

**Episode 38:  
Navigating Back-to-School Choices for Kids With Disabilities During the Pandemic**

**Transcript**

Ellen Stumbo 0:01

Welcome to the *Unexceptional Moms Podcast*. This is Episode 38. And I'm Ellen Stumbo.

Erin Loraine 0:09

And I'm Erin Loraine. And we are talking today about the pandemic and going back to school,

Ellen Stumbo 0:20

Which I think everybody is thinking about this right now.

Erin Loraine 0:24

It's the hot topic.

Ellen Stumbo 0:26

A hot topic. And we have no great advice. We're just two moms who have kids with disabilities, and this is what we worry about, these are our concerns these are our hopes,

Erin Loraine 0:39

Yes.

Ellen Stumbo 0:40

Just so we're clear what this conversation is going to be about. So maybe we can start by talking first about our experience when everybody went distance learning, because Erin, you are a teacher. You were teaching plus then having to basically homeschool your two kids.

Erin Loraine 1:04

Yes, yeah.

Ellen Stumbo 1:06

How was it?

Erin Loraine 1:07

I'm in a little bit of a different teaching situation because I went to it's funny now everyone's talking about this hybrid model. That's what the school I taught for has always done. They call it a college model or university model school. And so all of my kids went to school two or three days a week, and then we're home the other days doing assignments that I assigned for them. So it was just a small private school. So I wasn't dealing with the large amount of work and transition that other teachers had to deal with. But regardless, it was challenging. My girls, obviously can't be just left alone while I go do online classes. They have to have childcare and so I was very blessed that one of my in home respite providers is also part of a school district.

And so she wasn't working and she was able to come. And she was there while I taught but I was there were many days between my teaching, teaching the girls, not to mention everything went virtual. So virtual doctor's appointments, virtual behavior therapy, appointments, virtual everything. There were days that literally I woke up in the morning and until well into the afternoon, I jumped. I would do zoom call, teach my girls for a little while, zoom calls, zoom calls, zoom call, phone call, like it was all day long. It was something I hope to never do again, and I very likely will.

Ellen Stumbo 2:54

Yeah, yeah.

Erin Loraine 2:56

I did quit my job. So that was pre-pandemic, I had known that I was going to leave my job, just because it was a lot with my girls. So I will not have that factor coming into next year. And that has taken some pressure off of me. But still it was an intense spring.

Ellen Stumbo 3:17

But you bring up a really good point because I think there's a lot of parents that are finding themselves in a situation where they're saying, "We already tried this. It really didn't work. So either one of us has to quit their jobs so that we can help our kids learn from home." But not everybody can wing it. There are people who are single parents, and there's no single parent, who can quit their job to be home with their kids.

Erin Loraine 3:43

And there's not something we can do easily. Let me tell you,

Ellen Stumbo 3:47

Right, you have had to find other ways to bring some income into your home.

Erin Loraine 3:52

I've gotten very creative.

Would you like me to say what I do? You want to share? I don't want people to think that I'm like doing something illegal.

Ellen Stumbo 4:04

Yes, you should tell everybody how you're making money.

Erin Loraine 4:11

Without having a good deal, I do make jokes about it, but I started donating plasma, because I can help people. It makes a little bit of money and quite frankly, it's a whole hour that I get to be by myself. So I am donating plasma just to bring in a little extra. Nothing illegal!

Ellen Stumbo 4:35

And Erin is a huge proponent because she'll post on Facebook, "Here you can donate plasma, here's a coupon so you'll make a little bit extra even."

Erin Loraine 4:44

Yep, yeah.

Unknown Speaker 4:46

A lot of families are in that situation, if especially you depend on two incomes. And what happens because, as school begins, there's everything. There's from schools going back full time. You have schools, they're doing only distance learning. And there are schools that are doing the hybrid model.

Erin Loraine 5:10

And here's the other factor, Ellen, is regardless... okay, so we'll talk about this in a bit, but my school has made the decision to go back full time. Regardless, I don't know how I could work, because here's the truth, the chances that we're going to cut back down to online at some point in the year are about 99% at this point, I think, right, if not more. But besides that, every cough, every sniffle every everything that used to just be, "It's a common cold, or it's allergies," is now going to be a sign of Coronavirus and our kids will be home all the time. All the time. I don't know how I could have worked, even if it was a full time school situation,

Ellen Stumbo 5:56

Right? And we're not even going to be touching on the anxiety that even the pandemic brings up to our kids. But you have to consider that there's going to be a lot of anxiety for everybody. I mean, we're already high anxiety, but then even going back to school, like you said, the sneeze, the sniffle, the cough, which now it is going to be very overwhelming for everyone involved.

