

Deep Dive: Navigating Pediatric Heart Disease With Greg and Kara Olsen

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SUMMARY

The podcast features Dr. Becky discussing modern parenting challenges with Greg and Kara Olsen, who share their journey with their son TJ, who underwent a heart transplant. The conversation highlights the emotional complexities of parenting in the face of medical crises, the importance of communication, and the resilience of both parents and children.

- The Good Inside membership offers expert guidance and community support for parents seeking reliable parenting advice.*
- Greg and Kara Olsen discuss their experiences raising their son TJ, who was born with congenital heart failure and recently received a heart transplant.*
- They emphasize the importance of honest communication with their children about medical challenges, helping to alleviate anxiety.*
- The couple reflects on how adversity has strengthened their marriage and parenting skills.*
- They founded the "What's the Hardest Yard" program to provide at-home nursing care for families with children facing medical issues, ensuring equitable access to support.*
- The Olsens highlight the significance of finding small wins during difficult times to maintain hope and positivity.*
- They acknowledge the emotional toll on siblings and the need for balance in family attention and support.*
- The episode underscores the value of community support and the lessons learned through their journey, emphasizing resilience and connection.*

Why is it so hard to find reliable answers to parenting questions? How is it in 2022 parents still search on Google for answers from strangers? Well, now there's a better way. Introducing the Good Inside membership, an expert-guided, community-powered platform redefining modern parenting. In our library, you'll find hundreds of bite-sized videos, articles, scripts, and workshops tackling the trickiest parenting topics. And it doesn't stop here. We've created a private community guided by me, Dr. Becky, and coaches trained in the Good Inside parenting method. Here you can ask questions, connect with other parents, or attend a live event on a topic that matters to you.

This is the parenting handbook that doesn't exist. This is parenting advice at your fingertips, where you need it, when you need it the most. This is Good Inside membership. Hi, I'm Dr. Becky, and this is Good Inside. I'm a clinical psychologist and mom of three on a mission to rethink the way we raise our children. I love translating deep thoughts about parenting into practical, actionable strategies that you can use in your home right away.

One of my core beliefs is that we are all doing the best we can with the resources we have available to us in that moment. So, even as we struggle, and even as we are having a hard time on the outside, we remain good inside. I am honored to be speaking today with Kara and Greg Olsen. Greg is a former NFL tight end, and he and his wife, Kara, share their parenting journey with their 10-year-old son, TJ, who was born with congenital heart failure and recently went through a heart transplant surgery.

We talk about how this has impacted their family, what they've learned about their partnership, how they've watched TJ embody the idea of resilience, and how they've supported their other kids, Talbot and Tate, along the way. This conversation left me with tears, with laughter, and with so much optimism. With all of that in mind, let's jump in.

Hi, Greg and Kara. Welcome, and I am so happy to have you here and to be meeting with the two of you. Thank you for having us. Appreciate it. Tell me a little bit about yourselves, about you, about your family, about kind of the things that are going on for you right now. Yeah, so we're Greg and Kara Olsen. We live in Charlotte. We have three young kids. Uh we have a 10-year-old boy named Tate. We have 8-year-old twins, TJ and Talbot. I just retired 14 years playing in the NFL, so now I am around more and we're adjusting to what that looks like, and um Kara and I have been married since 2009. We met at the University of Miami, and we've been on this journey together ever since. From there, tell me about kind of the latest things on on your parenting journey. Well, this year's been pretty eventful. Between we moved to Seattle for Greg's last season with the Seahawks. So, we took the kids, moved them across the country, enrolled them in a school out there, which then went remote, so we did remote learning out there. We were going to live in a high-rise in the city of Seattle, and kind of live a very different life than what we typically live in the suburbs of Charlotte, so we were super excited about it. Um we were excited about the journey, the kids were excited, but obviously as it turned out it was way different than we expected, but I will say we did enjoy it, we made the most of it. Um we learned about a lot about ourselves, our family, and the kids have nothing but the best things to say about their experience out there. So, I am thankful for that, but I was also thankful to come home in January. So, Yes. came home in January, Greg retired a couple weeks later. Um had a ceremony over at the Carolina Panthers stadium in March, which was wonderful.

