

PARENTING DECOLONIZED PODCAST



Ep #46: Consciously Raising Autistic Children & How to Best Support Yourself Through an Autism Diagnosis with Maria Davis-Pierre

Welcome to the Parenting Decolonized podcast. I'm your host, Yolanda Williams, entrepreneur, Conscious Parenting coach and single mom to one amazing toddler. I'm on a mission to help shine the light on how colonization has impacted the black family structure. If you're a parent that wants to learn how to decolonize your parenting, you're in the right place. Let's do this!

Welcome back to the Parenting Decolonized podcast. I'm your host, Yolanda Williams, and today I have with me, Maria Davis-Pierre of Autism in Black. Thank you so much for joining me.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Thank you for having me, I'm really excited to be here.

Yolanda Williams: Yes, okay, so the first time I came across you, Maria, is when you had your first conference. And I was like, wait a minute now, hold up, wait a minute, let me put some – okay. I was like, who is this person, and why are we not friends, and so I shared your conference and I was like, well, you know, we get a chance to connect and we did and I'm so happy about that because as much as I can, I want to highlight black people doing this work, especially within the autism community. So thank you so much for all you do.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Thank you, I appreciate that. Your content, I can even remember the first time that I came across because that's how long I've been following, but everytime I'm reading, I'm like, yes! yes!

Yolanda Williams: Well, thank you for that. Can you just, you know, introduce yourself a little bit, about – and tell folks how you got started with Autism in Black?

Maria Davis-Pierre: Sure. So I am a licensed mental health counselor. I am a therapist, in the State of Florida. I am in West Palm Beach. And my oldest, well, I have three kids, I have a – my oldest is nine and then we have two six-year-olds, twins, boy and girl, and my oldest is autistic. She was diagnosed at 18 months and it was an extremely difficult time trying to get her diagnosis, you know, as I said I am a therapist, my husband is a physician. We were talking with our colleagues in the room trying to get her this diagnosis and you know even though they were agreeing with the fact that, you know, they do believe she is autistic, at that time, they wanted to wait until she was three and it was like, you know, she's – it's too early, I mean, you know, we

don't want to give this diagnosis, but you know, for parents who, you know, are raising a child who is autistic, we know that you need an official diagnosis before certain things can happen.

Yolanda Williams: Right.

Maria Davis-Pierre: So it was like, I'm not going to wait another year and a half when we know that is precious time and that early intervention does matter. So it really was a difficult time trying to get her the diagnosis and what it really led to was me actually sitting in our pediatric neurologist's office for a week, just sitting there and I told him, you know –

Yolanda Williams: Oh!

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah, I told him I'll be here when you open till you close until you give me my daughter's paperwork, and it took him a week and he was like, okay, please take this and get out of here, and I was like, happily!

Yolanda Williams: Please leave!

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah, and then, you know, once I got that I was like, okay, this is it. Well –

Yolanda Williams: Oh my gosh.

Maria Davis-Pierre: All rolling in and then my colleagues started coming to our home and none of them were culturally responsive, none of them could understand how being black would impact the work that they do.

Yolanda Williams: Listen!

Maria Davis-Pierre: And that drove me bonkers, I was like I don't understand how you don't understand that you have to take into account that we are a black family and some things are just not going to work. So I don't care that I'm a therapist, I don't care that my husband is a physician, we are black first and if you don't get that, that's an issue. So I saw that that was, you know, kind of a norm across the, you know, the other black parents I was interacting with and then people just didn't understand how it's truly different for us raising black children in general and then black children who have disabilities and our worries are completely different. Like, I'm worrying about the safety of my child being shot, being killed, you know, these are the worries that are pressing forward in my mind when I'm thinking about my child's disability and no one seemed to understand that or understood that when getting into the white parenting group, so you know, the white counseling groups or that support groups and things like that. They want –

Yolanda Williams: That wasn't the further preference, nor do they care to, if I am being really honest.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: I just feel like because white is the default in their minds, Gia says "hi, hi everyone", that it's not even a consideration and that's where the sort of invisible harm of white supremacy delusion comes in because we are othered, right, so we are not considered until we consider ourselves.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: Yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: And it was just traumatic, you know, just being completely honest, like people don't understand that when my child is experiencing racism in the school system and I then go to the school system to advocate for my child, I too experience that racism.

Yolanda Williams: Yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: It's traumatic to have to kind of as the parent push through that and still try to get my child what they need, you know, parents, especially black parents feel the need to keep going, keep going, keep going, keep going and not acknowledging the trauma that we're feeling or the feelings that we're feeling.

Yolanda Williams: The feelings.

Maria Davis-Pierre: I know like on autopilot.

Yolanda Williams: And listen, that's why this whole podcast exists and that's why you are asked because we have to stop for a moment, and be like "wait a minute, this is not right", and I have a right to these feelings, I have a right to be upset, I have the right to feel traumatized because I am and I have a right to express that and to not have to keep it in, in order for me to be safe because that's a feeling too.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Exactly, and that is really what started, you know, the journey of creating Autism in Black. It was seeing, you know, not only the stigmas within our community that we have to overcome, but also outside of our community that we have to, you know, push through in bootstrap method and, you know, I don't want to do that all the time, you know. So it's really providing support to black parents, raising autistic children and then also training organizations on not how to harm the black disability community.

Yolanda Williams: Yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: You know, as a parent, who – I have ADHD, my oldest as I said is autistic, our son got his diagnosis last year, he is autistic, and his twin, she has ADHD. So you know we are a neurodivergent family and people need to understand our disabilities and, you know, that's truly what motivates me.