Erin Loraine 6:26

Yeah.

Ellen Stumbo 6:27

So, what is your district planning on doing right now?

Erin Loraine 6:35

So our district is going back full time. And a number of our surrounding districts are as well. I have to admit I'm a little surprised by that, but that is currently their plan. I'm also not going to be surprised if that changes even before we start school, so I don't know I'm prepared for whatever.

Ellen Stumbo 7:02

And are they going to require a mask wearing?

Erin Loraine 7:07

Yes. I actually just talked to one teacher today that asked how we're doing with mask wearing. And Oksana wears a mask very, very well. I don't think there'll be any problem with her. The nice thing about Oksana is she has a full comprehension of what this is and what's happening. Where Anya is like, no clue. Absolutely no clue what's happening. Just knows that her life changed. And so mask wearing for her has been a lot harder. We've slowly transition to it. And we're to the point now where we can at least get through running an errand and having her keep it on even though we have to remind her a few times to keep it on her nose because she doesn't want to, but I do too quite frankly, I want to pull it down and go [breathe].

Ellen Stumbo 7:58

Yes, it does feel like you can't breathe, although we can. So currently, as we are recording this for people who don't know, it's a Wednesday, I'm in Minnesota and the governor is not going to say anything until Thursday. However, I have heard rumors that our school district is planning on doing a hybrid model, however that would look like, so we actually just finished doing the extended school year the summer school on Thursday and I did ask Nichole's special education teacher, and she said even in her classroom, although she only has a few kids, she doesn't have a big room. So she said she would even do a split class where she would, you know, have three or four kids at a time. And of course you have all the sanitizing, all those things, and the mask wearing. I also have a child, well two of my girls who will wear a mask if they have to. I don't think that Nicole could handle it all day. I think she would for small periods of time. We've had a couple of doctor's appointments that we had to go to and she wore a mask. She doesn't love it. She complains about it the whole time. She does keep it on, but she lets you know that she doesn't like it. And honestly we have been very secluded because she is immunocompromised. So we have really not gone to very many places at all. So I don't feel like I have done a very good job at preparing her to wear a mask. However, there's also the issue that because she is immunocompromised, even if there's a hybrid model, I don't think that we will send her to school.

And I hate that for her because she needs to be around other kids and she's social. yet at the same time, she's a homebody, so even now when we talked about it, because we talked about this with all the girls, my oldest, she's starting High School and she's like, "I absolutely want to go to school, if that's going to be an option," which makes sense, but my two kids with disabilities have loved being at home. So as hard as the distance learning was for me, I feel like my kids thrive, even speech therapy is going so well. Doing telehealth.

Erin Loraine 10:30

Oh, interesting.

Ellen Stumbo 10:32

Yes, yes. Which surprised me. But I think for Nichole, the place where she's most comfortable that she feels that she can be the most herself is home. So to sit at the kitchen table and do speech therapy, she'll do it and even the speech therapist has said that she has a few kids who have done better doing telehealth and she is one of those kids. Now she does want to see her teachers, she loved it every time she had to Skype or zoom with her special education teacher,

she likes having those connections. We also have a school district that provides iPads for every single one of their students, and they were able to move some things to become apps so that they can work and do app, you know, work through their app. So that does make it a little bit more manageable. And for Nina, who I thought would hate having to be home, she thrived. And it was the best IEP that she ever had was her distance learning IEP.

Erin Loraine 11:46  
That's interesting.

Ellen Stumbo 11:47

It is really interesting. I think as a parent, I don't think I recognized the anxiety that a regular school has provided to her as a disabled student, as the only kid in a wheelchair, and how that impacts her socially, emotionally. I mean, it's really that relational aspect. So I think just being able to relax that way was super good for her. And also because I was like, "We are not doing anything extra, we're only doing what we have to do." So we went from her having six classes, to only having four classes, only the four classes that she really needed to do. And again, every district, every teacher is different, but in our district, all the teachers pre recorded their lessons. So the kids could log in, watch the lesson, pause, take notes, go through what they needed to do. And then the teachers just had open hours so you could sign up to do a zoom meeting. So she did, she zoomed with every single teacher, and they went through all the material, everything that she needed to do. And she had that one-on-one help directly from the teacher, which she had never had that type of access to any teacher before. Because the school day is full, right? And because during class, the teacher is teaching their class, so they can't just give her 30 minutes, 45 minutes, just her. It's impossible for their schedules, and it wasn't possible for her schedule. But now suddenly, she did have access to them. And with the understanding that she won't be able to get all the assignments that a typical student is going to get. So how many does she needs to do? Or what are the accommodations that she needs? What are the modifications? How can they help her? So it was really, really great for her and she is so afraid to lose that, she's like, "No, if I can keep doing this, that's all I want to do."