Um and he hung up the cleats, so we thought that was kind of like turning the page. Um and then in May, the kids were kind of getting close to finishing up there. Tate was in fourth grade, and our twins were in second. And our twin son, TJ, he um started feeling a little He was just acting I wouldn't say he wasn't feeling poorly, he was acting out of sorts. Things were just not normal. We felt like he was just a little sluggish, he was a little irritable. Um I thought it was maybe just the end of the school year, I'm tired, we've moved, I'm ready for summer. We brought him into the um cardiologist just for a checkup saying he's just acting a little out of sorts, and sure enough that afternoon they told us he is in heart failure. He was born with a serious congenital heart defect called hypoplastic left heart syndrome.

So, he had already gone through three open heart surgeries Wow. early on in his life, and then he had a pacemaker put in, and he's had multiple different procedures, but he was living a really, really decent quality of life and feeling good and pretty normal, quote unquote normal. So, it stunned us when they had told us that

back in May, and they immediately put him into the hospital, put him on a medication called milrinone that would help his heart function until he was put onto the transplant list. So, this is I'm not even going to try to summarize that because I feel like my emotions are taking over and getting in the way of my brain functioning normally, but it seems like this was this point, almost like a high point in like the families' lives, like you're back in Charlotte, it's like amazing, retirement, Greg, you can be home and be around, Yep. and TJ had some medical issues in the past, yet this thing that seemed like sluggishness was actually uh this huge threat to his his life. It it just went from this high to what I imagine is one of one of the lowest lows or panic moments. For sure.

It was It was It really was the low of lows. Um when we took him into the doctor that day, we never imagined that what the chain of events that would unfold from that point on. You know, we thought they would alter his medicine, we thought maybe he had a little bug, right? We're living in this COVID world where people are sick all the time, and you know, we thought there was a million reasons for, you know, his subtle, you know, kind of change of behavior, and that was not even on our radar. You know, and and looking back, it was something that we always knew was a possibility. We knew that there was countless families who are born with children that have his condition that heart transplant is down the road at some point. These they call them single ventricle hearts. In essence, he literally has half of a functioning heart. They typically last a little longer, you know, his only lasted eight years.

You know, some of these kids last into the 20s, and you know, some of them are in their early 30s, so we thought transplant, if we did have to go that route, was kind of down the the horizon a little bit. Um so, it came as a dose of reality that, you know, we're not only are we not going home from this doctor's appointment, we are going to the ICU and start the process of what is, you know, getting listed on the heart transplant list, which is a process in and of itself, and uh starting that wait for the call to have your 8-year-old son undergo a heart transplant. So, I'm thinking about your emotions at that point. You're near I don't know if you're directly in the presence of TJ when you get this news, but he's around there, his emotions.

Thinking about your other kids. How How did you do that? How did that How did that all go? You know, it's it's kind of funny. We knew something was wrong, so they we went in, and there was no real alarming. We met with one of the doctors. We thought it was a little strange that it was the heart transplant cardiologist, who we knew just from our involvement with our foundation in the hospital. We didn't We had never seen him. He had never really taken care of TJ up to that point, obviously.

So, it really wasn't until we came out of him getting his echo, and one of the nurses um that we've known for a long time has become a dear friend, kind of met us in the hallway and said, "Hey, I'm going to take TJ, and Dr. Wallace is going to take you guys to his office to talk." And we were like, "Okay, like is everything okay?" And she was like, "No. Like Dr. Wallace will talk about it."

And we were like, "Oh my god." You know, so like we knew when we walked out, so TJ at this point has no idea. He thinks he's just playing uh what was he playing? Shoots and ladders. He was playing shoots and ladders in the in the room with a nurse that he's known since he was a baby, who to him was just like fun and playing. Like he he had no and uh you know, sense of what was going on. And then it was time to break the news to him,