Yolanda Williams: Well, thank you so much for recognizing this gap, and like standing in the gap for families like me because I have a similar story with Gia and having to really fight and finally being able to speak to a black female physician, and which is like can you help and she was like, "I noticed it too, so I'll help you", right, because everyone else – nobody else – everybody just told me to wait, just wait, just wait, just like "wait till what?" What am I waiting for? Okay, for her to be five years old and struggling in school because there's nobody that's recognizing that she needs help. So yeah, that persistence unfortunately is needed, right, in order to advocate for our children. There is a definition of ableism, that I have been drawn to by Talia Tia Lewis. Have you heard this one?

Maria Davis-Pierre: No.

Yolanda Williams: It is now outdated. So this is what they said, ableism is a system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence and excellence. These constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence and excellence are deeply rooted in anti-blackness, eugenics and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people in society determining who is valuable and worthy based on people's appearance and/or their ability to satisfactorily produce, excel and behave. You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Um-hmm.

Yolanda Williams: I think it's so powerful because when we start talking about ableism, especially in the black community, it is the basis of all anti-blackness.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: And then you add on, you know, a diagnosis onto that, it becomes extremely difficult to receive the help that we need, to be viewed as humans. To be viewed as people who need support and even within our community, I've had to like in my group, I have had to really check a lot of people on their ableism and not knowing – I can understand ignorance, right, because really being attuned to ableism is a fairly new concept in my opinion.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yes.

Yolanda Williams: Yes. And I – if I can be completely honest, I wasn't until Gia, so I'm thankful that I have this lens now and it wasn't until her that I realized that I have ADHD and it all makes sense, so once I realized that I do. And so I find that in the black community in general, when we are talking about getting support for our children, when you're speaking about disabilities with the black community, what kind of pushback do you receive? Because I know I receive people who are just like, well, that's – I am not going to allow them to use their diagnosis as a crutch. I've read that so many times in my group and it infuriates me because I feel like people don't understand – won't do the work it takes to really understand how these different diagnoses present themselves. Have you – have you gotten that?

Maria Davis-Pierre: We get pushback on everything, you know, and I am sure you know, you know, just the name of my business, you know, I get pushback on that, but it's a lot of pushback when we start talking about diagnoses in the black community because of the stigmas attached to it for us. Now, see, white parents have been hit to the game a long time and they will go and advocate for IEPs and 504 plans for their children as a helpful tool to help them get into college. Black people, you know, and I know I'm speaking in general, but I know we are not monolithic. We see it as something that is going to stop us, something that is going to be like, you know what, I can't put another label on my child and I get that because we already have to deal with being black woman, black man and those alone come with so much, so then to add in the disability, people already count us out just for being black and then add in a disability, and people don't know quite what to expect. Black parents don't know quite what to expect because the information doesn't get to our community, you know. My child, she's not the first to have the diagnosis, she's not the only autistic person in my side of the family, but we are the family that is most vocal about it. I didn't know other people in my family were autistic until I started my platform.

Yolanda Williams: Wow!

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah, yeah, so you know that goes to show, you know, how we view certain things and how we don't quite want to put a name to it because we don't know what that means and it's like, okay, my child is autistic, what does that mean?

Yolanda Williams: Right.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Because what I see on TV or what I hear from other parents, you know, it means this, so what does that mean for my child. Is my child going to live with me forever? Are they going to be able to go to college? Are they going to be able to, yes, and all these things start running through our head and nobody is coming into the black community and giving that support. We don't see it, we don't get it, so we're scared.

Yolanda Williams: Yeah, and we are not seeing so we are seeing these images that are really extreme images, right, of autism in the media. The media does a terrible job.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Horrible!

Yolanda Williams: Of pre-showing the spectrum of autism. It truly is a spectrum that's saying – what is that saying? You meant one autistic person, you've met only met one.

Maria Davis-Pierre: You've only met one.

Yolanda Williams: You really – it's such a spectrum and so the best advice I can give a parent from someone who – I am not autistic, but I do have ADHD and so what I would hope is what I would have wished is that someone had recognized that in me when I was younger and did the research to figure out like how they can best support me with my symptoms, with the things that I was struggling with. Not with what the idea of what ADHD is, right, because that's what people I think are doing. With autism, they are like this is what autism is in the media. So I'm going to treat my child like what the media representation and I want to – I want to figure out how to stop, right, because the media representation is so extreme, so it scares people and so they are not seeing like – you know, I watch my kid play and I'm just like what does your world look like? Because I want to be in it. It looks so much fun. She just has so much fun. Don't get me wrong, I know that there are struggles that she is having. She's not – non-speaking, and so she has to figure out ways to get her needs met without, you know, without speaking. There is other things that she struggles with sensory processing disorder. She doesn't eat a whole lot of different foods, like all these issues, right, but she's like a happy joyful kid because I have done the work to make sure that I'm supporting her specifically, right, her specific symptoms and making sure to advocate for those things, so when you know someone's doing her hair and they are – she's screaming, I'm letting them know she has sensory processing disorder. So if she starts to really get uncomfortable, we have to stop. It's just like recognizing the specific parts of your child and advocating for those things specifically because it looks different on every kid.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Exactly, and that's what I expressed to black parents the most, is that oftentimes, when our children are, you know, given the diagnosis, we begin to focus on the things that they may not be capable of.

Yolanda Williams: Right.

