

## Brian Boyd, classroom-based interventions and the importance of representation

The leader of the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute talks about what drew him into the autism field, and his departure from — and return to — the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

1 October 2023 | by BRADY HUGGETT

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*This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity; it may contain errors due to the transcription process.*

[opening theme music]

### Brady Huggett

You are listening to “[Synaptic](#).” This is our podcast that investigates the people, the science and the challenges of autism research and the greater neuroscience space. You’re listening to Episode 6 of “Synaptic.” My name is Brady Huggett, and I’m the host of this show.

[transition music]

### Brady Huggett

For this one, let’s start in the city of Minneapolis, in Minnesota. It’s a mid-sized city, population of about 425,000 in 2022. That makes it smaller than Milwaukee, but it’s bigger than, say, New Orleans. It’s also bigger than Saint Paul, the Twin City in Minnesota that sits across the Mississippi River from Minneapolis. Now, in South Minneapolis, there’s a four-way intersection where 38 Street meets Chicago Avenue. Back in 2019, there was nothing all that notable about it. There were the four corners of the intersection, a Speedway gas station, and a retail spot called Cup Foods, which sold everything from milk to stamps to phones. Now, you may already know where this is going.

Today, this intersection is known as George Perry Floyd Square, because on May 25<sup>th</sup> in 2020, more than three years ago now, a Black man named George Floyd was killed by police at this intersection, outside the Cup Foods. It was a particularly gruesome exhibit of police brutality against Black people, and his murder set off waves of protests in the U.S. There was intense media coverage and political unrest, and a deep racial reckoning in America, in a country that has already had many of those moments, actually. George Floyd’s murder became a new focal point in the Black Lives Matter movement, and the reverberations of his murder are still being felt in this country today.

For our purposes, for this podcast, the killing of George Floyd also set off a period of personal introspection for Brian Boyd. That’s today’s guest, Brian Boyd. When George Floyd was murdered and the country went through a convulsive self-searching around race, Brian Boyd had his own version of this. He took a long look at his life, both personal and professional, and made some changes. We talked about that in this podcast; we also talked about him growing up in tiny Brodnax, Virginia, and how his parents met. We talked about his time in Kansas, leading the Juniper Gardens Children’s Project, which helps to improve care and the education of children. All of that and more in the next hour.

I recorded Brian on August 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023 in his office in the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This was a week before classes started. Chapel Hill, which is very much a college town, was filled with parents dropping off kids and taking them out for meals, all those things that happen on campus right before school year starts. I set up the mics on a table in Brian’s office, and we sat across from each other and started in. Let’s pick it up here, where I’m asking Brian how long he’s been at Chapel Hill. Here’s your “Synaptic” episode with Brian Boyd, starting right now.

[transition music]

### Brady Huggett

I think this is not your first time at Chapel Hill?

**Brian Boyd**

This is not my first time at UNC. Right after my doctoral program at the University of Florida, I came to Chapel Hill to do my postdoc, and that was in 2005. I was at UNC from 2005 to 2017 and then transitioned to the University of Kansas, and I just got back to UNC-

**Brady Huggett**

Last year?

**Brian Boyd**

-last July.

**Brady Huggett**

Yes, I noticed. It looks like your diplomas are not hanging on the wall here yet.

**Brian Boyd**

[laughs] Yes, that's part of a bigger story. Actually, the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute where I'm now the interim director, we're going to be moving to a new space. There was really no reason to unpack because, hopefully, we'll be moving sometime in mid-November to late December.

**Brady Huggett**

When you came back, you said, "I won't put everything up"?

**Brian Boyd**

Yes. I've only recently become interim director in January.

**Brady Huggett**

OK. I've done some research. You are an East Coast person, right? I think at least you were born on the East Coast.

**Brian Boyd**

I grew up in Southern Virginia in a small rural town called Brodnax, Virginia.

**Brady Huggett**

Brodnax?

**Brian Boyd**

Brodnax. It probably has a population size of around 500 or 600 people, one of those towns with no stoplight.

**Brady Huggett**

Very small?

**Brian Boyd**

Very small, yes.

**Brady Huggett**

How is it that your family was there? Did they go back generations or move there or something like that?

**Brian Boyd**

Yes. It's where my mom's side of the family is. My dad's side of the family is from North Carolina, but my mom's side of the family grew up there. They do go back generations at least as far as I'm aware of living there. It's interesting because my mom and my dad actually are a part of big families, which isn't atypical in Southern Black families. My mom was 1 of 10 children.

**Brady Huggett**

There's nine siblings?

**Brian Boyd**

Nine siblings. My dad had 13 siblings, so he's 1 of 14 children. Most of my mom's siblings migrated to Richmond, Virginia,

which is a larger city, the capital of Virginia. My mom and three of her brothers stayed in that same town and grew up there and raised their kids there for the most part. That's where I grew up.

**Brady Huggett**

Is she there still?

**Brian Boyd**

My mom is still there, and my youngest brother. I have three younger brothers. My youngest brother is also still there.

**Brady Huggett**

Her whole life has been Brodnax?

**Brian Boyd**

She spent her whole life there in Brodnax.

**Brady Huggett**

That's pretty amazing.

**Brian Boyd**

She has tried to get me to come back. It won't happen. [laughs] I do go visit. Yes, she spent her whole life there.

**Brady Huggett**

Then how did she meet your father?

**Brian Boyd**

Oh, she met my father when she was out at a nightclub, I do believe, having some fun.

**Brady Huggett**

In Brodnax?

**Brian Boyd**

No, actually, I do believe in North Carolina.

**Brady Huggett**

Oh, OK.

**Brian Boyd**

She had traveled to North Carolina because Brodnax is only about 15 minutes from the North Carolina border. A lot of people come to North Carolina for a city experience or go up to Richmond, Virginia, for experience. That's how she met my dad.

**Brady Huggett**

Do you know what part of North Carolina?

**Brian Boyd**

I don't remember what part of North Carolina she met him in, but she was young. My parents had me when they were young. My mom was a teen mother, so she walked across her high school graduation stage eight months pregnant with me.

**Brady Huggett**

You were the first in the family?