you know, and we uh kind of composed ourselves the best we could, returned back to the waiting room where he was, and he kind of looked at us and was like, you know, "What's wrong?" And we were like, "You know, buddy, uh you know, we're going to have to be here for a little bit. You know, the doctors, you know, your heart's not doing great. It's getting weaker, and we got to put you in the We didn't say you're going to have to have a heart transplant. We just said, you know, we got to you're going to have to go in the hospital for a little bit until they the doctors kind of figure out what you need, and you know, he started crying. He, you know, he didn't want to go back to the hospital. He'd been there so many times, but that was what we had to do, and started the long summer of recover you know, preparing for and then recovering from an 8-year-old having a heart transplant. Can you tell me more I'm so curious about the the way you communicate with him about this? This is I mean, a heart transplant, right? This is stuff no one prepares us to talk to kids about or adults. There's You two strike me as it sounds like this nurse in a way that felt harsh, but also just honest, was was truthful. Like, everything's not okay. We've always been very honest with TJ from the get-go with each appointment, each procedure, each surgery. I think the best thing to do is mentally prepare your child for what's coming, right? The positives, the negatives. And I think the more prepared they are going into it, the better it turns out. So, at that point, we knew it wasn't good, but at that point, the doctors kind of framed it that we need to do further testing to see will his heart be able to recover on this medication. We need to do a heart cath procedure to find out more to see if he definitely does need a heart transplant at this point. So, once the news kind of settled and we got him into his hospital room and we settled a little bit, too. We kind of said, "Here's the different options, TJ." So, that was a Thursday. That Tuesday he was getting his heart cath and we said, "Right now, we got to get you on this medication in the hospital. We'll take a few days. We'll make the most of them.

And then, we will see what happens on Tuesday and see the status at that point." So, obviously, came Tuesday, we found out, you know, it is what they expected. We will TJ will need to be put on the heart transplant list. And we just sat him down and said, "We tried to look at all the positives. We said, 'Yes, there's a ton of unknowns. We don't know how long we'll be here. We don't know when you will get a heart.

Obviously, that's scary. But, we said, 'You are going to This is the best thing for you at this point. You're going to feel better. You didn't even know you didn't feel good.' You know?" And I think we tried to put kind of put this positive turn on it as did his doctors. And we They also told us all the positives of this once we got further down the road, you know? So, I think as we were able to digest it, there were small and more positives that came from it. You know, one of the things Carrie you just said that resonates with me so strongly is actually just naming what you don't know. Like, so many times we don't know things and for the two of you, there's so many big unknowns with your kids, right? Where Right. it might be something seemingly smaller with another family. And we often feel as parents like, "Well, I don't know. So, I'm just going to leave that out." But, that creates a lot of anxiety for kids. So, actually being very definitive about kind of here's what we know and here's what we don't know. But, as soon as we say what we don't know, we've classified it. It kind of lives in a column and I think you can take a little bit of a breath. So, so powerful for you to show up in such a sturdy way for him. What's going on for you in in this moment when you're delivering this? Oof.

That's a loaded question. You know, I think what we what we kind of describe to people is the unfortunate benefit that we had with dealing with this news. While it did come as a sudden shock, right? We were not expecting it in this moment. Since the day he was born, we've lived 8 years in this world where we got bad news,

then we got a little bit better news, and then we got bad news, and then we got a little better news. So, like, unfortunately, I don't want to say we were numb to it cuz we weren't. It wasn't like this out of the blue new world, "Oh my god, our son Mhm. We had lived 8 years of this. This was our life. This is We've been in that hospital a million times, you know? He had open-heart surgery. He was 2 days old, right? We We We never held our little baby until he was, you know, 3 weeks old. Three You know, his chest with You know, he was this big. And he you know, so all at looking back to those moments, you know, 8 9 years ago, I would say those moments prepared us for this moment where we knew the only way of going forward was to find mit- little wins, right? Not every day is going to be a win, but there is a win within every day.

Can we stack enough wins? Can we stack enough good days that we can at least move forward, right? We're going to take a couple steps back, but when you stretch it out over the the time frame, as long as we continue to move towards our desired outcome, both short-term and long-term, it allowed us to go to bed every night and wake up with some hope. And like, I think all we ever asked for from our doctors were We're just like, "Are we good?" Like, I know things aren't perfect, "but are we okay?" Like, "Is today a good day? Can we build on this? Like, are we moving in the right direction?" Whether it was waiting for his biopsy scores about his rejection levels when we were trying to get him on the transplant list, you know? There's a wide range if you have a lot of antibodies, which they thought he might have from all his blood transfusions following his surgeries. If his body had built up a ton of rejection, it limits the amount of organs that match.

