grow and develop.

“Every victory is a huge victory for him,” she says. “We do not do this alone. We do it together.”

With the support of United Way and its partners, Tricia, A.J. and their family have found a clear path forward that they will never have to walk alone.

To learn more about United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County’s work and to hear more stories, visit uwsatx.org.