**Brian Boyd**

I was the first in the family, yes, of course.

**Brady Huggett**

OK. She meets him at a club or something in North Carolina, gets pregnant, comes home, finishes high school. Were they married?

**Brian Boyd**

They weren't married at the time.

**Brady Huggett**

Then they got married?

**Brian Boyd**

They got married, yes, much later in life. Actually, my parents officially got married when I was in college. I said, "Why did you decide to get married now? You spent all this time." It's like, "Oh, we just decided to do it."

**Brady Huggett**

That was years later?

**Brian Boyd**

Years later.

**Brady Huggett**

Your siblings, that's the same father?

**Brian Boyd**

Same dad.

**Brady Huggett**

Did he move to Brodnax?

**Brian Boyd**

He did, yes. Both my parents lived there. I ended up coming back to North Carolina because my father passed away. He passed away in December of 2021. That led to me moving back to North Carolina to be back closer to my family.

**Brady Huggett**

I see. I guess we'll get to that. In your family, there's three of you.

**Brian Boyd**

I have three younger siblings, so there's four of us.

**Brady Huggett**

You're the oldest, OK. Then you're growing up in Brodnax, this town of 500 people or so.

**Brian Boyd**

That's right.

**Brady Huggett**

No stoplight, as you said. What did your parents do for work?

**Brian Boyd**

Blue-collar jobs. My dad worked in construction. One of those stories where he worked himself up to management by the time he retired from the position. My mom stayed at home for a little bit, and then she did various odd jobs. She's a very good cook, so she cooked at a lot of different stores and factories in town. Different blue-collar odd jobs.

**Brady Huggett**

I always find this fascinating. When you were growing up, and we look at you now, which, you have these advanced degrees, did you know that you wanted that life? Did you want an academic life? Had you seen an academic life? How did you get on your path?

**Brian Boyd**

Yes, that's a good question. I hadn't really seen an academic life, neither my parents went to college. My mom made different

attempts to finish nursing school because one of her closest friends became a nurse, and it just became harder as she had my siblings. I remember in first grade I had a teacher, and I was like- I decided I wanted to go to college. I remember coming home and telling my parents that I wanted to go to college, and they said, "Great, that's wonderful." What I always say is that what I had were supportive parents. Anything that I wanted to do, I wanted to join the band, I wanted to play tennis, they would always find a way for me to participate in those activities.

They were always supportive of anything I wanted to do. They were the kind of parents that also showed up to PTA meetings and met with the teachers. They were always actively engaged in my education. Although they didn't have one, they never said to me, "You have to go to college," or "We want you to go to college."

**Brady Huggett**

Or "We don't want you to go to college," yes.

**Brian Boyd**

Or "We don't want you to go to college." They just always supported the activities and endeavors that I pursued.

**Brady Huggett**

Is it safe to say that you come home in first grade and say, "I want to go to college," that they saw the value in it and were like, "OK, this is a good path for him. Let's support him in that"?

**Brian Boyd**

I think so. They didn't probably say it in those words. It was just like, "Oh, that's great." [laughs] They were very proud of me when I went off to college. I could see it in their faces. I'm very happy that I did it. Again, I think they were just really supportive throughout all of my schooling and all of my learning, so I'm proud of the accomplishments.

**Brady Huggett**

All right. As you're growing up, you're the firstborn, you're the oldest?

**Brian Boyd**

I am the firstborn.

**Brady Huggett**

You have already decided in first grade that you want to go to college, but did you have any idea of what that study would be? "I'm going to be a lawyer. I'm going to be an English professor. Who knows?"

**Brian Boyd**

I had no idea. I had various thoughts around what I wanted to be, a medical doctor, a teacher, all kinds of things. I had no real idea. When I went to college, I thought, "Well, maybe, I'll do medicine," not because I think I wanted to be a medical doctor, but I thought, "Oh, I'm going to college. I should get something out of it." Found that chemistry wasn't my strong suit, so that stopped that pathway. I was also taking a lot of psychology courses and education courses, so I saw some alternatives to some degree.

**Brady Huggett**

I'm also just curious. I also grew up in a small town. What did you do? In Brodnax, what did you do? How did you spend your days?

**Brian Boyd**

[chuckles] Because most of my life there I was in school, that obviously occupied a lot of my time and then spent it with friends after school. It's just the interesting things you do in a small town. You hang out in parking lots, you have house parties if you want to hang out with your friends, so there are different ways you find to occupy yourself. I spent a lot of time at my friend's house in that small town. Once we were able to drive, we would go to the big city, if you will. We would drive to Richmond or other places to be able to have access to the city life, if you will, but we always migrated back to home and just spending time with each other.

**Brady Huggett**

Did you spend a lot of time on a bicycle?

**Brian Boyd**

I am not very athletic, and I didn't ride a bicycle until very late in life. I will tell you, I was probably like 9 or 10. What prompted me to ride it was my younger brother started riding one, and I was like, "Well, shit, if he's riding a bicycle, I should learn to ride a bicycle." [laughs]

**Brady Huggett**

You were embarrassed into it?

**Brian Boyd**

I was embarrassed into it. I know that seems like something you would do in a small town, but it's a small town. One of the things about small towns, it's often, they don't have great roads. They don't have sidewalks or bicycle way. You're in the road and often, you're on a gravel road. Even back then, there weren't a lot of paved roads. It wasn't easy terrain for riding a bicycle and navigating over. You could do it within your yard, but it wasn't a way to go see your friends. Also, my friends didn't live close. They weren't neighborhood friends. Part of the reason my friend group became my friend group is because our parents knew each other. They grew up together and went to school together.

That was part of how I came to have this particular friend group at the time.

**Brady Huggett**

Your friends might've been two miles away [crosstalk]

**Brian Boyd**

That's right, exactly.

**Brady Huggett**

A bike wouldn't even have really made it.

**Brian Boyd**

That's right, yes.

**Brady Huggett**

All right. You're not sure. You want to go to college, maybe medicine because you're going to college and medicine is a big achievement. Maybe, that's the thing to do. You went to William & Mary?

**Brian Boyd**

I did, yes.

**Brady Huggett**

Great school, so you must've done well in high school?