Thankfully, he had a really common blood type. He was big. He had no liver failure. He had no kidney failure. He had So, like, all these boxes that we were checking, they didn't fix his heart, but they made the possibility of getting him a heart safely and recovering from it incrementally better as we went. And like, to us, those were the wins we had to cling to, right? We couldn't wake up one day and say, "His heart's better." Like, it wasn't going to happen. That just wasn't a reality that we could accept.

So, we had to find other things to cling to for us, but more that we could then put on this positive, optimistic space for our 8-year-old who's living in a walls of a hospital who kind of understands, but also doesn't understand why he's not home with his brother and sister enjoying summer, right? Like, we didn't have the perfect answers. We just Fortunately, we've done this now for 8 years with this poor kid and we kind of knew what to tell him. We knew what not to tell him. We knew what bothers him. We knew what didn't bother him just from experience. Wow. Tell me a little bit more about TJ. He is I always say he was He was a He was a challenging baby, obviously, with everything he went through. Um he didn't feel great, you know?

I'd say that's an understatement, but yes. He was. Um but he is now the easiest kid. He is such a glass half full see the positive side. Like, right now, he has a procedure on Thursday, a scheduled procedure. So, he But, routine. Like, Routine. Nothing crazy. So, we did a COVID test yesterday after school and today I home-schooled him and I'll home-school him tomorrow. And he's just like finds the positives in everything. We took a bike ride. It was like me." Not like, "Why do I have to do this? Why can I not be at school with my siblings and my friends? Why can't I go to baseball practice last night?" Like, he's just like, "Okay. Sounds good.

Let's take a bike ride for a reason." took a bike ride this morning after him and Cara did like their morning

session of school, you know? And fortunately, we have a lot of experience because we did it for three of them last year. It was a lot easier doing one today, I'll tell you that. I didn't I didn't do it, but Cara did. So, I said we I took credit for something I didn't do. Um which is fine. But, um we just rode around our neighborhood. I mean, we didn't ride the Grand Canyon, right? Like, it wasn't anything out of the ordinary. It was like he was riding through the Grand Canyon. He was just He had his mom and his dad and we were taking a bike ride and his brother and sister were at school and he wasn't and it was the best thing he'd ever done, right? Like, that's TJ.

Wow. Sounds like he has like a zest for life. He does. And maybe this this does just reveal my lack of education around how these things go, but I hear heart transplant surgery. Now I'm hearing school, baseball, riding a bike. So, take me I feel like there's a lot of dots there. For me, at least. Can you connect some of them? And then you factor in COVID, right? So, that that world does change. So, you know, 2 years ago, TJ would be in school today, would be in school tomorrow, at be in the hospital 5:00 a.m. on Thursday, be put to sleep, do a biopsy, 1:00 go home, and then Friday go back to school.

That's normal. Obviously, nothing about this world is normal now. So, he's home and he's quarantining and COVID testing and whatnot. But, as far as all the other stuff, like we we didn't know if we were going to be in the hospital 4 months. It turned out we got the heart in 8 days. It's a complete shot in the dark. It's a It's a long formula of data and whatnot that gets put into this like big system.

I won't bore you with the details. And then when we were getting ready to come home, we didn't think he would be home from the hospital before school started. He was home for Father's Day. So, you're talking middle of June. He had his surgery on June 4th and he was home June 15th. It's bananas. I mean, I'm trying to wrap my mind around that. haven't wrapped our minds around it and we lived it. We So, I don't They had pretty much said, "Cara, um based on his other surgeries, this is a easier surgery than what he's been through."

Because his body is getting for the first time since the night he was He is never in his life for 1 minute had a fully functioning heart in his body. He wasn't born with one. 2 days later, they in essence just reworked to the entire heart so that just one chamber does the whole thing. Then at 6 months, they tinkered around again. At 2 years, they tinkered around again. And then that was his finished system. That was his cardiac function Yeah.

for what it was. He's never experienced a minute of life until the moment he woke up from his heart transplant with a fully functioning heart. Mhm. So, they told us going in like, "Obviously, there's risk. There's risk in everything. But, he's a great candidate. He's strong. He's healthy otherwise. And all those are the things that concern us when we go in and do heart transplants. It's usually the other things that get you. Mhm. Liver failure, kidney failure, you know, blah blah blah. So, we get discharged on Father's Day and they literally just told us, "Take it slow. His heart is not the problem.

