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In this issue

President's Pen	1-2
Monthly meetings	2
Resource packet	3
Sponsors	3
Community events	3-4
Starcatcher	5-6
Hiring a caregiver	7-8
Amazon Smile	9
Big Red Safety Box	9
Realtor Fundraiser	9

FROM THE PRESIDENT'S PEN

*By Nagla Moussa*

ARD/IEP meetings are often very daunting for parents. The law, the language, the acronyms, and add to that the emotional stress and grieving. Understanding the IEP process is key to a successful IEP meeting. Here is my simple version of the key components (listed in approximate order of their appearance) that parents need to pay attention to during an IEP meeting,

Eligibility criteria is usually the first thing that is reviewed during the meeting. What disability is the school district classifying your child as having in order to qualify for special education services usually is determined by the Full Individual Assessment, FIE? This simply means a disability is suspected and brought to the attention of school staff, a full battery of assessments has been conducted by a qualified professional or professionals, and they determined whether or not the student has a disability and what it is. They also make observations based on the assessment as to what support and what recommendations they have to help the student.

Evaluations are the next step in the process: Are all evaluations current? Has there been new difficulties requiring new assessments? IDEA law allows for a full evaluation to be conducted every 3 years once a student has been receiving special education. The evaluations don't have to follow that schedule. They can happen sooner if the parent or teachers feel they need new assessments to judge what services are needed. Or if they decide in 3 years that no new assessments are needed, the parent can waive the 3 year evaluation. Evaluations are key to services and appropriate goals. It's important to ask for them, review them carefully and discuss them knowingly at the IEP meeting. You need to have data to base your service requests and goals on. Evaluations provide that data!

Next important IEP component in the process is the goals. Goals need to be based on thorough information, they need to be specific and not vague, and they need to be written in a way that can be measured. Student progress depends on these goals, and this is why they need to be specific and measurable!

Services, or the schedule of services, is next. This tells you what services your child will receive, and for how long. It also tells you where this service will be provided. The location of these services (including special education services) determines the placement of your child. This is important because of Least Restrictive Environment, or whether or not your child will be included in general education with non disabled peers. It also tells you if your child will receive related services such as Occupational Therapy, Speech, and transportation, and for how long.

## FROM THE PRESIDENT'S PEN

Important tips to remember during an IEP meeting are to ask as many questions as you need to understand all of these IEP components and what they will look like in the classroom. You can also decide to take your Prior Written Notice time (a 5 day period the law allow you as a safeguard to take the IEP home and review it before it is implemented). Don't be afraid to disagree and to make other suggestions. Remember you are a very important part of the IEP committee, and you are the expert on your own child!

## MONTHLY SUPPORT GROUP MEETINGS

### **Parent Get Together and Support Group Meeting**

For parents of children with autism of all ages:

When: 2nd Tuesday of each month, 9:30a.m.-11:00a.m. (**Original Pancake House**, 2301 North Central Expwy #156, Plano, TX 75075)

3rd Tuesday of each month, 11:30a.m. - 1:00p.m. (**Corner Bakery 2401 Preston Rd A**, Plano, TX (In the Whole Foods Market Parking lot).

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### **Self-Advocacy Group**

For Teens (7th Grade and up) & Adults with Autism Participants will learn about autism and its effect on their lives, while developing a great appreciation for their individual gifts and talents. It is important that participants know they have autism. Trained volunteers, including some with autism, facilitate this group. Bring an object, book, picture or other item that represents your talents and interests, \$5.00 to pay for pizza, snacks and drinks.

When : 1st Tuesday of each month, during the school year, at 7:00 pm

Where : St. Andrew UMC, 1401 Mira Vista Blvd. Plano, TX 75093. Please check in at the Theater room upstairs on the 2nd floor)

\*\*\* This meeting will be a Luau social\*\*\*

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Please note that there will be no support group meetings in June and July. We hope to see you in August at our Family Swim Fun event!!!

## PARENT RESOURCE PACKET

Looking for an autism friendly pediatrician, dentist, private school, hair salon, attorney , therapy providers for speech, OT, ABA, or just about any services that make your child lives easier?

Email Nagla Moussa at nagla\_alvin@verizon.net for a comprehensive parent resource packet. It's invaluable!

## PLEASE SUPPORT OUR SPONSORS

St. Andrew United Methodist Church

Concept Connections-Jenny Keese

Junior League of Collin County

The Behavior Exchange - Tammy Cline-Soza

Gordon Biersch Restaurant/Kraft Works Corporation

Region 10 Educational Service Center

RBC Wealth Management (Plano)

Therapy and Beyond - Regina Crone Ph.D

Help, Hope, Solutions – Cristina Busu

## COMMUNITY EVENTS

NAA-NT hosted its annual Teacher Appreciation Dinner on April 3rd, 2018 at the Glen Eagles Country Club in Plano, TX. About 150 teachers, therapists and para professionals were celebrated for the difference they make in the lives of our children. Guests enjoyed an evening with dinner, entertainment, raffles drawing with prizes of all guests and fun and laughter with the families that honored them.