Maria Davis-Pierre: We focus on the needs, right? I like to also look at those strengths because we all have areas where we need support, right, but when it comes – a diagnosis comes into play, we focus so much on, well, they can't do this and they can't do this and they can't do this and then we get caught up in, well, let me do it for him and let me do it for him, which is another form of ableism, you know, but we also have to focus on those strengths because and this is the therapist in me.

Yolanda Williams: Okay.

Maria Davis-Pierre: If we utilize those strengths, it can help in those areas, right. My child, I know is good at being able – my youngest, she is really good at telling me when I'm doing something wrong, she's good at communicating those things to me. So I utilize that to help her advocate for herself in other areas, right, use that strength and we are going to utilize it in other areas so that's also what we should be focusing on with our children. Well, because we need them to also understand that we're not looking at them from one view of, you can't, you can't, you keep because then they're going to pick up on that as well, regardless of where your child is on the spectrum. They have feelings and they're going to be able to feel those things. So we always want to also pour into our children because we know that that world outside of that door is already going to try to steal that black girl joy and that black boy joy. So I find it to try to make it as safe as possible in my house for my children because I know when they step outside that door, it's not always going to be safe for them.

Yolanda Williams: Listen and that is why conscious parenting I think is so important, especially when you have a child with any kind of neurodivergent diagnosis. I mean we are – you know, these are children – really just to me, the way that I've been able to come to terms with everything that's going on with myself and with Gia is that our brain just processes different information differently. That's how I think about it. I do not consider – now, I am struggling as an adult with ADHD because I am – you know, unmedicated. I also am struggling like with just the symptoms, the cluttered and –

Maria Davis-Pierre: Mess.

Yolanda Williams: Go on and all that stuff.

Maria Davis-Pierre: I am right there with you.

Yolanda Williams: But you know, the beautiful part – beautiful part of really understanding like this is what's going on with me and this is what's going on with my kid is that I don't want to feel bad about those things that I thought were failures. I really thought that like why can't you keep, like – you know, you all listen, my house is cluttered. It just is, I – you know, if you go into my bedroom, it looks like the police came in and tossed the place, it's horrible. And it gets to the point, where I get overwhelmed and then I have to do it.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yes.

Yolanda Williams: I have to work myself up to it. It's like that's a symptom of ADHD.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: I used to feel so bad about that, like what's going on, why don't I have the executive functioning to be able to remember things, why don't I have the executive functioning to be able to run this business in a certain way? I really – I did a strength test and all of the executive functioning strengths were at the very bottom, all of them were at the bottom. My number one strength is futuristic thinking.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Mine too.

Yolanda Williams: Yes? So if you – but if you look at our businesses, that reflects that. It reflects our strength and so I have to really contend with am I going to focus on my weaknesses? That I can't control, right. I can't control how my brain functions. I can help with the symptoms by trying to, you know, come up with some systems and that kind of stuff. I can't control those things. Or am I going to focus on what – how – what my brain does best? Right. And so understanding my strengths, understanding your children's strength, that's a – man, that's so empowering. It really helps you to see them in a different, like, every frame, that behavior, that may be triggering you because if you will get triggered by some of that behavior – and listen, Gia in her pool parties, the diapers –

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah, that was the age. That was the age, but yeah.

Yolanda Williams: That's when you – that's when – that conscious parenting had to really come into play and sometimes I failed. Sometimes, I yelled and I was through tantrums because I was so like triggered by it all, this is disgusting.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah, and it's the reality.

Yolanda Williams: Yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: I mean and we don't like to give our self grace to know that we are not perfect. There's going to be times when we fail.

Yolanda Williams: Yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: And we have to give ourselves the grace in knowing that, okay, well, you know what? This is that moment – I can create a new moment from this, I can apologize to myself.

Yolanda Williams: Apologize, always.

Maria Davis-Pierre: I cannot tell you how much I apologize to my children.

Yolanda Williams: And the day (indiscernible) (00:20:33).

Maria Davis-Pierre: I like regulation, I am a therapist who has to constantly check and make sure that I am regulating my emotions because it's very difficult for me because of ADHD.

Yolanda Williams: It is for me is ADHD and trauma, you know, before we got on the podcast, where Rae and I were talking about my post that I created over the last couple of days that talked about privilege and gentle parenting. Now, I don't call myself a gentle parent for this reason, because I want to focus on me. I want to focus on me being conscious, and in order for me to do that, I have to really be cognizant of my trauma, my ADHD symptoms, right, like my – like how struggling with money is going to affect my mood, that consciousness is what's going to help me be a better parent. It doesn't mean that I'm always doing well, I'm not. I'm just not and I'm very transparent about that because I want folks to understand, you will mess up, it doesn't mean that your child is to be completely messed up because of it. The best thing you can do when you rupture is to repair and show them that you are this human being that messes up and not this infallible God that most children think that parents are. Humanizing yourself and then it then helps to humanize them.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: When you have grace for yourself, it helps you have grace for them. You can't give your kid things you don't give yourself people.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Right.

Yolanda Williams: And so I'm never going to be like, oh, this is so easy, all you got to do is count to three and absolutely not yell. I am not one of those people that's going to give you a bunch of tactics, I don't think Maria is – either it's like, no, what is going on underneath the surface that we need to address, right?