**Brian Boyd**

Yes, I did. I think I graduated fourth or fifth in my class, something like that.

**Brady Huggett**

You get to school and then what happens as far as your thoughts of what you major in, what your career might be, what you're going to get out of this education while you're there?

**Brian Boyd**

Yes. I think I can tell you my autism journey, but also just my general journey. William & Mary was very different for me coming from a very small town. There was some people who were maybe what you would call sort of middle-class, upper middle-class, but William & Mary was the first time I was exposed to real wealth. A lot of the folks who go there from Northern Virginia, they went to very elite private schools, where you don't have class rankings because everyone goes off to Harvard or Yale. They actually felt like they hadn't been successful because they ended up in William & Mary versus Princeton. You had those kind of folks, but it was also the first time I was exposed to Black wealth.

One of my closest friends, both of his parents were medical doctors. They were urologists and radiologists. That was very different for me, just seeing that exposure to folks who had grown up very differently than I had, and it was intimidating to some degree. It's one of those times you question, how did I end up in this space, and should I be in this space? That was part of my journey there. I've told this story before, but how I ended up in autism is just strange. I was taking an abnormal psychology course, and there was a paragraph about autism. I cannot answer the question what it was about that paragraph that sparked an interest in autism. Something about it did, and I searched online.

This was before Google, so however we searched then. What popped up, likely because of proximity to the state of North Carolina, was a summer camp that's organized by the Autism Society of North Carolina called Camp Royall. I applied to be a camp counselor there for the summer and got accepted and came down to Pittsboro, North Carolina. It was just one of those experiences where people either said, "I'm going to do this forever, or I'll never do it again," because we were young college students. For most of us, it was our first real exposure to autism. It was 10 weeks. We worked with people of all ability levels, all ages. My very first week that summer, my first camper was an adult. He was nonspeaking.

He had a seizure disorder. He engaged in aggression, he tried to bite me. He had a seizure. We had to bring him to UNC hospital, and he had a tantrum in the middle of the hospital because, now I know, the environment was so overwhelming. I was like, "I think I'm going to do this the rest of my life." It was something about that 10 weeks for me that made me decide to keep pursuing this.

### **Brady Huggett**

Two things I want to ask about. One is, go back to you arriving to college and you come across wealth for the first time, including Black wealth, and you have this moment where you're like, "Am I supposed to be part of this? I don't have the background. I didn't go to private school." Maybe you didn't have AP classes. Obviously, you overcame that. I'm curious how you did and how long it took before you realized, "No, I am supposed to be here at this university."

### **Brian Boyd**

Yes, that's a really good question. I think part of it is I started to do well. Other than chemistry, I was doing well in my other classes. I also think that part of belonging was finding spaces where I felt safe, connecting with other Black students on campus and forming a network and comradery and us having that shared experience of being at a predominantly white institution. I realized that even those Black folks who had come from privileged backgrounds were having similar feelings and that it was not unique to me simply because I didn't grow up with the same opportunities that some of them did.

Just having those discussions and those honest conversations helped me get to a place of acceptance.

### **Brady Huggett**

Is it like, "It's not just me"?

### **Brian Boyd**

It's not just me.

### **Brady Huggett**

Other people feel this way.

### **Brian Boyd**

Yes, exactly, especially people of color.

### **Brady Huggett**

Then the second thing is, the way you just described this. You go to this camp. You're 10 weeks there. One of the people that you're working with is an adult, maybe physically larger than you, tries to bite you. You go to a hospital with that person. They have a tantrum. I think that would turn off a lot of people and probably did, but it didn't turn you off. I'm curious if you've thought about why.

### **Brian Boyd**

Yes, I don't know. It was just such a fascinating experience. To my knowledge, I had never met an autistic person. Now, I may have, but I just didn't know. To my knowledge, the young man's name was Cliff. Cliff was the first autistic person I had met

and spent a week with him. I wish I could spend a week with him again because there's so much now I know that I could have done better. The trying to bite me was my fault, wrong communication, and his ability to express his wants and needs to me, and me not understanding because he was nonspeaking. There's so much I learned.

It was the culmination of the experiences too because I got to meet so many people who were there, including what they used to do, in those days at least, is have some of the clinical psychology interns who are working at the TEACCH program, which is a statewide program for people with autism in the state of North Carolina. They would come out and provide advice to the counselors, give us some guidance during the week.

I met some of those folks and talked to them about their experiences with TEACCH and what they were trying to do in the state to meet the needs of autistic people and their families. Just the fascination of working with autistic people, hearing what was going on in the state of North Carolina, maybe part of it too was not knowing what I really wanted to do after I graduate. It just seemed to provide me a pathway, like, "Oh, why don't I get into autism and study autism given that I've had this experience that I've personally enjoyed, even if everyone didn't?" Maybe, it also just provided me a direction, a little bit of, here's something I could pursue and do after I graduate from college, which I ended up doing. [chuckles]

**Brady Huggett**

At what year of college did you do this counselor?

**Brian Boyd**

This was summer of 1997. I was actually graduating a semester early. I was going to be graduating in December. I graduated in three and a half years, because I actually did take sort of AP courses. I had college credit going into William & Mary, so I was able to graduate a semester early [crosstalk].

**Brady Huggett**

Right after this, you graduated and you go, "OK, what's my next step?" What was your next step? If you want to get in this field, what did it take to get into the field?

**Brian Boyd**

Yes. I have an interesting journey then. I shared this at the Annual TEACCH Conference. I talked to one of the psychology interns from TEACCH, and I said, "I think I want to keep doing this. I'm going to be graduating in December, and I think I want to keep working in autism." She said, "You should reach out to Gary Mesibov, who at the time was the director of the TEACCH's Autism Center." I had no idea who Gary Mesibov was and what he meant to the field of autism. When I got back to William & Mary, I decided to call him and I left a message. Actually, his secretary answered the phone.

**Brady Huggett**

You just looked him up, got his number?

