

## FROM THE PRESIDENT'S PEN



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### In this issue

President's Pen	1-2
Monthly meetings	2
Upcoming events	3
Resource packet	3
Sponsors	3
Tips for anxious child	4-6
Unexpected	7-9
Amazon Smile	10
Big Red Safety Box	10
Realtor Fundraiser	10

## FROM THE PRESIDENT'S PEN

*By Nagla Moussa*

Divorce is very difficult on children especially younger ones. Adding Autism or any other disability to a divorce situation makes it very complicated and requires a lot of thought, planning, and much consideration of the future. In a family with no disability, the usual scenario involves planning for a child's needs through high school graduation at age 18 or maybe even college graduation. If the divorce involves a child with autism or any other disability, supervision, care, and financial support continues into adulthood and throughout that individual's natural life span.

Financial support is just one aspect of planning in a divorce situation. Many other considerations have to be negotiated between the divorcing parents. How to make the child/adult understand what is happening and whether that individual will need very specialized counseling to deal with the divorce and the change in life situation. It's very important to put the child/adult with disability's welfare first and consider what they need to deal with the loss of both parents living under one roof. Behavioral issues might arise due to anxiety and transition. Therapy, understanding and consistency will be required from both parents to help their child acclimate to the new reality.

Another consideration is working out guardianship issues once a child reaches 18 years of age. Prior to that, working out care and visitation between the two parents is critical. Communication and schedules need to be very clear and everything has to be agreed upon ahead of time and spelled out in the divorce decree. For the best interest of the child, parents need to collaborate, put their feelings and negative emotions aside and concentrate on making the transition smooth for their child. Everyone has to remember that children with autism and disabilities often can't communicate their sadness, anxiety, and other feelings verbally, even if they are very high functioning and very verbal. Often behavior is their first mode of communication and making every effort to be consistent with schedules helps eliminate some of the loss of control, anxiety, and feelings of chaos and fear of the unknown.

It's important to pay special attention, have an agreement, and consider your child's medical and biomedical needs including any special diet, alternative therapies, supplements as well as medication. This can be an area of conflict for divorcing spouses especially if one spouse is not in agreement regarding alternative therapies, diet, nutrition, and supplements. Specific attention and

## FROM THE PRESIDENT'S PEN

documentation has to be spelled out in the divorce decree regarding this area of need since it can have some detrimental effects on the child's health if not implemented.

Finally it's very important for both parents to take care of themselves emotionally and physically. Divorce is extremely stressful, and can take a toll on mental and physical health. This can make you less effective in meeting your child's needs. Finding a support group, seeking counseling, speaking with your spiritual guide, and surrounding yourself with supportive family members and friends who are willing to help you watch your child in case you need a break or unable to care for your child is extremely necessary!

Here are some helpful articles, resources, and books to assist you in making informed decisions about the future.

<https://www.carautismroadmap.org/divorce-custody-and-asd/>

<https://www.modernmom.com/10-tips-to-help-kids-with-autism-cope-with-divorce-117367.html>

<https://www.amazon.com/Divorce-Social-Story-Happens-Parents/dp/B01FL00XLO> [https://www.amazon.com/Special-Needs-Child-Divorce-Evaluating/dp/1604424923/ref=pd\\_lpo\\_sbs\\_14\\_t\\_0?\\_encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=6F5QH4SHMPGXEBD71FV3](https://www.amazon.com/Special-Needs-Child-Divorce-Evaluating/dp/1604424923/ref=pd_lpo_sbs_14_t_0?_encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=6F5QH4SHMPGXEBD71FV3)

## 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, (August - May) 9:30a.m.-11:00a.m. (**Original Pancake House**, 2301 North Central Expwy #156, Plano, TX 75075)

3rd Tuesday of each month, (August - May) 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, (September - May), 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)

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### Family Swim/Picnic Fun

Bring your picnic basket, wear your bathing suit, flip flops, bring your sun block and join us for a fun family swim time. Admission is paid for by NAA-NT. Please bring your own picnic supplies, food, drink and towels. No glass containers please.

When : Tuesday August 7th, 2018 4:30pm to 6:30pm

Where : Jack Carter Pool, [2601 Pleasant Valley Dr, Plano, TX 75023](#) .

RSVP: [Nagla\\_alvin@verizon.net](mailto:Nagla_alvin@verizon.net)

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### Reading Comprehension Seminar

Learn ways to improve your child reading comprehension form expert Lisa Brackin.

When: Tuesday September 4th, 2018 at 7:00p.m.

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

## 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](mailto: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

## Renee Jain

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As all the kids line up to go to school, your son, Timmy, turns to you and says, “I don’t want to take the bus. My stomach hurts. Please don’t make me go.” You cringe and think, Here we go again. What should be a simple morning routine explodes into a daunting challenge.

You look at Timmy and see genuine terror. You want to comfort him. You want to ease the excessive worry that’s become part and parcel of his everyday life. First, you try logic. “Timmy, we walk an extra four blocks to catch this bus because this driver has an accident-free driving record!” He doesn’t budge.

You provide reassurance. “I promise you’ll be OK. Timmy, look at me... you trust me, right?” Timmy nods. A few seconds later he whispers, “Please don’t make me go.”