Now, he's got a fully functioning heart. That's not the problem. He's going to be weak. He's going to be tired. He's going to be irritable. He's on a ton of medicine. He's on steroids. He's on anti-rejections. Immunosuppressants. Immunosuppressants. So, keep him healthy. Keep him outside. Fresh air. Right? It was kind of like what we were told about COVID all along, right? Like, keep him out of crowded spaces. If he's in a

group, wear a mask. And if you're going to see people, just do it outside.

Like, it was pretty much simple as that. And he got stronger and we would The first day he could barely make it to the end of the driveway just on like a little walk. And it was hot and it's the summer. We'd stay inside and play. And then he'd make a little further, a little further. And today he probably rode his bike 2 miles. And he goes to baseball practice twice a week. And played in his first tournament 2 weeks ago. And the other day.

Ran a mile in school the other day. He doesn't run the whole time. It gives him a little anxiety, but he finished. Right? So, like we told The time is irrelevant, TJ. You could come 10 minutes behind the last kid. The time is irrelevant. You're able to do it for the first time in your entire life. Right? Like, those are huge wins. And when we're getting closer to school and the COVID stuff was still going on and the schools were making decisions, we asked our doctor. We're like, "We'll do whatever you want. If you think he should be homeschooled, we'll homeschool him. If you think we should take whatever. Just tell us what to do."

And his transplant cardiologist said, "Send him to school. He wears a mask." We went and met with his teachers about like basic common sense. Like, does he need four kids to sit at his table? No. Can they keep hand sanitizer at Like, super easy stuff that we probably should all do anyway. We made those slight, you know, classroom things. The teachers have been amazing. And knock on wood, he's comes home every day thrilled to be there. And so far, so good. I mean, it's the body's just It's amazing.

body is remarkable. It's wild. What do each of you do kind of along the lines of self-care, taking care of yourselves? I can only imagine. Is Is self-care like a joke? Is that why you guys are laughing? Like, what is self-care? I don't know. I know. The other night we were like, "We should try to go to dinner together." Let me look at our calendar and figure out which night works. You have two other kids. You have TJ.

How do you not run yourselves into the ground? I I don't know. Um everyone's like, "Cara, how are you still doing it?" Um I think we have no other choice, right? Like, Greg's dad was super tough on him. My mom was very tough on me growing up. Even like when she her my dad drove up the second we found out the news about TJ. And I'm not going to lie, when I saw her, I just broke down, right? That's a mom's job. Of course. She had let me have my moment and then she said, "Cara, you are the mom. They Everybody else is depending on you. You need to stay strong.

If you fall apart, the entire unit falls apart." And I think like that's hit so strong with me on a daily basis, right? Like as a mom, these kids need you. My husband needs me. Probably more than the kids. True. He doesn't even know where his socks are. So, um I'm Self-awareness. Self-awareness. But, um I think that was the best advice. And I think growing up that way and having that foundation has led And I think Greg has had a similar foundation, too. Um of, you know, you do what you got to do, right? Yeah. And um I have a lot of faith, too. And there's moments where I rely on God and say, "Give me the strength today." You know, there's times that that it'll be laying in bed and we're like, "Do we screw it up today? Like, what's You know?" But, that's normal, right?

And I'm sure we did. I'm sure there were some days that we that we probably did. And whether we knew it at the time or not. Yeah. We didn't want to screw it up, but we did the best that we could. I'm going to venture to say that I don't think anyone listening to this is going to say, "Greg and Cara sound like they really they really messed they really messed this whole thing up. Geez, I could have done a much better job." I don't think there's one person thinking that.

Well, there was there was probably things like along the lines that if I look back and said like, you know, even small things like, did I lose my Was I so frustrated with everything going on there that I like take it out on Cara? Did I take it out on our other kids? Did I You know, right? Like, did I let it blend into things that weren't related? Like, it wasn't Cara or my other son's fault. And I'm sure it did. I'm I'm sure at some point that happened. And I think to add to Cara's point, I think the one thing we've always tried to recognize, and again, not pretending that we've always been able to accomplish it, but like, we've had a pretty decent ability where each of us have had our moments, right?