**A huge thank you to our sponsors and all those amazing people in our community who solicited gifts for the raffle drawings:**

Gold sponsor : Epic Strides, Angel Pollard, Program Director, and Mandi Redmon, Business director.

Silver Sponsor : All Behaviors Considered, Archana Dhurka founder and director.

Monica Garcia and the JP Morgan Chase staff for filling all the teacher bags

Dori Schaefer, Francheska Medina, Therapy and Beyond ABA Clinic, Progressive Pediatrics, Sherry Pearson, MariAnn Gattelaró, Marianna Bond, Dolly Thomas, Lucia Weber, Kelly Barnes, Rose Henke for sponsoring and soliciting gifts

# COMMUNITY EVENTS



## Gabrielle Banzon

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North Texas Performing Arts houses a program designed for youth and adults with special needs called the Starcatchers. This program gives students opportunities to grow through drama, music, dance, and visual art. These opportunities are performance-based, such as musical productions and rock concerts, and curriculum-based, such as visual art and dance, both aiming to further the development of important life skills. Every “Starcatcher” gets a chance to shine.

However, the performing arts impact more than just the individual. They also have an impact on the community. What makes this program unique is not just the work with the students, but its relational approach to the work. Each student is paired with a neurotypical intern, who assists their development through rehearsals and shadows them during performances. In addition to fostering personal confidence and creativity, the Starcatchers work to foster collective compassion and empathy.

Travie Burt is a veteran of this program, having been part of productions for the past 8 years. His mother, Brenda Burt, notes the impact of these interns on Travie and his fellow actors.



“The best thing we have gained from participating in Starcatchers has been the social interaction with the other actors and interns. The interns are such special young people. We appreciate so much the amount of patience and dedication they show and how they figure out just how to best assist our Starcatchers.”

While the Starcatcher program is open to all youth and adults with special needs, regardless of the particular diagnosis, many are on the Autistic Spectrum. Students with autism generally have difficulties with communicating and forming

relationships. In our musical productions, they get to develop and improve those skills in a fun way and in a safe and supportive environment. Learning individual scripts reinforces word retention and retrieval skills, acting out scenes models emotional expression and social interaction, and singing and dancing to musical numbers promotes vocal projection, gross motor skills, and group cohesion.

Fred Trafton sees how learning lines and acting out scenes had increased the development of communication skills in his son, Connor.

“My son learned to read out loud, work with other actors, and manage his frustration and fear of performing working with the NTPA Starcatchers. And he’s gone from protesting every practice to being upset when we can’t make a rehearsal. This has been the best educational and therapeutic opportunity for him since forever!”

## STAR CATCHER IN YOUR CHILD

While Liz Wetherington mentions the physical benefits for her son, also named Connor, through musical numbers.

“Connor's gross movement has improved, thanks to the dances and roles he's had. He has low muscle tone and tires very easily. But through choreography rehearsals, his endurance has improved.”



The Starcatchers aim to create a moment to shine for every individual. If certain words or sentences are difficult for a student, the script is adapted to suit their verbal capabilities. If a dance number requires movement beyond a student's range of motion, more simple choreography is created. These accommodations are not meant to point out a student's weaknesses, but to highlight their abilities and promote confidence.

Bill Smith recalls how the Starcatchers helped his son, Billy, to shine.

“As a parent of an autistic child you have so many hopes and wants for them. You want a safe place where

they can be challenged and grow while making meaningful connections. You hope they can find a place where they can be recognized for their unique abilities and the joy they can bring. Our son's autism in past has been a battle ground for his self-confidence. He can be socially awkward at times and can have difficulty with making friends. We tried various sports, scouts, and group activities but never found a good fit. The amazing thing about theatre, especially Starcatchers, is the chance it offers the child to work in a group and still have a sense of personal self-accomplishment. Starcatchers engaged my son and has motivated him to become more involved in theatre and become more outgoing. He has more confidence in himself and is now constantly singing. This alone is a gift I will cherish more than we can ever explain because at 2 years old he was completely nonverbal. Since performing with Starcatchers, he makes better eye contact and does not fear being in front of crowds. This is in thanks to the staff and volunteers. They treat each performer with dignity and caring. This program has truly been a blessing. “

Join the Starcatchers this summer at our Plano, Dallas, and Fairview locations. More information coming soon at [www.starcatchers.org](http://www.starcatchers.org)

Gabrielle Banzon, MA, MT-BC  
Starcatchers Therapeutic Coordinator



## Sherry Pearson

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Finding, hiring and keeping a care giver/respice provider can be a daunting tasks for autism parents.

As the cliché says, it can be a lot like kissing a few toads to find the prince or princess we are seeking. Years back, when my son was around 10 years old, I decided I needed additional assistance to care for him. I had neglected to take care of myself as so many caregivers do. Getting the supplementary help allowed me to look at my son's needs and therapy programs with a fresher perspective.