Erin Loraine 14:00

That's so interesting. And you hear those stories sometimes. I can't say we had the same experience. My girls, you know, Oksana handled the whole thing beautifully. But they thrive in the school environment. And yeah, no, I love that. But yeah.

Ellen Stumbo 14:24

But if a school goes to the hybrid model, the teachers are not going to be recording their lessons. And I think this is also why it was really good, because for kids who take longer to process things, they need to listen to things a couple of times. So when you're in class, maybe you listen to your teacher teach and give the lecture or you know, whatever style of teaching they have, let's say it's a lecture. So you can listen to a 10 minute lecture with the material that you're supposed to learn. That's it, that was presented and you absorb it, but now my daughter has access to it on her iPad and because it's recorded, she can listen to it once, twice, three or four times, as many as she needs to, so that she can absorb the information because of the

processing time. So that's why it was good. But again, if we go to a hybrid model, I don't think the lessons are going to be recorded. Right? They're going to again be teaching to all their students. So then there's that piece with that I have to help her. It's sitting by her one-on-one for both my girls. Same for you. So when you have more than one child who needs that support and help... and not even kids with disabilities, there are kids without disabilities that need that one-on-one support?

Erin Loraine 15:47  
Oh, without a doubt.

Ellen Stumbo 15:48  
It's so different, and how do you as a parent, deal with your own mental health and then manage schooling for your kids and their mental health as well.

Erin Loraine 16:01  
No. And you know what the truth is? Mental health is a big discussion that needs to be had surrounding this pandemic. You know, for us and for our kids. And that's actually something when I had one of my principals call me just to check in on us that I said, "My girls need to be in a school setting." Anya, again, has zero comprehension of what's happening and she is a mover and a shaker. She doesn't do well just sitting at home. So this has been really challenging for her. And Oksana would happily sit home all day but then see the problem we have with that is...

I'm trying to think how to say this and maintain...

She... struggles... when she's not okay. I mean, I think everyone knows she has a schizophrenia diagnosis. So she just struggles when she's not connected to people continually she starts then to sink into worlds and places that aren't real more and more often, and we're really starting to see that become an issue the longer we go where she is home all the time.

Ellen Stumbo 17:28  
And, I think for some kids also the structure that school provides is very necessary for their mental health but even for their.. well yeah, their mental health, right, your stability but the predictability of the routine, the clear expectations and, and also to have people outside of your parents or whoever you live with, having those other voices and other people investing in your life is very much a need. Not just a want.

Erin Loraine 18:12  
and a lot of what we're talking about here, mental health wise, it's not disability exclusive. Every family is feeling this. No matter what ability level your child has, every family is feeling it. Every parent when I say, "I'm exhausted because I just want some time to breathe." Yes, every parent is feeling that they might not be parenting children with the level of needs that I have, but they're feeling it.

Ellen Stumbo 18:45

It's the first time that as parents of kids with high needs that we feel like, "Oh, now you'll get it. Now you'll get what that's been like." But I think that's a very good point. Like there is no break and honestly, there's no break for the kids from us!

Erin Loraine 19:01

No, you're absolutely right.

Ellen Stumbo 19:03

Yeah, I mean, it's both ways. It's not just us as the parent, "I just need a breather." I think it's our kids also, "I just need a breather. I need to be away from that." And especially my girls are in middle school and high school, but it's such an important stage in life for friendships. It really is and to have those connections. So my oldest is constantly saying, "Can I get together with so and so?" I'm like, "Okay, who are they seeing? Are they actually in quarantine?" "Well, they're only seeing his neighbors and his friends." Like, sorry, you can't see them. And it's so hard to have to say that. Because there's that desire for connection outside of family. And listen, we are the most boring family. We don't go anywhere and we don't do anything. But I think it's gotten to the point of feeling like, at least before we had the option to do something, but now we don't. So I think that's what's really rough. And as well as my kids managed it at the beginning. I think it's getting to the point where it feels like it's been since March since we've seen other people. That's a really long time. And while I have two kids who are fine with it, I have one kid who's not, and she's finally starting to feel that. Now, I do worry about the anxiety of kids going to school. Let's say that their teacher gets sick. I mean, that's also...

Erin Loraine 20:37

It's lose, lose, right? It really is lose-lose.