Each of us have had our times where we're like, it just isn't sitting right and we're just kind of it's getting the better of us. Very rarely have both of us had those moments at the same time. And whether we were conscious of it and made the corrections or if it was just a product of being together a long time or whatever, like, there was always one of us who could kind of like rally the troops a little bit and like find the silver lining and push forward and kind of like drag the other person by their hair and be like, "Let's go." There was never a day where we both laid in bed feeling sorry for ourselves.

Because if the two of us felt sorry for ourselves, our kids had no chance. TJ or the other two, right? Like, that wasn't fair to them. We had no time to the pity party. Yeah, it sucked. It wasn't fair. We didn't ask for it, but guess what? Life's hard. The sooner you realize that, sometimes the better. And I think perspective, right? Like, you so many moments in our lives where, you know, we're maybe complaining about these little things and you look back and sometimes life you're put into perspective and you're like, "Okay, why was last week I was complaining about what happened on a baseball field?" Or Her, not me. Him.

Or, you know, "Oh my gosh, my kids didn't clean up after themselves." You know, and it's these moments and it's unfortunate that it's been at I think TJ's expense, but like you appreciate the little things. Like, our marriage has become so much stronger and continues to be because of these moments. And we know we can do it together, right? You know, as hard as it's been, you look back and you say, "I did it." And I'm thankful for the journey and I'm thankful for the lessons from the journey. It's an amazing perspective the two of you have. And you know, what was going on for me, Cara, as you were talking about that that breakdown moment is I think a lot about um I don't know, kind of this idea of multiple things being true at once, right? I think a lot of us grew up in homes where feeling a certain way like meant something characterological or you're not strong. And these are like big things, right? Versus I'm a strong mom who's a sturdy leader of my family and I'm allowed to have moments where I'm breaking down, especially to people I feel, you know, safe with. And what you're saying to Greg, I think, where hopefully those moments just happen on different days.

That that's the most convenient, at least, right? You guys schedule that. It seems like you got a good rhythm. So,

where are Tate and Talbot in this? Because growing up as a sibling of TJ, I imagine can feel tricky in a lot of ways, right? In terms of just some fear and anxiety, seeing this as a possibility or also even I'm I'm sure TJ in some ways literally does get, quote, more attention. He needs, right? Um and even if it is illogical to have feelings about this, our feelings don't respond to logic. They respond to themselves, right? So, where where Where's all that in your family? From the day TJ was born, that was a struggle that we had, right? I mean, the the day we brought his sister home, we went back to the hospital with TJ and we never even really got to traditionally bring her home in the sense that majority of people like we brought our first son home. That was the idea of bringing your child home and all the stuff that goes along with it. TJ never had that and to a degree, Talbot never had it, either. We were kind of a house divided for 40-something days after they were born, you know, I It was in the middle of the season.

TJ was in the hospital. Talbot was home with Tate. Um fortunately, we had both of our families and we had a lot of help that could help navigate it, but nothing replaces mom and dad. And in our minds, if we were at the hospital, we were failing the other two kids at home. And if we were out having pizza with the other two kids, trying to have a sense of normalcy, we had like this tremendous guilt. Like, I I It even kind of carried over when TJ was in the hospital and everyone had kind of known locally like what was going on.

Um people were pretty aware of the story. And like, we would try to make it a point where one of our family members, our parents, whoever it was, would go sit with TJ at the hospital and play get while we're waiting for the transplant. And he was completely normal. Like, he was playing air hockey and taking walks and coloring. He was a blast in the hospital cuz he felt fine. And um Cara and I would like take the other two for pizza. And like, we would both walk in and have this like weird feeling like, "Is everyone here? Like, why are the Olsens? I just read an article that their kid's waiting for a heart transplant and he like could die and they're out having pizza on a Friday night." And like, it we really had to say to ourselves like, "You know what?

Screw them." I hate this. I'm sorry for the language, but like I I had harsher language in my head, but but I'm glad you said that. If people are going to pass judgment because we're trying to find one night a week of normalcy for other two kids. Like, so like that was something we had to kind of work through as well. Like, there was all these mixed emotions about was serving one failing the other and we we really just came to the conclusion and I don't know if it's just cuz we just convinced ourselves that it was true or not but like we really just came to the point where the circumstances are what they are.

They're out of our control. We cannot let this rule us. We cannot let this control every decision we make because if we do, no matter what we do, we're wrong. The conflict of the kids being in two separate locations and the kids being divided and TJ getting a lot of the family attention. We're really proud of the way the other two have handled it. They were old enough this time around. They were babies. They don't even remember TJ's first couple surgeries.