**Brian Boyd**

Yes, got his number. His executive assistant answered the phone, said, "He's not in, but you can leave a voicemail message." Gary Mesibov called me back and, to some degree, interviewed me on the phone. I think I may have come to Chapel Hill for a little visit, but he just hired me. At the time, the person I ended up working with was Nancy Reichle, who passed away from cancer. She ended up being my mentor. She had a grant with someone at UNC, and the person who was working on the grant as a research assistant had left. They had this funding to some degree for someone to help work on that grant. He hired me to, in part, work on that project and gave me this-

I had a title of predoctoral intern at TEACCH, and I did all these things. I worked in the TEACCH preschool. I worked at the residential program that they operate at TEACCH. I worked for the Autism Society of North Carolina day program. I did adult social skills group. He just allowed me to make up the experience that I wanted, and I did that for almost two years. I worked at an inclusive preschool. Really, Gary just created this experience for me. I had a conversation with him years ago. He had no recollection [laughs] of doing this.

**Brady Huggett**

Oh, really?



**Brian Boyd**

I was like, “Gary, you’re responsible for my career. You took this chance on me without really knowing me and just created this opportunity.”

**Brady Huggett**

I know, you go away, and you go get more education and come back. When you came back, he had no idea who you were. That’s so funny.

**Brian Boyd**

He remembered who I was, but he did not remember that he had hired me.

**Brady Huggett**

Opened this door, yes.

**Brian Boyd**

Opened the door for me, yes, in that way.

**Brady Huggett**

He also labeled you as predoctoral. It’s almost like, “Well, that’s what you’re going to do,” and you did. Is that why?

**Brian Boyd**

No, no. At the time, I did not know I was going to go on and get a Ph.D. The reason I ended up getting a Ph.D, my Ph.D is in special education. I ended up working at the TEACCH preschool. I ended up being the assistant teacher. Actually, this is also a story. I worked there for both years of my internship. The first year, I was an assistant teacher, and the current teacher left. She retired and stopped teaching at the TEACCH preschool. She had been there for a while. They had hired someone else to become the new teacher, the next year. I showed up to the office because I think it’s two or three days before we’re expecting kids to show up, and there’s a voicemail from the new teacher they had hired.

He said, “I actually don’t think I want this job.” We’re going to have kids showing up, and there’s no teacher. Now, TEACCH is privately run. They had a private preschool, essentially. You didn’t necessarily need a teaching license. Someone said to me, “Do you want to be the teacher? I was like, “I don’t think I can be the teacher.” [chuckles] I was like, “Find someone to-” We had someone fill in who was a doctoral student in the education program at UNC Chapel Hill, who had been a teacher. She came and filled in for a few weeks with me, until we hired-

**Brady Huggett**

Oh, to get you- Oh, OK.

**Brian Boyd**

To get started. Her name was Laurie Sperry. Hi, Laurie, if you ever listen to this. Just seeing the work she was doing and how she was able to step in and work with kids and the applied work she was doing, the exposure to her and that TEACCH preschool is what really led me to go on to get my master’s degree and then my Ph.D. It was just an interesting time, to some degree. We actually ended up starting a program for 2-year-olds, and this was the late ‘90s, where we were diagnosing a ton of 2-year-olds with autism.

**Brady Huggett**

I like that they looked around the room and were like, “Well, do you want to teach?”

**Brian Boyd**

“Well, do you want to be the teacher?” [laughs]

**Brady Huggett**

“You’re standing here, so you must be the one.” You got a master’s at UVA?

**Brian Boyd**

Yes.

**Brady Huggett**

Was the plan just to get that master's and roll it right into a Ph.D. program?

**Brian Boyd**

No, the plan was to go teach in public schools.

**Brady Huggett**

Ah, OK.

**Brian Boyd**

To get more experience. A lot of things, as they say, are right or just a product of timing and luck. What happened is that the University of Virginia hired a faculty member from the University of Florida. Her actual background was reading and disability, not related to autism at all, kids with learning disabilities, but she knew of my interest in autism. She said, "I really think you should just go on and get your Ph.D. I have a colleague at the University of Florida, she has a grant related to autism, and I think you'd be a great doctoral student for her. She has funding available." I did want to go back and get a Ph.D., so that had been part of the plan.

What I thought was to teach for a couple years, get more experience, actually being the lead teacher under my belt, and then go on to get my Ph.D. This sort of opportunity presented itself where there's funding. I ended up talking to this person, Maureen Conroy, who was my doctoral mentor. It worked itself out. I ended up applying and just going directly into my Ph.D. program.

**Brady Huggett**

You did, OK. With the idea then being that you would actually focus on autism when you're out, or no?

**Brian Boyd**

Yes, yes, yes.

**Brady Huggett**

That was the plan?

**Brian Boyd**

Yes, that was the plan.

**Brady Huggett**

Then four years of Ph.D., more?

**Brian Boyd**

No.

**Brady Huggett**

Less?

**Brian Boyd**

Actually, I did it in three and a half years.

**Brady Huggett**

Three and a half, OK. When you get out, what did you do?

**Brian Boyd**

When I finished my Ph.D., I ended up coming back to UNC to do a postdoc.

**Brady Huggett**

That's it, OK.

**Brian Boyd**

Actually, Gary Mesibov was also responsible for that. He does remember the postdoc. He connected me to Grace Baranek, who's my primary postdoctoral mentor, who was doing research around sensory experiences of young autistic children, because my dissertation had been focused on repetitive behavior. I also ended up working a lot with Jim Bodfish who was there at the time who developed the Repetitive Behavior Scale-Revised. He was at UNC at the time. To some degree, there was postdoc co-mentors, but Grace Baranek was my primary mentor, but Gary connected me to Grace. We ended up meeting at a conference and discussing and talking about our postdoc, and I ended up getting a postdoc with her.

**Brady Huggett**

OK. Then, I think, you stayed at Chapel Hill, you got a tenure-track position here, I think, or you were tenured here.

**Brian Boyd**

Yes, I was. After my postdoc, I moved actually to Frank Porter Graham where we're sitting now-

**Brady Huggett**

Right, [crosstalk].