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah, and that's what we need to be doing as parents, you know, especially as black parents because we know how the cycles generation to generation have impacted us and what we want to do differently, right, and it's hard for a lot of our parents, our grandparents to acknowledge their own shortcomings, and it's why we have grown up the way we have and we want to do that differently for our children. So for me especially, I acknowledge to my children, hey, you know, I know I was wrong in that and I apologize that what I did impacted you in that way and we have a conversation around it, you know. My children are human beings, they have

opinions, they have, you know, voices that they want me to hear and the least I can do is listen to that. The very least – I mean like they have opinions, as I – it boggles my mind how we think that children have no opinions and they turn 18 and they are not allowed to have opinions. What about all those other opinions, you know. So I make decisions, you know, me and my husband, we make decisions, but we always do have our children's input because they're the ones that have to live with the decision in some instances, especially when I'm talking about accommodations and schooling, what's working for them and I'm not there. So if – and it's not me so if I'm saying, "okay, well, this is going to work for her" and she's like, "no, I don't like that", then guess what it makes no sense in having it just to have it. So check in with them, you know, and see what is going to be helpful. See what is working, observe the behavior and see if this is going to work and how we change that, you know. A lot goes into advocating for our children and we just have to acknowledge that and take it on as another role in parenting, you know, especially when we're advocating for our children who have disabilities.

Yolanda Williams: I want to ask you about parents who are, you know, struggling with their own dysregulation, with their own stuff, whether they would be neurodivergent or neurotypical. What advice that have – you know, children with autism or other disabilities, what advice can you give them to help them regulate in the moment, so their child does something like you know how to pool party or another time Gia threw all of the toilet paper into the tub during the pandemic when people were all hoarding toilet paper! You know, we laugh about it now, and she now (indiscernible) (00:25:05).

Maria Davis-Pierre: And my husband threw a hundred rolls of toilet paper away during that time and it was by accident and it was a struggle for me! It was hard. So we had things.

Yolanda Williams: What advice can you give to help these parents like, in the moment, what do you suggest?

Maria Davis-Pierre: You know, there are many things that I would suggest and understand that, you know, in these, you're not always going to get it right, but the first thing is to stop and take a moment before you react. A lot of times we see and then we react and then we think about it later. Put that thinking before the reaction, so that you're able to not in that moment, do something that is going to be impactful to your child. Like, we would see that and start going to yelling and, you know, some people would, you know, go into spanking or disciplining and things like that. But stop and think before you react. Because sometimes, our reactions are truly not based on the behavior that the child is displaying, but on everything else that has to go on. "Oh, now I got to do this", "oh, now I got to go and do this", so we're thinking about us in that moment.

Yolanda Williams: Right.

Maria Davis-Pierre: So my – one thing is always take a pause. Sometimes, we're not able to take that pause. Sometimes, we go straight to reaction. Take that pause when you are realizing that

you're in it. A lot of times we realize that we're in it and when you are like, okay, I am already in it, then we just go full wrong.

Yolanda Williams: (indiscernible) (00:26:38).

Maria Davis-Pierre: Right, I mean just give it that good old (indiscernible) (00:26:41), you know, you can pause, you can take that pause in that moment still, and be like you know what, I need a timeout, I need a break, you know, I can't tell you how many times I am like, okay, let me just take a minute for this and then I will come back and address it later. You know, let me calm myself before I had this talk with you. You know, a lot of times, we think in that moment, we have to have the conversation. We can put a post-it note as I like, I mean put a post-it note on this and I'll come back to it when I can handle the conversation because I'm going to say, I know me and this, I'm speaking on me personally, I will say a lot of things in the moment because I'm angry or mad or upset that I really don't mean, because I just want you to feel what I'm feeling. I know that about me, so I know that, okay, let me take a pause and then I am going to come back to it. These are skills that you can use, you know, acknowledge them. That's one of the hardest things for parents to do, is acknowledge our own emotions. We are like, okay, no, can't cry, can't be sad, can't do this. No! Your feelings are your feelings and it's okay to feel them. It's the behaviors that may come with it that may complicate things.

Yolanda Williams: Right.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah, it's nothing wrong with being sad.

Yolanda Williams: Being mad!.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Being mad, being angry, being frustrated, being overwhelmed, grieving.

Yolanda Williams: Yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: You know, people act like grieving is the worst thing in the world. What are you supposed to do when you have a loss?

Yolanda Williams: Yeah. And when I was just talking about loss and I almost guessed that during this time of COVID, we are grieving a lot. I grieved a happy hour yesterday says (indiscernible) (00:28:30) an hour, I missed hanging out with adults, I have missed to hug my friends, you know, like, I have missed my life. Now, don't take me wrong, I enjoy being at home now, but I think COVID made that more of a thing, well, I am just – my world, just like got, you know, I am just in the house. But before, you know, I was going out, and I was having fun and I was like, I still had to (indiscernible) (00:28:49) I have to grieve that, because otherwise, you internalize those feelings.

Maria Davis-Pierre: And it comes out. Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: Like that will come out some later. So how are you managing when they come out if you're not even managing when they go in.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah, yeah, and that's, you know, the topic of something else I am practicing, self-care and we think of self-care because social media and the media have made it to seem like something that is out of reach and that's why I'm so passionate about black parents having and making time for themselves and not thinking that self-care is just a vacation on some Caribbean island that I can go and spend a week. No! Self-care is about – it's that, you know, it can be that, trust me, but it's really truly about your mental health as well, you know, taking intentional timeout to check in with yourself, check in with your emotions, see where you are and acknowledging that and giving yourself the grace in that moment, hey, you know what, this is really stressing me out, hey, you know, I'm really sad about this that happened and knowing that it's okay and it doesn't make you less than, you know, so taking that time out for yourself intentionally throughout your day and doing check ins with yourself. We cannot raise human beings – healthy, happy human beings if we can't do that for ourselves. If I can't emotionally regulate or if I can't acknowledge my feelings, then having that expectation for my children is kind of out of reach because I want to be displaying what I'm doing –

Yolanda Williams: Yeah, you want to model it.