Ellen Stumbo 20:42

Yes. I recently talked to a friend who has a child who is very immunocompromised since birth. I mean, they've had the protocol that a lot of people are doing now that you come home, you know, change your clothes, immediately you shower, you scrub and that's always been their life. And they actually pulled their child from school before the school closed, I believe. Just a couple of days, they kind of saw the science and they were like, "We we can't risk this." But now, they are considering most likely sending him to school and she was saying that she does like the safety guidelines that the school has. So they're creating those pods. Have you seen pictures of the pods now in schools, what that looks like? Like if you went to an office space and you know how everybody has a cubicle?

Erin Loraine 21:37

Yes, yes, they are clear plates of Plexiglas.

Ellen Stumbo 21:40

Yes, like a plexiglass or even I think like with clear shower curtains and PVC. I mean, the teachers are getting so creative, because if you keep these desks, six feet apart, really you can only have so many. So is there any way that you can create a smaller space and still have

everyone protected, right? So if everybody's wearing a mask, and you have those PVC, and she was saying that it's a situation where her child is only one of three or one of four. That's it.

Erin Loraine 22:11

That's where we are.

Ellen Stumbo 22:13

Yes. And, they are not going to be going into other classrooms. And that's just, they're just going to have to stay in one classroom. And I think it's so hard. This pandemic is so hard for inclusion, and to get, you know, our kids to be included. I feel like this is creating a little bit of extra segregation. Yet, we're trying to be safe. I mean, there are so many issues to consider here. So anyway, she feels like the school has a very good handle on things. Of course, they've always been careful because of her child. And they're doing these little pods inside the classrooms with the kids wearing the face masks. The teachers wearing the facemasks, they're going to be eating there, so their lunch is going to be there. And I can't remember if she said it's going to be a full day or just a half day. But you know, from the parent of a child who is immunocompromised and really having conversations with the child as well.

Erin Loraine 23:18

And the truth is, this is a time when having your kids in a self contained classroom is a little bit of a benefit. Because I have that situation with both girls and both girls are going to have teeny tiny classes with very few people there. They can really control where they are in the school and all those kind of things. And so I also feel very confident in what our school is doing.

You know, I wonder if we should have said this at the beginning, but I'm just going to throw it in now. Have you seen the little things that people are posting on Facebook that are like, "No matter what a parent says, like, I'm sending my kid back to school. I'm not sending my kid back to school. The answer is, 'You are such an awesome mom, that was a hard decision to make.'"

Unknown Speaker 24:02

Yes, absolutely. I think for most of us parents, in general, all parents, but for us who need to think through maybe a little bit more issues because of kids who can't tolerate masks, whether kids on the spectrum, who have sensory issues or even true medical conditions that prevent them from wearing a mask or whatever it is like, we have to be extra careful. I don't know one parent who is making decisions just because, or even just because, "I can't handle the kids any longer, they have to go to school." I haven't heard anybody saying that.

Erin Loraine 24:48

No, not at all. And every family has to look at so many factors about their individual situation in their individual school, in their individual classroom, in their individual lives. And weigh those factors. So...

Ellen Stumbo 25:02

And I've talked to a friend who's disabled and we've talked a lot about mental health as well. And for him, the the lack of the social interactions is pretty detrimental. And I feel like for some kids, that's, that's very true. That's real. The social interactions are so needed. Now, I struggle to understand how we're gonna keep younger kids apart. Or disabled kids who don't understand.

Erin Loraine 25:45

Yeah, yep. I know.

Ellen Stumbo 25:49

It is. It's going to be so hard because I think Nicole would understand it a little bit, but I think she would feel sad. I think, even though we talked about it, there will be part of her that would feel like why is my teacher staying away from me? Why can't I get together with my friends? And also, as a side note, there are kids who understand it very well. But if you have a child who needs help with their personal needs, you're gonna have to have a face-to-face interaction. You can't keep someone away from your child.

Erin Loraine 26:29

No, not when you have a child who needs toileting assistance, who needs feeding assistance.

Ellen Stumbo 26:36

Yeah, whatever it will be. And again, you have parents that are feeling like that is the only reason I feel like I can't send my kid to school because of their immune system, right? So they understand they could do it very well. I heard of someone who got approved by the school to go back for their child because she is going to be doing that personal care. But they had to go through this approval. And of course, it is a unique time. We've never been through a pandemic like this. So she was approved for that. Well, not everybody can do that. Right? If you had a job, you can't be there with your kid. And that's another thing, some people are gonna have to send their kids to school because of their job. Because they can't not work.