**Brian Boyd**

-Frank Porter Graham because again, timing and luck. Sam Odom was hired to be the director of Frank Porter Graham. I had expected after my postdoc that I'd have to leave because you often don't get to stay in the same place when you finish your postdoc. I had gotten to know Sam through my doctoral mentor, Maureen, when I was in graduate school. When he came here, he said, "Are you interested in staying?" Actually, the University of Florida tried to hire me back. I thought I was going to go back to the University of Florida for a faculty position, but Sam came and said, "Are you interested in staying? If so, I could negotiate a place for you at FPG as part of my startup package." That's what he did.

I worked at FPG for a couple years completely soft money funded. Most people here are funded through grants. Then I did my postdoc with Grace in the Occupational Therapy Department at the School of Medicine, and a faculty position opened up there. They recruited me onto faculty. I was there as an assistant and then tenured associate professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy at UNC.

**Brady Huggett**

When you had these two options, Florida is trying to hire you back, and then Chapel Hill was also like, "Do you want to stay here?" how did you weigh those two?

**Brian Boyd**

Yes, that was actually pretty easy to weigh. The only thought was, "Oh, soft money versus a hard money tenure-track position." The autism research infrastructures just was then and still is just wonderful at UNC. Just the number of autism researchers, the breadth of research that was here, I just knew it would be a better place to launch my career as an autism researcher. That was really the primary reason I stayed. The other reason was I was close to my family. We're all East Coasters. All my siblings live between Maryland and Georgia, so it also allowed me to stay close to my family.

**Brady Huggett**

Florida would've been- you'd have been almost the outlier all the way down there, right?

**Brian Boyd**

That's right, exactly.

**Brady Huggett**

Early on, repetitive behaviors, sensory issues, you're looking at that. Well, just take me through some of your early research then, I guess.

**Brian Boyd**

A lot of the early research, Grace was doing longitudinal descriptive studies around looking at the development of sensory experiences in young kids with autism. I did some work related to that, looking at the relationship between sensory and repetitive behaviors. I did some measure development work with Jim Bodfish. Then the other part of my portfolio because of

Sam that developed around the same time was school-based intervention research. How do we really support teachers in the implementation of effective practices for autistic children in their classroom? Those are the two bodies of work that I was really doing at the time.

**Brady Huggett**

These are for teachers who had autistic children in their classrooms, or the entire class was autistic children or both I suppose?

**Brian Boyd**

Yes, both inclusive environments as well as self-contained classrooms that were primarily serving children with autism or children with disabilities.

**Brady Huggett**

You were devising interventions that may help the teachers.

**Brian Boyd**

Absolutely. It was really devising interventions that teachers could implement to support the learning and development of autistic children. A lot of that work though is about how you train teachers to deliver what are evidence and foreign practices. That was a lot of my time.

**Brady Huggett**

I'm curious, how you came up with those interventions.

**Brian Boyd**

There were actually a couple of things that were happening. One, we were studying existing practices, teachers were already using, so we were getting a sense of that, like what led to improved outcomes. We did a study around how to develop an intervention called structured teaching that was used a lot in public school classrooms around the country. We looked at that as well as a preschool model called LEAP, which is for autistic children, served an inclusive classroom program, so we looked at existing practices. Actually, one of the interventions I ended up helping to develop was called Advancing Social-Communication and Play, which is based on Connie [Kasari]'s work, actually.

That was really informed by current science but also, we spent a lot of time doing focus groups with teachers as well as related service providers, so speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists to understand what were their needs. That's my interest in community-engaged research or community partner research as well. Listening to them and understanding really what would be helpful for you and teaching young autistic children and how can we best deliver that information to you? We learned a lot from just those focus groups and listening sessions, and then we used that information to help develop or further develop the ASAP intervention.

**Brady Huggett**

You spent about I guess 15 years or so at UNC in the first run?

**Brian Boyd**

I think about 13 years.

**Brady Huggett**

13, OK. Well, what led to the move to Kansas?

**Brian Boyd**

Oh, gosh, that's a really, really good question. I was at an event, a 50<sup>th</sup>- was it 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary event for Frank Porter Graham? I do believe it was. Some folks, the current director, or the director of that time of a program called the Juniper Gardens Children's Project, him and his wife were both scientists, they're early childhood researchers, and the field was there. This man's name is Charlie Greenwood. He said to me, "I'm thinking about stepping down as director, and I think you'd be great to replace me." I was like, "Oh, what?" [chuckles] Now, I had a leadership position. I was associate chair for research in the Department of Health Sciences, which is where occupational therapy was.

Juniper Gardens, like Frank Porter Graham, just to give a little backstory, are centers that to some degree arose out of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty movement. They're both formed around the mid-1960s really to think about how we can develop

programs, policies and practices to help children in poverty to break this cycle of poverty. Juniper Gardens is one of those places that was really formed in part through community activism, in large part of Black people who lived in Kansas City, Kansas, who wanted to improve educational outcomes for their kids.

One of the reasons I decided to apply for the job, ended up accepting the job, is that Juniper Gardens, like Frank Porter Graham, a lot of the early research was based on primarily Black children who lived in poverty. Frank Porter Graham is known for the Abecedarian Project that led to what we know about the importance of high-quality early-childhood classrooms and how that leads to improved long-term outcomes for children. A lot of the early work was based on Black children who lived in poverty, but these institutes and centers had never had really a person of color leading them. I think sometimes it's important that leadership reflects the communities they're serving.

I was in a position to be able to step into that role, and me accepting that is one of the few times where it wasn't just about my career, but really what I thought was an important message to the field, to the broader field of early child, not specific to autism, around having people of color in these kinds of leadership positions and opportunities. In particular, when the work of that place is focused, primarily built upon a sort of research that has primarily focused on underrepresented and minoritized communities. That was part of the reason. Also, I knew a number of the people there. They were a wonderful group of folks. and so variety.

But just having a leader of color was one of the main reasons I decided to take a chance and move to the Midwest and never lived in the Midwest before, and decided to do it.

**Brady Huggett**

Do you think that that was part of the reason why you were recruited though, because, look, you've got this dataset that's based on Black children and there isn't a Black person running this? Maybe there should be.

**Brian Boyd**

Maybe. This was prior to George Floyd. That happened afterwards. Just knowing those folks and who they are and their own belief systems, that may have been a factor that was communicated to me, but that may have been a factor in their thinking as well.