Maria Davis-Pierre: They can do it. Well, you know, and I just wanted to say, you know, as someone that struggles a lot with self-care, being a single mom, being a work from home mom, sometimes I don't get a break, like that's where the word "intentionality" comes in.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: It is, first of all, we know that you know community care has to be a part of self-care and if that doesn't exist, it makes things infinitely harder. With that understanding, I have to seek out weird times in order for me to get a little bit of self-care, right, so when she's at school – it's this where the privilege part comes in, right, so I will take, I will drop her off at school and some time before I start to work, I will get back in bed and do like my morning, I call it spiritual hygiene routine, where I meditate, I pray, I journal to get my mind right and get things out of me and set the intention for the day, and before I close my eyes, I'll do a meditation. She will sleep by then. And so I am able to like do it then or when I am in the shower, you know, sometimes, I will get in there and just cry, right.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: Right? You know, just to get the tension and the pressure out of my body. So if you are finding yourself where you're, you know, in a one-parent household or even a two-parent household, that's struggling, you are finding it impossible to take care of yourself and find intentional time for yourself. You just have to look at like there's breaks, there's times where you're watching TV and don't get me – I feel like TV –

Maria Davis-Pierre: That's my self-care, I watch a lot of reality TV.

Yolanda Williams: I do not! I watch a lot of old TV. I am a problematic fave of Roseanne and if you come over here, the 90s Roseanne is probably playing on that, or Star Trek: The Next Generation. That's what I do, I zone out in order for my brain to shut off, right and then, but I realize I have to intentionally use my brain to help me through traumatic times, being able to parent with intentionality, parent consciously, because folks like, you know, coming from a traumatic background, having the experience, abuse of my own childhood and then going on to abuse relationships in my adulthood, that doesn't go away just because I birthed the kid!.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Not at all.

Yolanda Williams: It doesn't go away. So we have to acknowledge like there is – there are these things that will pop up, that we have to work through, that make this type of parenting harder, not impossible, but harder.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: And (indiscernible) (00:33:07) that thing is how we help each other move around the roadblocks because if we just pretend like they're not there, folks are going to keep hitting these invisible roadblocks and stop trying. That was always my intention to say, like, hey, what is the root, what is the cause of this feeling, and how do we help you through it, and sometimes it's self-care, sometimes it's a new job, you know.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: It could be, yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Giving that acknowledgment to what you're feeling is self-care. You know, acknowledging that I don't always have to be happy, I don't always have to put on this front that everything is okay, especially for black parents because we get caught up in that whole stigmata of strong black parent, strong black woman, strong, strong, strong! You know, we are not strong everyday and that's okay. Personally, for me, I don't want to be strong every day, I want to acknowledge those other feelings and not feel that I have to put a show on for the world, you

know. That just continues to lead to, you know, the oppressive system that we are in, you know, I want to acknowledge that, hey, guess what, this sucks and I don't like it.

Yolanda Williams: And my feelings are valid, because it does.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: Right? So the fears that we have as black parents as parents with children with disabilities, these fears are completely valid, but it's how we deal with them that matter. So, you know, for the parent who just found out that their child, you know, has a diagnosis and is trying to figure out like what do I do next, how do I make sure that I'm not projecting ableism onto them, like what are your suggestions to the parent who is completely new to this and doesn't know the next steps.

Maria Davis-Pierre: First thing is to be honest with the feelings that of whatever you're feeling. Be honest about those feelings. There are a lot of times we feel a lot of shame and guilt for the feelings that we automatically feel when our children receive that diagnosis and then it's like oh my God, I can't believe I thought that, oh my God, I can't believe – feel those feelings, they are your feelings, acknowledge them. That's the first thing. Then, the second thing is being mindful of what you are digesting and I mean that as in media, Google, going onto a lot of these groups and blogs and things like that, being mindful of what you're digesting because not everything is going to work for your situation. You are still in the role of the parent and you have to make decisions that are based on your household. Everybody else is making decisions that is based on their household. What goes on in my home and the peer home is not going to work for everybody. So understand that what you're digesting, you know, you're going to have to put your own spin on how it works for you. Also, get a support system of people who look like you and are understanding what you're going through. The best thing I ever did was find other black parents raising autistic children.

Yolanda Williams: Yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: The other thing that I did that was great was reach out to adult black autistic folks.

Yolanda Williams: Yes.

Maria Davis-Pierre: The greatest thing I ever did.

Yolanda Williams: Adult autistic people, that's who we need to listen to.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yes, yes, you know, especially if you're raising a black autistic girl because they – you know, the outside world will have you thinking you are raising a unicorn, so finding

black autistic women was one of the greatest things that I was able to do and talking to them and understanding, okay, this is what I need to be thinking about, or you know, this is what I needed to take into consideration, you know. That is something that we need to do because especially if we are not autistic, yes, I have ADHD, my mind works in a different way, you know. So I can't always understand where she's coming from and they may not either, but they have more of a grasp than I would be – would have because I'm not autistic.

Yolanda Williams: Right.