Erin Loraine 27:31

Right? Absolutely. Absolutely. I know.

Ellen Stumbo 27:36

And this is where we say this is a podcast where we have no advice. We're just talking about our reality about what this pandemic is going to look like for us. Now there are schools that are starting in like two weeks.

Erin Loraine 27:50

Four,

Ellen Stumbo 27:51

Yes, I mean, I can't imagine the anxiety as the parent thinking this is happening really soon. I'm already anxious about it. And we still have until the beginning of September.

Erin Loraine 28:06

Yeah, I know. Yeah. And I've got two going into college too, which is a whole other interesting.... so I got one going into his senior year and one into his freshman year. And so we just did orientation for the freshmen. And it was interesting hearing, and I feel so confident in both schools and the creative ways that they've come up with to keep these kids safe, but also still let them have a college experience. I feel good about where they're headed. But it's a whole... it's a whole nother thing. You know?

Ellen Stumbo 28:46

I am not looking forward to those days as it is, let alone if this was the right of the pandemic. So this makes me think about the students that were in the transition program, or those who are currently in the transition program, because I feel like sometimes that's an age group that maybe gets overlooked a little bit. Because I was talking of a friend, and this was her child's last year in the transition program, and then it ended abruptly in March. Well now they don't get to go back next year. So there's all that training that was lost, but also because we're still in pandemic, there's nothing for their child to return to, to have skills to keep doing that job training. And even the students coming into it right, like now you've graduated from high school, you're supposed to go into the transition program. What do you do with that? Those things are also going to look so different.

Erin Loraine 29:51

Absolutely. Absolutely. And when you talk about transitions in general, I have a friend whose daughter is going to high school. None of those teachers know her. And she has medical conditions that make it so she has to go online. And it's a special education situation and none of the teachers there know her. How do you educate a child -- like I feel for these teachers-- how do you educate a child that you don't even know? Virtually?

Ellen Stumbo 30:27

Right. And I know, there's a lot of parents that are doing homeschooling just because it's easier to have the education in your hands and you set what you're going to do when you're teaching, which I understand and it does make perfect sense to me. And there are lots of virtual academies that are seeing a huge click or more people signing up to do it. Because it's set up to be better. I do think this would be a great time for most school districts to look at those virtual schools. I know in Minnesota at least we have two that are public schools, but they are virtual schools. And I feel like this is the time to learn from how they do it right and learn the way that they're teaching. Because you're right, a new teacher, for a child who has an IEP, who needs support, how do you do it?

Erin Loraine 31:24

I know, and having homeschool two boys, I can tell you that those parents are right. Sometimes it's easier to just do your own homeschooling than to be restricted by the guidelines and the boundaries of what the school has. So many different options for parents, and it's, it's challenging and it's overwhelming, and it's scary and and not just for us, but for the teachers out there. You know?

Ellen Stumbo 31:57

Yeah. So maybe As we leave people, as we say goodbye, we can say to all the parents, "Whatever you're doing, we know that you thought really hard about it, and you're making the right choice for your kid."

Erin Loraine 32:13

Without a doubt, without a doubt.

Ellen Stumbo 32:15

Maybe that's what this whole podcast was about. We just figured it out as we're wrapping up.

Erin Loraine 32:20

Yeah. And quite frankly, both of us could get off of this call and something could happen that makes us change our mind about what we're doing.

Ellen Stumbo 32:28

Absolutely.

Erin Loraine 32:29

This is ever changing. It's ever changing.

Ellen Stumbo 32:32

Yes. And honestly, I do wonder if some parents are going to start doing one thing, you're going to figure out this is really not working, and you are then going to switch.w

Erin Loraine 32:41

Without a doubt. Without a doubt.

Ellen Stumbo 32:43

It is new territory for everybody. And I feel like we're all just winging it, trying to do the best we can.

Erin Loraine 32:49

Without a doubt. Yep. Yeah.

Ellen Stumbo 32:53

So thanks everybody for tuning in. Let us know what you're doing.

Erin Loraine 32:57

Yes, we'd love to hear.

Ellen Stumbo 32:58

Yes. The transcripts and show notes are on [ellenstumbo.com](https://ellenstumbo.com). You should be able to find the episode right on the website. You can even go directly to [ellenstumbo.com/episode38/](https://ellenstumbo.com/episode38/). Also, if you want to support us. A great way to do so is by leaving a review on iTunes or Stitcher. And like we mentioned, we would love to know what you will be doing this coming school year. We hope that you have a great day and we are rooting for you as you make decisions for your kids this coming school year. Have a great day.

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