**Brady Huggett**

OK. This is quite a move. As you just said earlier, you're close to your family on the East Coast. Suddenly, this is not going to be close to your family. What did your family say when you said, "I'm headed out to Kansas?"

**Brian Boyd**

They were in disbelief. In particular my parents, they couldn't believe that I was going to move out to the Midwest. Like everything with my parents, they were really supportive and happy. Neither of them really liked to fly. Actually, none of my brothers or my parents ever came to visit me. [laughs] I think they really always thought that I'd move back at some point.

**Brady Huggett**

They were just waiting you out?

**Brian Boyd**

They were waiting me out to some degree. No one actually came to visit, at least not my family, but they were supportive of me taking this on.

**Brady Huggett**

Then, when you actually get there, the Midwest is notorious for being quite polite. At least on the surface, I think that was probably the case. Did you feel welcome there? How did it go?

**Brian Boyd**

I actually did. I would say there's something to those Midwestern values and niceness that was truly real. It feels culturally different than the South, than what I'm used to, but I did feel welcomed. I formed a community of friends. Juniper Gardens was a wonderful place to work and a wonderful group of colleagues to have in place to lead. I enjoyed the work that I was doing there, and I was sad when I had to make the decision to leave, but actually did for the most part enjoy living there. I did

always think eventually I'd get back to the East Coast. I didn't plan to move back so soon, but I knew it wasn't my permanent home, but I enjoyed my time there while I was there.

**Brady Huggett**

It was a home; it wasn't your permanent home.

**Brian Boyd**

Yes.

**Brady Huggett**

What was your research there? What did you do at Juniper Gardens?

**Brian Boyd**

I was doing a lot of the intervention work on autism that I was doing at UNC, continuing it there. That was when I really got into the outcome measurement work as well. What really happened was George Floyd. Then Peter Mundy was the president of INSAR at the time. He reached out to me to ask me to write a statement for INSAR on Black Lives Matter, or why the Black Lives Matter movement should matter, or we should think about that within the context of autism. I had to sit with it for a little bit. What do I say? How do I approach this?

**Brady Huggett**

It was like, whatever you want to say, just say it.

**Brian Boyd**

Yes.

**Brady Huggett**

Now you had to decide whether you're going to accept or not, but also what would you say given this platform?

**Brian Boyd**

What would I say, yes. I wrote this statement, but after I wrote the statement, I really had to sit with myself because I said, "I'm not doing research on Black autistic people, or Black caregivers." This hasn't been my line of research. Even though I'm a Black person in the field of autism, I felt a bit inauthentic, because I wasn't doing that work. I began to really shift my work a little bit to more specifically focus on Black autistic people, or at least marginalized communities within autism.

I also thought, I occupy a position in the field. For lack of a better term, I'm one of the known Black scholars in the field and probably because people remember me because there aren't a ton of Black faces that they see at conferences. I thought, I'm in a position to really give some voice to this, and I've been asked to write this statement, so I should continue this line of research. It was during that time at Juniper Gardens that I began to shift my research to really focusing on underrepresented and the minoritized communities as well.

**Brady Huggett**

Two things, I actually went looking for this statement, but I couldn't find it anywhere. What did you say?

**Brian Boyd**

Oh, gosh, [chuckles] I don't recall what I said, actually. [laughs]. It should still exist somewhere serve a reminder. I'll pull it for you. Really, it was just talking about why this kind of movement should even matter within autism. Black autistic people exist, and we shouldn't expect that they're able to separate their experiences with race and racism in America from their experiences with disability. That there's intersection, and maybe we should recognize the intersection in those experiences, that they're having racialized experiences as well.

**Brady Huggett**

I get it. This is your statement, and you're saying, "That's not the work I'm doing."

**Brian Boyd**

Right.

**Brady Huggett**

Then you began to do that work?

**Brian Boyd**

Yes.

**Brady Huggett**

I read someplace that, and I can't remember where, but that you had said something like, the things you were hearing from caregivers or from Black autistic people themselves, were not the things that you were seeing in the research. You're like, "That needs to change."

**Brian Boyd**

A couple of things happened, and one of those things happened before I even moved to the University of Kansas. That's part of a research study, and I've told the story before as well. As part of the research study we were running parent education groups. We were studying an intervention actually for toddlers. I was leading this parent education group as part of this intervention study on behavior management, and it was a room of about five parents, four white women and one Black man, I do believe was the size of the group.

We were talking about behavior management and how you address some of these issues. I was giving the standard spiel because it was a randomized trial. I gave the standard spiel to everyone, and then parents were able to talk about behavioral issues their children were experiencing and get advice. The Black man said to me, he was talking about how when he takes his child in the store, that his child throws a tantrum because he thinks he's always going to get something new. I'd heard this before. A standard recommendation is maybe have the child take something with them that they can only take with them when they go to stores.

Something they can occupy and a treat with them and something they can carry with them into the store, so they don't think they were going to get something new. He just paused and he looked up to me, he was sitting across the table. I'll never forget the look on his face. He just said, "You know I can't do that because they'll think I stole something."

**Brady Huggett**

If the kid is carrying something that he hasn't gone through the register yet.

**Brian Boyd**

That's right, and he's bringing in something into the store. I didn't say anything. I think I just stopped. I was like, "Oh, my God, I know exactly what you're talking about because I've been followed in stores. I've had that experience of being a Black person in America." I think that he only felt safe to share that story because I was a Black person leading the group. He didn't have to say any more. [laughs] He said, "I can't do that," and I knew exactly what he was talking about. I don't need him to elaborate on the reason. That story stuck with me. The other thing that then happened was I was contacted by Camille Proctor who runs [The Color of Autism](#). My interactions and experiences with her also led me into this space.

**Brady Huggett**

This man says this to you, and you think, "Oh, we are giving out advice to the group as if it applies to everybody, and it doesn't, or it can apply to some of these people, and no one really knows. We're handing this information out as if it's applicable to everybody, and it isn't. That has to change."

**Brian Boyd**

That's right.

**Brady Huggett**

No wonder that's stuck with you forever.