Maria Davis-Pierre: So understanding about certain sensory things and puberty, you know, and things like that and certain accommodations that I would just not think of, and I am like, oh okay, this makes perfect sense, you know, that was one of the greatest things that, you know, I could do and understand that as black parents, our children are seen as black first. When you get into the disability world, you'll understand that a lot of them do not take that intersectionality into consideration and they don't understand that when people see us, they see black first before anything and that alone then sets up how they interact with you, decisions that they make so you have to understand how that intersectionality works because oftentimes, they are so intertwined you are advocating for both. So you have to understand that and that's the information I give parents when they are first receiving the news that their child is autistic, you know. Feel those feelings.

Yolanda Williams: Yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: You know, okay, we understand that, get you a support system, acknowledge, you know, what you are dealing with, and then kind of moderate what you are digesting because all of these groups will have you doing this, that and the other and the last thing you also want to do is to make your child feel like there is something wrong with them that you're trying to fix. So I never want my children to feel like I'm trying to fix them, I don't want them growing up to think that they're broken. So we have to also watch how we are interacting with our children, you know, and it's a lot, it's a lot! You know, and it gets deep and it gets overwhelming and it gets frustrating and there are days that it's like, I just want to stay in my bed and not have to deal with what is going to come and there are days that I do just that.

Yolanda Williams: That's it.

Maria Davis-Pierre: And I'm okay with that.

Yolanda Williams: I am completely okay with it, I have (indiscernible) (00:39:59) to let go of so many of the – listen! You know, the rules like, listen, yeah, all the rules are fake.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: I posted it and it was like why my autistic child is on electronics and I'm just like, I am not explaining a shit! Gia is on her electronics because it actually helps her. She has learned so much from her electronics and then let me just tell you all this, unless you are in my house paying my bills, I don't get a shit what you say, about what my – what's going on in here. So I really want us to start having that attitude when it comes to these, we aren't harming them by doing the thing that we know is best for them. I get what articles and everything else say, but they may not apply to neurodivergent children and so I do what's best for my child and she has been thriving you all, she has been – she counted to nine using some blocks, she sought out – she sought out these (indiscernible) (00:40:58) with numbers, picked out the blocks and had numbers on them and put them in order. I am like, did you just count in front of me, like, I have never seen that before. It was so amazing to watch her and I know that she only did that because she counts constantly on these simple, simple songs and all that stuff. So I let go of so much and I have embraced just the imperfection of it all. There are things where I am just like, (indiscernible) (00:41:21) says so here's this TV, here's this iPad, I am going to be over here on the couch napping.

Maria Davis-Pierre: And that's me, you know.

Yolanda Williams: That's what I do when I have to.

Maria Davis-Pierre: And that I do with my kids as well, you know, they are (indiscernible) (00:41:32), just do best you can!

Yolanda Williams: Yeah. (indiscernible) (00:41:35)

Maria Davis-Pierre: Just do the best you can and I – well, I am not the parent that is going to be up and arms about it. The school knows that I am not going to be that parent. I am not going to be the parent that comes in if you mess with my kid, they know that I'm that parent, but I'm not the parent that's going to be like, oh, you know, you just spent six hours at school, let's work on this homework, no, that's not me. I don't – that's not how my mind works and that's not what I want for my kids, you know. So there are things that I'm just – I just don't stress over. I'm like, well, you know, you don't want to do it, don't do it. Just – I am not going to be up and arms about a worksheet, I'm just not going to do that. And I'm not going to get them upset about a worksheet, you know.

Yolanda Williams: Yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: So there is things that I'm just not going to be upset about and –

Yolanda Williams: (indiscernible) (00:42:25) they go.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Exactly and you know that's one of the most important things because getting into these parenting groups, especially ones based by white people will have you thinking

you are the worst parent in the world. You know, and I don't, you know, pack my children's lunch and I don't make it all pretty – that's just not me, that's not my skill set, but they are eating and they are healthy, you know, they're very picky, so am I. I am not going to force them to eat things because I don't want that done to me.

Yolanda Williams: Right.

Maria Davis-Pierre: You know, so there's just certain things that work in my household because that is how we are and I do not – I'm not shaming anybody else, who – what they do in their household, but do not have that expectation for me and what goes on here and I think if we all just really minded the business that paid us!

Yolanda Williams: (indiscernible) (00:43:18).

Maria Davis-Pierre: We would be better off.

Yolanda Williams: Like I am tired, I am minding my own. (indiscernible) (00:43:27) everyday.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Right. Oh my God, it really.

Yolanda Williams: You know, all that just in and of itself, laundry, like I don't have time in minding someone else's business, but also like I just want to encourage you all, because when I getting the diagnosis, my first reaction was I did something wrong, because I didn't understand. I didn't understand autism, I didn't know anything about it. Again, I went by what the media said. So I joined some groups online. They were white centered groups. And the information in these groups, I was like this can't be right, like, this – it just didn't sound right and so I sought out other groups and that was just like, yeah, I knew that what – it was a lot of people that basically saw autism as a feeling or as something that could be cured, or happen because they got a shot or, you know, that kind of stuff and so the information that was coming in was people, who were just like how do I get my child to do this thing? How do I – it felt very corrosive, it felt very manipulative, it felt very harmful. It felt – I was like (indiscernible) (00:44:29) and I was like I'm not doing this to my kid and I had to seek out blogs, you know, I follow like a black girl, Lasky's, I believe that is ADHD blog, that's how I realize, I probably had it, and then I also followed Peace I Give blog, like other – just started reading and I was just like, wait a minute now. This is the information that I need and I asked the Parenting Decolonized community, like what should I be doing, I don't know everything and so community support is so important. It's really important to seek out advice from actually autistic people, and from people who understand, parents who understand, like there's nothing wrong with my kid, but I do need to seek out support aligned with her diagnosis that advocates for humanity. So if it feels wrong in your heart, like this doesn't feel like I'm really honoring my child's humanity, like I am really honoring who she is, and who she is is autistic. You cannot separate the autism from the human.