It is an adjustment in the beginning having people in your personal space while allowing close access to your child as well as to siblings, and your home in general. I decided that if my son needed long term care this would not seem strange to him later in life and therefore we needed to make it part of our weekly routine for life. We have also found many lifelong friends to our family through our respice providers that have been a tremendous blessing.

You will interview prospective providers and decide if you think that it is a good fit for your child and your family.

I have a list of questions I ask once I have narrowed the in person interviews from the over the phone interviews. Some of these questions may include, "Are there any behaviors you cannot work with?", "How will you assure my family's information is respected and private?", "How have you handled a past emergency?" "Are you ok with not bringing gluten or other food allergens into our home since my child could accidentally consume it?" and this last one is important if you are using college students: "What is the duration of time you are looking at fulfilling with us?"

Once you completed your interviews, I strongly advise contacting references. Back ground checks are easily accessible today as well.

You will have to weigh the pros and cons of bringing in an entry level person or an experienced provider. The cost will be quite a bit higher with experience but your training time should be minimal. If you decide to bring in an entry level person and put the time into train you can customize the process exactly to your needs. If you have a strong ABA program sometimes parents feel better about using a certified RBT as their respice provider to support generalization of skills and not inadvertently reinforce negative behaviors.

CPR & first aid training is always a good idea. I prefer the in person classes vs the online course. I have used a local husband and wife team that offer multiple class opportunities every week in Plano. They have the bragging rights of providing the most CPR certifications in Texas in 2017. Their # is 972-424-6180 for Greg Carver.

It is also a good idea to leave a copy of your insurance cards and a written or typed authorization for your child to receive emergency medical treatment by the provider. This will allow your child to receive immediate medical treatment while you are en route to the emergency room or out of town in case of an accident. I am thankful we have never had to use this, but have peace of mind knowing it is in place.

I have found through the years of "kissing a lot of toads" to determine early on what motivates the caregiver we have hired. Is it a certain salary, minimal work hours, a holiday bonus or exposure to autism and future references for their field of study? Maybe a combination of the few mentioned. One additional agreement I make with our care provider is that we will pay them for any cancelled hours if we cancel

## HIRING YOUR HOME CAREGIVER

within 24 hours. This goes a long way in letting them know you respect their time as well as they have an assurance of their paycheck through scheduled hours with your family.

You will also give feedback on the job they are doing and in determining the effectiveness of their work.



Learning from my expectations over the years, A job description and daily check list seems to work best for my family. I will be happy to share these with you if you find yourself stuck in getting it developed. My contact email is [snspearson@verizon.net](mailto:snspearson@verizon.net)

There are a few places I have found to be my best resource over the years in posting an ad inquiry.

Look at local colleges and universities that have job postings for their students where you can post the job for free. Contact the departments that are studying psychology, behavioral science, education, occupational therapy or speech pathology and ask where they allow fliers to be posted on their campus. These students will be more motivated to work with your child as it will give them exposure for their field of study. <https://www.utdallas.edu/bbs/degrees/psysbs/>

Look for an online local autism forum where you can post a job ad for a caregiver or respite for free. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/462146077201894/>

Many parents use online classifieds such as CareNow or Sitter in the City.

I have had the best response on indeed classifieds this past year. <https://www.indeed.com/>

Also, check into respite grants to help pay for this necessary break for you as the primary caregiver. One resource for the Collin County area is Life Path Systems. These small grants were invaluable to me when my son was younger so I could go to medical appointments, grocery shopping or attend to my Mother while she was ill. <http://www.lifepathsystems.org/services>

Wishing you the best of luck while searching for your caregiver and hopefully not finding too many toads along the journey!

*Sherry Pearson is a veteran Warrior Mom to Tristen (age 19)*



## DO YOU SHOP AT AMAZON?



Love shopping at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)?

Support families with Autism all year round just by doing your normal shopping! Just click <http://smile.amazon.com/ch/20-8388811> to support the National Autism Association when you purchase at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com). Your Amazon prices remain the same, and with each purchase, NAA-NT receives a donation. Thanks for your support!

## DO YOU HAVE A CHILD THAT WANDERS?



Keep your  
child safe!

The National Autism Association's Big Red Safety Box is back in stock! If you have a child that wanders or know one that wanders, please click on this link <http://nationalautismassociation.org/big-red-safety-boxes-now-available> to learn how you can get this box with tools to help keep children with autism safe.

## BUYING OR SELLING A HOUSE?

We are excited to have the generous support of a real estate agent, Kirk Iverson! Kirk will donate 25% of net proceeds directly to NAA-NT anytime someone buys or sells a home and mentions NAA-NT as a referral.

Check out his page <https://www.facebook.com/kirk.iverson.942?fref=ts> or <http://BuyHousesSellHomes.KWRealty.com>

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