**Brian Boyd**

Yes, it really did.

**Brady Huggett**

What have you been doing since then to fix that?

**Brian Boyd**

I've been doing some work in partnership, as I said, with Camille Proctor of The Color of Autism. Some of it just out of service to how we can think about better supporting Black families of autistic children. I co-led a virtual support group for Black fathers of autistic children. I did for over a year, probably almost two years. I started it with a grandfather of an autistic adolescent. We started leading the group and running the group, and I ended up stepping away because, one, I'm not a parent at all. Obviously, then, I don't have autistic children. I felt like the group should be led by the fathers, because we had created a community, and it was a really well-functioning group.

A Black dad, an autistic young man ended up taking over the group. The wonderful thing is that a group of them have started a podcast, and they just interviewed me for the podcast. It's just amazing to see how it's grown. They told me to show back up to the group because I told them why I left. I started to feel like it wasn't a space for me because they were having real deep conversations about parenting and being a Black male, raising a Black autistic child in America. They were like, "Come back because we'd love to have you." Just seeing them now branch off and do this podcast.

**Brady Huggett**

What's the name of the podcast?

**Brian Boyd**

Oh, I have to look up. I can't recall off the top of my head. I have to subscribe to it, and my interview should be coming out shortly. It was just amazing to see that growth. Those service experiences, like "What can we do to build community?" have been one thing. Then we've been trying to do some research. Camille and I have been trying to do some work together, and then I have a grant and review, which I hope will get funded.

It's on its second submission. We got a good score the first time through the National Institutes of Health and, uh, the NIH, where it's more specifically focused on Black families of autistic individuals, with a colleague of mine here at UNC who studies racial equity in general. I've been trying to really think about the science of this work, but also how I just be of service. The other thing I shared with you is I recently formed the Black Empowerment in Autism Network.

**Brady Huggett**

Autism Network, right.

**Brian Boyd**

Yes.

**Brady Huggett**

Well, let's talk about that. I looked at that. You just had your first, I'm going to call it a meeting, your first gathering there and maybe 20 people there up and down the East Coast. I can't remember, was there someone from the West Coast?

**Brian Boyd**

No. West Coast, Australia.

**Brady Huggett**

Oh, yes. The idea is to promote connections, community support, all those things.

**Brian Boyd**

That's right.

**Brady Huggett**

Well, it's, OK. Just tell me about why you founded that.

**Brian Boyd**

Yes. Likely because to some degree the position I occupy, the field I had was increasingly having a number of Black scholars in the field reach out to me, those who were early in their career, for just advice and guidance. I also had a separate conversation with David Mandell. I think he had sent some people my way just because he thought they could get good advice and mentorship from a Black scholar in the field, and I thought, "Gosh, I'm hearing from these folks who are out there who are



interested in connecting, what can I do to help connect those of us in the field who are Black, who are trying to operate in the research space.”

I partnered with a couple folks. A colleague of mine Jamie Pearson, North Carolina Central and Nigel Pierce, North Carolina Central, and we just started having some meetings about what could we do, what kind of space could we create to connect some of the Black scholars we knew who were doing autism research. We started having monthly virtual meetings related to what is now the Black Empowerment and Autism Network. It really just started snowballing around, I know these people, I know this other person, and just started inviting others to join. I actually just got off a BEAM call, and now we're up to 35 people who are doing wonderful work in the field.

We're thinking about how do we support Black autistic people and Black caregivers of autistic people? How do we do that? How do we provide voice? There is a Black autistic researcher in the group as well, because we want to honor the lived experience of those Black autistic people as well. We'd like to have more, but they're at least one in the group, but we're organizing ourselves and really thinking about how we create space and voice for this particular group, and really how we can be of service to others is part of what we're thinking about. In addition to articulating and hopefully advocating for research agenda focused on Black families.

**Brady Huggett**

The acronym is BEAM?

**Brian Boyd**

The acronym is BEAM.

**Brady Huggett**

I thought I came up with that to remember it myself, but it's a good acronym.

**Brian Boyd**

Yes.

**Brady Huggett**

Let me ask you. You said earlier that people obviously remember you because you may be the one Black face that they know in this space. How do we get more African Americans or Blacks into this space? By that I mean really in academia and the pipeline for Ph.D.s is, I can't remember what it is, it's something like 5 percent or 6 percent of Ph.D.s that go out every year to go to the African-American community or Black community, and we need to get that higher. How is that done? I wondered what your thoughts were on it.

**Brian Boyd**

Yes. I think that's the real question here and the overriding question to some degree. We've been talking about this within the group, is, how do we really grow the pipeline to help diversify the scholars in the field. Getting people experiences early on, I think, in middle school, high school, when people are beginning to think about career pathways, because some people just don't realize what's an actual opportunity. What would this look like to study autism? What does it look like to be a scholar in the field or to have these different pathways to be a speech pathologist or a clinical psychologist or a special educator or whatever it is to contribute to autism in different ways? How do we start earlier growing the pipeline?

I think hopefully another thing that we are trying to do is how do we establish mentoring networks where there are mentors of color. That representation matters so they can see people who look like them doing the work and being successful in this space I think is also important, but I also don't think it's easy. I mean, there are lots of challenges and roadblocks around that we put into place that affect people's ability to get into the field, and in broader academia to be retained in the field.

**Brady Huggett**

Exactly.

**Brian Boyd**

What we see with scholars of color, and in particular Black faculty, is they don't make it much past becoming an associate

professor. They drop off at some point, and so what is it about being in academia that leads to burnout or fatigue and people wanting to leave?

**Brady Huggett**

That thing you mentioned earlier too is someone will get to college or get a Ph.D. program, look around and go, “Am I supposed to be here? There’s no one else here that looks like me.” That’s like an emotionally draining thing to have to put up with, but that’s something BEAM is looking at, you’re saying.