Maria Davis-Pierre: From the individual.

Maria Davis-Pierre: But I can separate the ADHD from me, I can meditate out of it. I can list in journal out of it, like my brain is this way, her brain is this way. And there's nothing wrong with it, right? And it's that embracing of that truth that really is empowering and allows you to seek past all these things that may trigger you about the diagnosis, of all the amazing parts of it. Like I said, my kid is so imaginative and I can see her seeing things and experience things that I can't see and experience and I am a little bit jelly. I am a little bit, well, can I insist on this, on whatever this thing, because it looks really fun.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah, I think if we – you know, back to what you were saying about embracing if we did that, that a lot of stress would just be lifted. Embracing and I am like, okay, this is who my child is and I'm okay with that and then embracing ourselves, is why am, I am okay with that, you know, a lot of stress would be lifted because we are giving, you know, when we are placing those priorities and this is how it should be done and this, this and that, a lot of time that is not driven by what we want is what society says we need.

Yolanda Williams: Capitalism.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yes.

Yolanda Williams: Right for privacy. Yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yes, and we –

Yolanda Williams: I was asked, I am sorry Maria, I am just going to say this real quick. Always ask yourself, well, who does it benefit for me to think that?

Maria Davis-Pierre: Exactly.

Yolanda Williams: Who is profiting from it and am I gatekeeping for or and investing in these systems of oppression when I think this way or when I'm forcing my child to think this way.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Exactly and oftentimes, it is all of that because –

Yolanda Williams: Yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Especially for us, black people because I – you know, our society is not made up to accommodate us.

Yolanda Williams: Yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: So when we're thinking – even when we are talking about evaluations, you know, and I'm putting my therapist's hat on, when we are talking about evaluations, when we are talking about mental health, the DSM which is the book that holds all the diagnosis, it is whitewashed, it is white washed and it is old white men talking about white men, you know, so when we're out here advocating for these diagnoses, a lot of times we are misdiagnosed and underdiagnosed because when they look in that book and then they look at us, it doesn't match and it's not because we don't have that diagnosis, it's because that book does not take into consideration that we're not white and we're not always men, you know. So how we present in a lot of places when we are going and seeking these evaluations, we are already at a disadvantage, especially if you don't know that system is whitewashed and what they're reading is whitewashed, we are already at a disadvantage, you know. So we have to constantly navigate these systems, right?

Yolanda Williams: Yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: So embrace what you can to let that stress go because that journey of the things that we have to navigate are already stressful and it's just horrible, you know. I constantly tell people, you know, anxiety, depression, autism, ADHD, how it presents for black people and in that DSM, it's it excludes us, because that's not how society has set us up to be, so a lot of times when we are – leave out that door, we already have to code switch, you know, black people have to code switch and we have to do this and we have to do what, you know, that's how society has made it. We have to be palatable black people.

Yolanda Williams: Yes. I am so glad you brought up masking before we close out here. You know, I really want to, you know, quickly talk about that because it is so detrimental to the mental health of, literally, anyone who has a disability, but especially for children. What is masking and why is it so harmful?

Maria Davis-Pierre: Masking would be – so I'm going to put it in terms. So if your child is autistic, they may stim so they may, you know, my daughter stims, she flaps her hands when she gets happy, she also spins in circles. Masking for her would be taking away those stims when she's around certain people to be accepted or not have to deal with what comes with flapping her arms and spinning in circles and why it is so harmful is because it takes a lot of energy to not do something that is innate. It takes a lot of energy to not do something that is of you. So to constantly be conscious of let me not do this, let me not do this, let me not do this, let me not do this is exhausting and it leads to what is called artistic burnout, you know. So it is extremely harmful because once you're in artistic burnout, so many other things can then arise, you know.

Yolanda Williams: Yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Suicide ideation, depression, anxiety, you know. So we have to be mindful of what masking is and it is especially hard for black parents to understand masking because code switching is so innate to us. So we are already –

Yolanda Williams: It's very (indiscernible) (00:51:13) for a lot of people.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah, we are already of the mindset that when we leave our house, we can't do certain things and when a lot of times and this is, you know, what a lot of my research is on is that when black parents are telling their children not to do something, it is not because they are autistic, it is because they're black and they are making decisions based on fight or flight safety, and I want my kid to come home at night, right? So they're telling them not to do certain things because they're black and that's how we've been raised by society. We can't go and do these things outside because we're black and we already don't want –

Yolanda Williams: Yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: We don't want that spotlight on us, right? I will be honest we don't want an even bigger one. So they're making decisions based on that. Now, communities will shame black parents you're doing this, you are doing this, you're doing this. And black parents don't even realize what they're doing is masking, they are thinking code switching because this is what we have to do. So you have to understand when you are in a role of a professional, and you are talking to the black community, this is why it's cultural responsiveness, it's so important you have to understand code switching and masking and then how those intertwine, but both are extremely harmful, right. It's harmful for us to dim our blackness when we have to leave our house every day, right. So the intersectionality of it for, you know, black disabled individuals is even more exhausting.

Yolanda Williams: It is.

Maria Davis-Pierre: So that's why we have to be mindful of let me not tell them to be anybody but who they are and be okay with that.

