



AUTISM AND DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES TODAY

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A NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS, EDUCATORS AND OTHER PROFESSIONALS

Finding "Good Times" On the Conference Circuit

By Marion Wells and Ann Lyon Branning

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What has happened to strength-based thinking? Where have all the "Good Times" gone? YAP recently was represented at two conferences to promote the services that we can provide. At our booths we had a blanket that was designed to have conference attendees help us put the blanket together by tying a knot that would represent a "Good Time" story of strength, or something they learned from an individual with a developmental difference. Some attendees looked at us with blank stares, some smiled and kept walking, and others blurted out, "I don't have anything positive." We decided to reword the question, so then we began to get responses like, "There are so many, but I can't think." Then, the negative comments returned. That is when Ann Lyon Branning and Marion Wells thought, YAP has a lot of work to do.



Pictured (l to r): Marion Wells, conference attendee and Ann Lyon Branning.

Is sharing and talking about strengths and good times an uncomfortable subject? Can a neurotypical possibly learn from a person with a developmental difference? Clearly the answer to both questions is YES! And we set out to make the shift in the way people think! We then said that this was a challenging task and that others were having difficulty, as well. We asked them to tie a knot, but if they needed time to process and think of a strength they could always come back...and some did. The attendees began to talk about how individuals with differences taught them patience, and one parent said that her son helped her to see the pleasures in the "simple" things in life and to not get stuck on labels. One of our blanket winners (pictured) was so excited about winning. She spoke to us about how happy it made her and how her boyfriend would be happy with the blanket, too! That is when we thought about how we are more alike than different. Who wouldn't want to be wrapped up in a blanket that was tied together with strengths and Good Times in every knot?

Our blanket turned out to be a social experiment of sorts. We left both conferences thinking that we made a few changes in the way people are thinking. Lots of people said that they were going to take the blanket idea back to their schools, offices, and families to try to build and reinforce strengths. Really, who doesn't love a day filled with positives, strengths, and, of course, GOOD TIMES!!!!



The Arizona Autism Training Adventure

By Stacia Ortega

Four days, five presentations, over 246 attendees, over 600 miles, and over 10 hours of driving time-wow!

The idea was to provide a presentation throughout Arizona to referring authorities, their provider networks, parents, youth, and agencies such as the Division of Developmental Disabilities, Rehabilitation Services Agency, educators, and clinicians from all levels, as well as management and supervisory staff; on YAP's philosophy and approach to providing services to those on the autism spectrum. The hope of answering a need where alternatives to service provision are being requested.

Youth Advocate Programs' Ann Branning, Michelle Miller, Matt Gromis, Janet Crawford, and Stacia Ortega presented across Arizona's southern, central, western and eastern counties, "A New Light on the Autism Spectrum; with attendees including parents, caregivers, teachers, DDD staff, case managers, clinicians, therapists, and even transportation specialist. This unique interactive program gave even the most seasoned clinician an opportunity to challenge their knowledge and approach. Task Analysis is always a great equalizer for folks to have the opportunity to appreciate the uniqueness of the youth they serve. Ann continues as the reigning champion of keeping the sandpaper clipped throughout the presentations!

Arizona also provided the presenters a look into life in the southwest and the cultural differences and needs unique to life here; especially the need for materials and presentations in Spanish and to family members that are often unaware of what options are available, as well as addressing issues of stigma. Communication all around was the message that folks in Arizona received and the message YAP received.



YAP presenters (l to r) Matt Gromis, Ann Lyon Branning, Stacia Ortega, Michelle Miller and Janet Crawford.

Conference: Rethinking Autism

By Janet Crawford

On April 8, 2010, YAP's Autism Institute will host a one day conference in Phoenix, Arizona. Keynote speaker Ann Donnellan will guide participants in rethinking our knowledge of autism based on the findings of self-advocates, neuroscientists, and other researchers. Her presentation emphasizes the role of sensory movement differences, and the ways in which awareness of those differences can help us move beyond negative assumptions about a person's intellect, sociability, and communicative capacity. Attendees will acquire a powerful new lens through which to view the experience of autism, and practical suggestions about how to provide effective and respectful accommodations and supports.

Breakout sessions will also be part of the day, which will include:

- Parenting with Pride;
- Art and Autism;
- Social Skills 101: Ideas for IEPs;
- Sensory Accommodations;
- Behavior as Communication; and
- The Hidden Curriculum.

For more information and a registration form, check out our website at www.yapinc.org.



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Relationships Article

By Charlie Remy

I have struggled for years to understand how romantic relationships work - always being on the "sidelines" while my peers seemed to be successfully navigating the dating scene. While my diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome in the spring of 2008 did not change my life (I had known I had it for awhile), it was comforting to realize that I was not alone in having relationship problems.

While many neurotypicals (people who do not have autism) struggle with relationships, those of us on the autism spectrum face particular barriers including not understanding unwritten social codes, boundaries, and the steps required to form and maintain relationships. Most neurotypicals tend to pick this up with relative ease, yet people on the spectrum must make the effort to learn it.

When I attend conferences for adults with Asperger's, I quickly realize that I am very high functioning compared to many of those present. While I am very thankful for this, one of my biggest frustrations with Asperger's is my inability to experience a romantic relationship. I am 24 years old and have never been in one. This causes me to frequently feel lonely and depressed, especially when I see so many neurotypicals involved in happy, successful relationships.

My problems with relationships started my sophomore year of high school when my school went coed. I tried to be friendly to the new girls on campus yet I was received with indifference at best. I was pegged a "stalker" by a few who did not understand my true motives and this rumor quickly spread across the school. I ended up being defamed and even nice girls rejected me because they bought into the malicious lies that were being propagated about me.