**Brian Boyd**

Yes. We’re trying to think about ways to really diversify the field. One, [laughs] the fact that we’ve been able to find 35 Black people out there doing autism research is- I didn’t know that many of us existed [laughs] until I started BEAM, and so it’s just been amazing to see the number of folks who are out there operating in the space in different ways. We have folks who are developmental pediatricians, child neurologists, all the way to folks like me who are way on the more applied research side of things. Just having us and organizing us and putting us into one space has just been empowering, if I can talk this late in the day, for me and just realizing sometimes there are more of us out there than I realize, but how can we then galvanize this group to further grow the field?

**Brady Huggett**

I think there’s two things I want to ask you.

**Brian Boyd**

Sure.

**Brady Huggett**

The first one is, you mentioned George Floyd. George Floyd happened; he’s murdered by the police. This is in 2020. As this happens, America goes through this kind of racial catharsis, this sort of racial reckoning. I think almost everybody, from the person who’s driving the bus to managing the hedge fund, and almost no matter the color of skin, has this long look at themselves and what is happening in this country and where do we fit into this mess and what are we doing?

It sounds almost like you also had a racial reckoning. You’re like, I used to be a man doing science, and I’m doing science in this way, which is how it’s done, but after that you’re like, “No, I’m a Black man doing science and I can’t divorce those two things, and I need to do research that encompasses all the things that I bring to the table.” Is that accurate?

**Brian Boyd**

That is accurate. I think I really asked myself if not me, then who, and we have a long history in research, as I alluded to, of people not looking like the community doing research on the community. I was able to operate in this space and do work in this space and walk a different path and make a conscious decision that I should not try to divorce these identities. I should embrace the fact that I’m a Black man in autism research, in academia. I occupy the status in the field. I can help push forward a research agenda on Black families and give voice and space to that, so why not embrace that?

In my doctoral program, I actually did think about doing research on Black families early on in my doctoral program. There were two other Black doctoral students in my program at the University of Florida in special education. Not autism researchers, but they were more doing research on children with emotional and behavioral disorders, and so by and large that population in schools is often Black boys. You had the two Black scholars essentially doing research on Black children. I really did think to myself like, “Gosh, it’d be all the Black people just going to do research on Black people?”

I actually made a conscious choice a little bit to not focus on Black families of autistic children at the time and to keep pursuing my interests, because I had an interest in repetitive behavior because of my experiences that I had had in the TEACH preschool. That was a real interest, but I did think to myself at that time, did I want to do research on Black families, and I actively said no, because I didn’t want to feel pigeonholed or feel like I had to go there do that work. It was interesting that after George Floyd coming back to that space, but also I think I was able to come back to it because I was more established, and I was more comfortable with myself.

**Brady Huggett**

You’d shown what you could do all this other research [crosstalk].

**Brian Boyd**

Yes.

**Brady Huggett**

You're saying almost like, "Well if I'm a Black man doing this research on Black people because that's all I could or should do maybe." You said, "No, I've done lots of things and this is where I want to spend my time, my efforts."

**Brian Boyd**

That's right.

**Brady Huggett**

I maybe have two more questions, actually.

**Brian Boyd**

Sure.

**Brady Huggett**

One is, I also read someplace that this is the happiest you've ever been doing your research, now that you've changed tasks like this, is that right?

**Brian Boyd**

Yes. I think it was a quote that may have been in *Spectrum* news at some point. It's really true like marrying my identities and being openly talking about my experiences as a Black man, being able to do research on Black families has allowed me to not feel like I'm living in separate worlds. It's allowed me to sort of reconcile my own identities. Both my personal and professional identity in some way.

I didn't realize I would feel this way. Really thankful to Peter [laughs] for asking me to write that statement because it really did make me sit and reflect on what I wanted to do with my career and how I most wanted to make an impact. Now I show up in spaces and I openly talk about the work I'm doing and that it's focused on Black families. I now say that unabashedly because of where I am and because of this happiness that I feel being able to engage in this work.

**Brady Huggett**

Yes. That's a great answer. Just a final thing, I think, as we said, as you were growing up, you couldn't imagine this would've been your career.

**Brian Boyd**

No.

**Brady Huggett**

I feel certain that your parents wouldn't have imagined this career either. Have you ever talked to them about, your mom's still in Brodnax, that this is your life? It must be astounding that this is your life.

**Brian Boyd**

I don't know if we've had that conversation. I don't know if they fully understand what I do, being a professor, because I do administration now and I lead a research center. I don't do a lot of teaching because I think they think of professors as you teach courses.

**Brady Huggett**

Like you're standing in front of the-

**Brian Boyd**

Right. Like that's all you do. They know I do autism work. They're aware of that. I now have at least two cousins who are on the spectrum. My parents have talked to me about that and what that means. They know I'm operating in that space. They have asked, and I think they actually viewed a presentation I gave, because they know I travel a lot and give talks. I think they watched one of those. I remember actually they did talk to me about wanting to come and see me give a talk.

I was like, “You don’t want to hear me talk about autism?” [laughs] The most boring thing ever. I know they’re proud and understanding in those ways, but being a professor is a weird thing to explain to anyone that’s not in academia. Like, “What in the hell do you actually do with your time?” In general, I know they are very proud of what I have been able to accomplish in general.

**Brady Huggett**

That’s it. Thank you.

**Brian Boyd**

Thank you.

[transition music]

**Brady Huggett**

How was that? Great interview. I thought — I’d actually spoken to Brian before while doing some reporting — at the time I thought that he’d make for a good “Synaptic” guest. I was right. Great interview. Thank you, Brian, for having me into your office and for being a guest. Much appreciated. This podcast will be archived on [spectrumnews.org](http://spectrumnews.org), and “Synaptic” can be found wherever you find podcasts. Google, Spotify, YouTube, Apple, wherever.

We’re building a little archive of guests now; you’ll find Connie Kasari in the archives; you’ll find Ashura Buckley; Cathy Lord is in there, all free. You can reach us on Twitter, our handle is [@spectrum](https://twitter.com/spectrum). Our theme song was written and performed by Chris Collingwood. Next episode will be out in a month on November 1<sup>st</sup>. That is it. This one is over. I’ll let the music play us out.

[ending theme music]

**Brady Huggett**

This is not a big deal. I’m going to ask. If we turned off the overheads, would it be all right? You can just pick up a little bit of a hum from it. Let’s see if that, uh- yes, that did it.

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