Yolanda Williams: And be okay with – so sitting with those feelings that come up, right, when you are in public and your child is doing – so I remember being at the park with Gia, and Gia does – she spins in circles too, but she will also get on the ground and like roll around when she's very excited. So we are at the park and it's the park, so I just let her just – you know, have fun, and she spins around the ground and she's having such a good time and a little white boy points at her and starts laughing and tells other kids to start laughing at her. "Look at her, look at her spin on the ground". Like he started talking about her, I was just, "look", he was like, "what is she doing", and I was like, "she's having a great time in minding her business is what she is doing." "Hello!" And we just looked at each other for a minute, okay. (indiscernible) (00:53:46) let him go. We are not going to get startled with that.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: We are going to do, I am not going to be like, "oh get up, people are looking at you." You know, I stopped code switching a while ago, but see that is a privilege. I have because I work (indiscernible) (00:53:59) and I work from home, but for – and I want to teach Gia that too, but it's something that kind of like is in our – we just do it.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: We don't recognize that we're doing it and it is a form of masking really when you try to tell your four-year-old, we have a lot of people in the parenting group who are like, hey, you know, the school keeps calling and my four-year-old kid's getting in trouble because, you know, they won't sit down when we ask them to and they won't do their stuff and I am just like a four-year-old should not have to sit for long periods of time.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Exactly.

Yolanda Williams: So it is age-appropriate and expectations need to be adjusted and looking at what does my child do to self soothe, what does my child do when they are getting agitated, Gia does a lot of flapping. Right now, she is about to get started, yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah, I rock, I have my own stims, I rock, but you know, that whole (indiscernible) (00:55:00) of black children in the school system is one that will – gets me wild up every time, but we have to understand that stims are a coping mechanism for our children and for us and it's a self soother. So if they're not hurting themselves or other people, right, there is no harm in it. There is no harm in my child flapping her arms and spinning in a circle. There is no harm in it. They look at it as, oh, why, why she did that.

Yolanda Williams: Open the pot, yeah.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Yeah, (indiscernible) (00:55:31).

Yolanda Williams: And being black is like (indiscernible) (00:55:34).

Maria Davis-Pierre: Exactly.

Yolanda Williams: So like you said, we have to just be mindful of the things that we are doing that are survival tactics versus and respectability politics versus is this really protecting my child because really, yes it is, but also it can be harmful. So, you know, there's nuance there. We have

to be mindful of that nuance and we are willing to say, sometimes, when I do things to protect my child, it is harmful.

Maria Davis-Pierre: I will say this. So my son when my son was diagnosed last year, you know, I don't code switch and for our oldest, Milia, you know, we are like, "girl, do you." Now, when my son got diagnosed, that was an extremely scary thing for me because black men, you know, and he's a big boy and it took a lot for me to change my mind with him on letting him be him because my first instinct was I got to protect him, I got to protect him, I got to protect him. So I will say for me, I had to do a lot of reframing my mind when my son was diagnosed. For me, with my girl, it was like, okay, she is going to do her and if anybody got a problem with it, you are going to have to see me. It is the same for my son, but I also have that added protection of, oh my God, if you are going to do as a six feet black boy, they're going to kill you, you know. So it really took a lot of reframing in my mind to not be ableist with him, to not teach him to mask, to teach him to code switch, I had to do a lot of self work just on the fact that he's a black boy. So I understand that for parents raising black boys, I understand that automatic instinct to want to be like, no, you can't do it, but we have to let them be who they are. The onus is not on us for people not to be racist to us, for people to not kill us for being black, that onus is not on us. Yes, we have to protect ourselves, but we don't want to do it at the detriment to our children and their mental health and their livelihood. (Indiscernible) (00:57:59) with that?

Yolanda Williams: Okay. I just want to ask you what does decolonizing parenting mean to you?

Maria Davis-Pierre: For me, it really means taking out what society has told us to be and be who I want to be, who my children want to be, and taking that pressure off of us as black people because in my mind, it's all about me as a black parent because that's what I know, and being okay with being the black person that I am and not the black person society expects me to be, and that's how I parent.

Yolanda Williams: I love that. Maria, how can people find you in Autism in Black?

Maria Davis-Pierre: You can go to our website, autismblack.org. We have the Autism in Black podcast. We have our Autism in Black second annual conference that's happening in June. I'm on Instagram, Autism in Black and I'm on Facebook, it's [autisminblk](https://www.facebook.com/autisminblk).

Yolanda Williams: Well, we are definitely looking forward to this year's conference and so thankful for the work that you're doing in advocating for these kids, but also the work of educating, you know, the professional world about intersectionality because this – it really is so problematic even with like the A scores, I have posted on like the As' trauma page, like when are you all going to include race in here because –

Maria Davis-Pierre: You know, there is a state that's already doing it, so hopefully it trickles down.

Yolanda Williams: Can be trickled down so we should be in there, because if I include, you know, race with my As score, it goes up to 9, you know, so like can we include that and start recognizing, you know, that racialized trauma is a huge part of it and then when you add on, you know, ableism, you add on gender, like things just get compounded. So thanks for doing that work with professionals to really be like, listen, hey, the default is not white, it is actually, you have got to have, you got to widen you lens and this is how and I appreciate that.

Maria Davis-Pierre: Thank you.

Yolanda Williams: And thank you all for listening. You know, let me know what you think about this episode in the comments on social media. And go ahead and give Maria some follows and some support because this work needs to continue. Thank you for listening. Keep it conscious! Bye.