But they were, you know, 10 and 8 and Talbot his twin sister and him are just like super connected. It's the twin thing is real. And we're just we say it to ourselves a lot like they could have been a lot more selfish. Our son never had his 10th birthday party. He had a birthday obviously, but he never had a 10th birthday party because

we were in the hospital. It was 2 days after TJ's transplant and never made it about himself.

And you know, those are the moments that you look back as parents and say, you know, we mess a lot of things up but somehow along the line we got something right. One of the things I'm sure that helped your kids or continues to help them access that perspective is it sounds like there's other moments where you do see their need to have pizza with their parents as valid, right? We don't need to compare is that as valid as sitting with the son who's waiting in the hospital. It's you can't put them on a seesaw next to each other.

TJ has needs and Talbot and Tate have needs and there's no exact equation to meet each one but it sounds like you really do put forward the effort to say it is important that we show up and have pizza with you probably not just talking about TJ non-stop probably talking about your life and what's going on that matters and then when there's times that we need you to understand that your birthday party is going to be on the back burner. Well, when our needs are met sometimes we can tolerate them not being met at other times and it sounds like you were really able to do that.

That's right. We tried and I think to Cara's point earlier about our communication with TJ we really tried to like over communicate with the other two. Mhm. We felt that the more they didn't feel things were kept from them good or bad, the less they felt anxious about like desiring that attention. Information doesn't scare kids. It's the absence of information. It's the same thing for adults. In the beginning of COVID what was terrifying that nobody knew anything about any of it, right?

And once you learn information, even if it's not great information, our bodies can rally. We can right? We can say, "Oh, I get it a little bit." When you're left alone in the dark, literally, right? That's terrifying especially for a kid. So, I think that's such a powerful example and for other families I imagine who have a kid going through medical issues the idea that you're protecting your other kids by leaving them out of it often completely well-intentioned but ends up leaving those kids extraordinarily anxious.

Yeah. No question cuz then your mind starts filling the blanks in, right? Right? Like your imagination fills the darkness to your analogy, right? Right? We felt like if we told them the news even if it was bad it probably wasn't as bad as they could have made something up in their mind because we didn't tell them what was really going on. Yeah. So, one of the things I've learned about the two of you is that you've done something larger coming out of what you've gone through with TJ and a desire to help others and support families. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

So, shortly after TJ's third open heart surgery. So, this was like 2014. Original idea? Yeah. Was after his first? Yeah, after his first Okay, so after he got out of his first surgery this was like 2012 2013. Yeah. Um we had brought TJ home and we were in a position fortunately that we were able to bring him care into the home. Uh we we hired a nurse who lived with us for 6 months which was the gap between him being discharged from the hospital and then going back for the stage two of what would be three open heart surgeries.

And it was Cara's idea that, you know, how cool would it be if we could bring this to everyone regardless of how

much it cost. So, that was the birth of What's the Hardest Yard program which is the program that we run here with Levine Children's Hospital and we launched it in 2013. So, we've gone on 8 years. We've been able to fully fund that all children whether they have something small like a heart cath after they're born because they have a leaky valve or they have a hole in the heart or something that's on the scale of severity not crazy serious but not like life-threatening all the way to a very very critical severe heart condition like our son had.

Whatever the needs are medically can be served in the home through the Hardest Yard program upon discharge. There's no financial requirements. There's no background checks. We don't care how many people live in the house. We don't care where you live. We don't care how nice your house We don't None of that factors. It's completely medically based. It was really able to grow and grow due to the support we've had and our story kind of resonating with a lot of people and just this past June which is really funny how things come full circle. So, this past December of 2020 we had a virtual opening of What's the Hardest Yard Congenital Heart Center and it's a 22,000 square foot state-of-the-art um multi-disciplinary cardiac center here at Levine Children's Hospital in Charlotte and it's all the subspecialties from heart transplant which at the time we funded this we had never stepped foot into heart transplant. So, that's December of 2020 it opens.

