

Inside: Helping Children with Autism Thrive



## A Lifeline for Families

Giving hope to families of children with autism.

BY BETH TAGAWA

When Mason\* was 18 months old, he could say only one word: "Mama." Even though his father, Sam, suspected something was wrong, Mason's diagnosis came as a shock: autism.

Luckily, Mason's family discovered a unique resource: Stanford's Preschool Autism Lab (PAL). Similar to a traditional preschool, at PAL, young children with autism play, draw, and learn. But they are simultaneously being treated with

behavioral therapies.

What's more, their facial expressions, interactions, and gestures are tracked by cameras, allowing Stanford researchers to analyze the effectiveness of these therapies. Stanford-PAL is one of just a few institutions in the country to combine autism care and research in this way.

"The childhood years are critical," says Antonio Hardan, MD, director of Stanford's Division of

Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, who leads the Stanford-PAL program with Grace Gengoux, PhD. "With early intervention, we can work with kids as soon as a diagnosis is made, which sets them on a path to achieve the best possible outcomes for life."

Hardan also leads the Early Support Program for Autism (ESPA), which helps families after a new autism diagnosis. At this vulnerable time, ESPA's care coordinator shares where and how they can access services. Parents also receive training on basic strategies to assist their children with communication, sensory processing, and more.

Both PAL and ESPA are free of charge.

Since the pandemic, demand for these services has skyrocketed. More than 700 new families are served by ESPA each year, up about 40 percent. And Stanford-PAL's waitlist has grown considerably.

With fewer in-person services available during the pandemic, Hardan says, many patients haven't gotten consistent care, and behavioral problems and other symptoms have worsened.

Hardan seeks philanthropic support to expand the program to more classrooms and to make services even more accessible via video sessions.

In doing so, he aims to help more children like Mason. Sam will never forget the day he picked up his son from PAL, and Mason said four words: "Where is your car?" His first sentence.

"It was so exciting—my wife almost cried," Sam recalls. "PAL really changed my son's life." ♦

\*Names have been changed.

## Couple Advocates for Early Interventions for Autism

"NOBODY IS HELPING ME." "I'm not a good mother." "I feel like I'm losing my child."

Nearly 40 years ago, when Marcia Goldman heard these words from parents of children with autism, the educator knew she had to act. Neither autism nor its treatments were well understood at the time. But Goldman decided to establish a special preschool based on emerging best practices.

As word spread about the students' progress, demand increased. Still, Goldman knew that a single school could do only so much. She wanted to change the system.

Goldman ultimately found a thought partner in Stanford's Antonio Hardan, MD. They shared a dream of giving families the opportunities to help children achieve the best possible outcomes. These dreams crystallized into the ESPA and Stanford-PAL programs, which Goldman and her husband, John, support through philanthropy.

"When a child is diagnosed with autism, parents feel like the clock is ticking to get help, but they often don't get any guidance," Goldman says. "To be able to close that gap for families has been amazing."

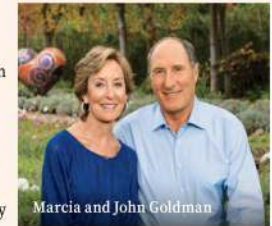
Goldman is also passionate about research being done at Stanford-PAL to improve best practices for treating children with autism, which she has seen evolve dramatically over her decades in the field.

"It's been so validating that the research is proving interactive early intervention approaches work, and that the methods used at Stanford-PAL can be a wonderful model for other programs," she says. "It helps me know that my career has had meaning."

Hardan is thankful to have found a partner in the Goldmans.

"This program would not be possible without the support of John and Marcia," Hardan says. "They have made an incredible difference in the lives of kids with autism."

To learn about supporting autism programs, contact Payal Shah at [Payal.Shah@LPFCH.org](mailto:Payal.Shah@LPFCH.org).



Marcia and John Goldman

To learn more about PAL, watch this video at [supportLPCH.org/blog/lifeline-families](https://supportLPCH.org/blog/lifeline-families).