I went to college at a small university in North Carolina with a student body of about sixty percent women and forty percent men. After attending an orientation session when I was a senior in high school, my father remarked to me that "if you cannot meet someone with all the girls on this campus, then I don't know where you can." I had my hopes raised by the prospect of a gender balance in my favor. Un-

fortunately, I did not date whatsoever in college. Like always, I poured my heart and soul into school work, being successful academically, yet quite a failure at relationships since I simply did not know what to do.

I took a semester off from school and started my master's in library science at a university with an all female undergrad population and most of its graduate level programs being coed. Again, the gender balance was in my favor so this gave me some hope. I lived in the graduate dorm on campus and ate a lot in the cafeteria which gave me the opportunity to meet a lot of the undergraduate girls on a surface level. Nevertheless, I felt a little strange being one of the few men on the residential campus and decided to maintain a low profile so that I would not be misunderstood again. This led to eating a lot of meals alone and experiencing a lot of solitude in my room.

After some debate in my head, I decided to give speed dating a try on two occasions this past summer. I signed up online and went to a local restaurant on the night of the event. The men moved to a different table every six minutes while the women stayed in the same place. Unfortunately I did not find anyone who truly interested me since I realized that I did not have much in common with the people there. Many of them did not have the same level of education as I nor were they intellectually curious. I cannot say I am surprised speed dating did not work - in the end its quite superficial and forced.

Although I have yet to experience a romantic relationship, I have found the social networking site Facebook a helpful tool to get to know people. It allows me to find people with similar interests and get to know them online without investing a lot of time, energy or money. I must say I have met some great people through Facebook that I otherwise would have never been able to get to know. I am hopeful that one of these days a virtual friendship will develop into a real life romantic relationship.

Any suggestions or advice regarding romantic relationships? Feel free to email me at crr03@maine.rr.com



“One for the Books”: A Self-Advocate Presents a Unique Autism Parenting Guide

By Pat Amos

William Stillman's latest book, *Empowered Autism Parenting: Celebrating (and Defending) Your Child's Place in the World* (Jossey-Bass, 2009), is not only a breath of fresh air in an increasingly stuffy room, it could signal the beginning of an entire new genre of autism parenting books. Rather than handing parents an overwhelming check-list of treatments and therapies to try, cautioning them to check their blood pressure and beware the dangers of stress, or acquainting them with the “stages of grief” through which parents supposedly must pass, the author does something totally refreshing: he reminds us that parenting a child on the autism spectrum can be rewarding and delightful. That's right, the secret is out now. Parenting these children need not be a process of lowering expectations or settling for something less, because autism “comes with myriad gifts if you can be open to seeing this perspective.”

First, full disclosure: yes, that's my name on the “dedication” page. William has done me an undeserved honor because, as my young people (they're not kids anymore) would tell you, I still have a lot to learn. But maybe that's the point: we parents have to stop thinking only in terms of what we should teach our children, and spend more time learning from them. We have to engage more with their passions and enthusiasms, and worry less about what the neighbors might think. We have to believe in and defend their intellect, their deep emotional lives, and—as William puts it—their “place in the world.” We have to learn to listen, and be ready to be changed by what we hear.

The idea of learning from people with autism, sometimes referred to by therapists and teachers as “following the child's lead,” has too often been misunderstood. It has been portrayed by detractors as “anything goes” parenting, as a laid-back approach and a lack of needed structure. Here William's book is right on target as he traces the low expectations involved when a child (or adult) with autism is left to engage in endless, aimless, age-inappropriate activities in the misguided belief that they desire nothing more. However, he contrasts this tyranny of low expectations not with an agenda to fix or “cure” children of autism, but with the intense, purposeful process of engaging with them to explore and elaborate their “passions” and interests. And there is nothing aimless about it.

Genuine interests can be recognized because they open new vistas on the world and bring us together in organized, meaningful, and joyful ways.

Finding and honoring these interests also requires us to “presume intellect,” a stance which, William reminds us, “is the prerequisite to establishing a respectful, reciprocal relationship with your child.” He makes use of compelling personal anecdotes to demonstrate that parent empowerment and child empowerment go hand in hand. William's clarity about this issue—that parents can honor and follow their child's lead, have a great time, *and* be responsibly fostering their child's development—should be very reassuring to many families.

The author's other great strength is in his ability to de-mystify and democratize the experience of autism. He reminds us that we all have occasional “brain fades” and “instances when the brain vetoes body signals,” and urges us to use these moments to gain insight into the mind-body connections and disconnections of autism. This is especially important when we encounter the types of behavior characterized as “acting out” or “non-communicative.” Recognizing that the body can have a mind of its own, over which the brain does not always have control, can help us to understand and support people with autism rather than mistakenly concluding that they are unintelligent, unfeeling, or deliberately uncooperative.

Empowered Autism Parenting offers not only a powerful vision in which autism ceases to be a puzzle or a cause for pity, it also gives the reader specific advice in areas such as coping with a child's sensory sensitivities, fostering communication, evaluating various therapies and medications, helping children become effective self-advocates, making the most of the IEP process, and taking care of one's own wellbeing and healthy state of mind. Parents will appreciate having suggestions that they can put immediately into practice, all delivered in a style that is conversational and jargon-free. Best of all, they will appreciate William Stillman's unwavering and unconditional belief in the intellect and capacity of people with autism, and in the power of relationships to realize their potential.

Author and self-advocate William Stillman has presented trainings through Youth Advocate Programs. His website is: <http://www.williamstillman.com/about.html> Reviewer Pat Amos is a consultant and trainer with Youth Advocate Programs, specializing in sensorimotor accommodations, positive approaches, and parenting issues.