Lo and behold, we go take TJ for his appointment in May in the building in the clinic that we helped build and opened 6 months earlier and he was diagnosed in that clinic by the transplant team who was able to move into this brand new state-of-the-art clinic as a result and now TJ will do his monthly checkups for the first year there and then his subsequent periodic checkups for the rest of his life at the Hardest Yard Congenital Heart Center right down the street from our house. So, we're very passionate about our our foundation. It's something that we spend a lot of time and energy on and to meet families who come up to us in the pizza parlor at our 5K on Instagram and say like this baby and they're holding them in their arms, right? Like this baby went through your program. We had one family one year say, "I'm here running in your race with my baby's name on my shirt with all my closest friends because the nurse the Hardest Yard program the nurse you provided us is home caring for my baby and my entire family is here. It's why we do it."

I do want to take a quick moment and say that while we went through all this back in May June, we had like a our parents, our brothers and sisters, like a friend developed a meal train. Like every day it was just so unbelievable the um support we got from the city of Charlotte. It touched our hearts. Wow. What have you most learned about yourselves through through all this? Cuz I think for all parents if we're doing parenting well, our kids teach us way more than we teach them but I'm I'm sure in your case that's probably very true.

I think like you said um we learn more from our children and I think like TJ's strength and our other two children's strength has given Greg and I such peace, you know? We thank God every day for like blessing us with three of them, blessing us with TJ's journey. I think blessing each of them with each other and I think as long as we give them love and support and guidance and accountability every day, all in all we hope that they turn out fine.

Yeah, and I would say I would wish TJ would not have to go through this. Like if I had a magic wand, of course I would say I I wish he never went through any of this. And the day he was born till today, he lived a completely

normal life like his brother and sister and never went through any of this. Having said that I wouldn't change what the rest of us went through. You know, like I don't know if a lot of the things we do now, the lot of the things that we value our marriage, being parents, being children, you know, to their grandparents. Like how we our patience and like some of us more than others. I don't know if all of that would be the same if we hadn't gone through the last year a journey and I know it's so crazy because I don't want TJ to go through it but I don't want us to not go through it. So, it's like this weird kind of parallel. Um but as far as things that I took away and I truly mean this like it the val- the understanding, right?

When we first got married like we had been dating since college. It was fun. It was new. We enjoyed each other for a long time and it just that was the next step but like you don't really understand how important that partnership is until like your world is completely upside down and you're all you got. Right? Like that relationship and like valuing how important it was to have like a partner in life and not only the mother of your kids but like someone who just like could really get in the thick of this and like be on your side and go forward day in and day out and do it together.

Like I wish it wasn't through adversity that you get that perspective to how important it is but like I can't stress to people enough just like if you're going to get one thing right like figure out who you're going to do your life with because if you get that right you can pretty much handle the rest. And I know it's hard, like not everyone gets it right and it's not anyone's fault in a lot of cases, but like I can't stress enough just how important it's been, like it was Cara that we could do it with versus someone else, you know?

And I truly mean that. Like that's a huge Thank you. You're welcome. I mean, thank you for making me I believe that. But like I in my heart like truly believe that it made it made the whole thing possible. And I feel the same way. Thank you. She might not, but that's okay. That's for another episode. No, I I enjoyed this. This was a lot of fun. This was awesome for us. It was like a free session. Thank you.

to go have We're going to go have lunch and later. We're going to have The rest of our day is going to be smooth now. She's going to kiss She's going to kiss me tonight. She's going to give me a hug. All good things. Wow. Greg and Cara, you are just amazing. I am so grateful that Greg and Cara let me in on their parenting journey. I learned so much and I'm guessing you did, too.

This is an episode where summing things up with key takeaways, it just doesn't feel right. So instead, I'm just going to let this one sit. I know I'll reflect on themes of connection, truthful communication, resilience through distress, and I'll be thinking about the amazing Olsen family and their Hardest Yard Foundation. If you want to learn more about the Hardest Yard and the Olsens' newest charitable effort, Receiving Hope, check out r4r.org.

That's the letter R, the number four, and another R, .org. Thanks for listening to Good Inside. Let's stay connected. At goodinside.com, you can sign up for workshops and subscribe to Good Insider, my weekly email with scripts and strategies delivered right to your inbox. And for more ideas and tips, check out my Instagram, Dr. Becky at [goodinside](https://www.instagram.com/drbecky). Good Inside is produced by Beth Rowe and Brad Gage, and executive produced by Erica Belsky and me, Dr. Becky.

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