You resort to anger: “Timothy Christopher, you will get on this bus RIGHT NOW, or there will be serious consequences. No iPad for one week!” He looks at you as if you’re making him walk the plank. He climbs onto the bus, defeated. You feel terrible.

If any of this sounds familiar, know you are not alone. Most parents would move mountains to ease their child’s pain. Parents of kids with anxiety would move planets and stars as well. It hurts to watch your child worry over situations that, frankly, don’t seem that scary. Here’s the thing: To your child’s mind, these situations are genuinely threatening. And even perceived threats can create a real nervous system response. We call this response anxiety and I know it well.

I’d spent the better part of my childhood covering up a persistent, overwhelming feeling of worry until, finally, in my early twenties, I decided to seek out a solution. What I’ve learned over the last two decades is that many people suffer from debilitating worry. In fact, 40 million American adults, as well as 1 in 8 children, suffer from anxiety. Many kids miss school, social activities and a good night’s rest just from the worried thoughts in their head. Many parents suffer from frustration and a feeling of helplessness when they witness their child in this state day in, day out.

What I also learned is that while there is no one-size-fits-all solution for anxiety, there are a plethora of great research-based techniques that can help manage it — many of which are simple to learn. WAIT! Why didn’t my parents know about this? Why didn’t I know about it? Why don’t they teach these skills in school?

I wish I could go back in time and teach the younger version of myself how to cope, but of course, that’s not possible. What is possible is to try to reach as many kids and parents as possible with these coping skills. What is possible is to teach kids how to go beyond just surviving to really finding meaning, purpose and happiness in their lives. To this end, I created an anxiety relief program for kids called GoZen! Here are 9 ideas straight from that program that parents of anxious children can try right away:

### 1. Stop Reassuring Your Child

Your child worries. You know there is nothing to worry about, so you say, “Trust me. There’s nothing to worry about.” Done and done, right? We all wish it were that simple. Why does your reassurance fall on deaf ears? It’s actually not the ears causing the issue. Your anxious child desperately wants to listen to you, but the brain won’t let it happen. During periods of anxiety, there is a rapid dump of chemicals and mental transitions executed in your body for survival. One by-product is that the prefrontal cortex — or more logical part of the brain — gets put on hold while the more automated emotional brain takes over. In other words, it is really hard for your child to think clearly, use logic or even remember how to complete basic tasks. What should you do instead of trying to rationalize the worry away? Try something I call the FEEL method:

# TIPS FOR PARENTS OF THE ANXIOUS CHILD

- ¥ Freeze: pause and take some deep breaths with your child. Deep breathing can help reverse the nervous system response.
- ¥ Empathize: anxiety is scary. Your child wants to know that you get it.
- ¥ Evaluate: once your child is calm, it's time to figure out possible solutions.
- ¥ Let Go: Let go of your guilt; you are an amazing parent giving your child the tools to manage their worry.

## 2. Highlight Why Worrying is Good

Remember, anxiety is tough enough without a child believing that Something is wrong with me. Many kids even develop anxiety about having anxiety. Teach your kids that worrying does, in fact, have a purpose.

When our ancestors were hunting and gathering food there was danger in the environment, and being worried helped them avoid attacks from the saber-toothed cat lurking in the bush. In modern times, we don't have a need to run from predators, but we are left with an evolutionary imprint that protects us: worry.

Worry is a protection mechanism. Worry rings an alarm in our system and helps us survive danger. Teach your kids that worry is perfectly normal, it can help protect us, and everyone experiences it from time to time. Sometimes our system sets off false alarms, but this type of worry (anxiety) can be put in check with some simple techniques.

## 3. Bring Your Child's Worry to Life

As you probably know, ignoring anxiety doesn't help. But bringing worry to life and talking about it like a real person can. Create a worry character for your child. In GoZen we created Widdle the Worrier. Widdle personifies anxiety. Widdle lives in the old brain that is responsible for protecting us when we're in danger. Of course, sometimes Widdle gets a little out of control and when that happens, we have to talk some sense into Widdle. You can use this same idea with a stuffed animal or even role-playing at home.

Personifying worry or creating a character has multiple benefits. It can help demystify this scary physical response children experience when they worry. It can reactivate the logical brain, and it's a tool your children can use on their own at any time.

## 4. Teach Your Child to Be a Thought Detective

Remember, worry is the brain's way of protecting us from danger. To make sure we're really paying attention, the mind often exaggerates the object of the worry (e.g., mistaking a stick for a snake). You may have heard that teaching your children to think more positively could calm their worries. But the best remedy for distorted thinking is not positive thinking; it's accurate thinking. Try a method we call the 3Cs:

- ¥ Catch your thoughts: Imagine every thought you have floats above your head in a bubble (like what you see in comic strips). Now, catch one of the worried thoughts like "No one at school likes me."
- ¥ Collect evidence: Next, collect evidence to support or negate this thought. Teach your child not to make judgments about what to worry about based only on feelings. Feelings are not facts. (Supporting evidence: "I had a hard time finding someone to sit with at lunch yesterday." Negating evidence: "Sherry and I do homework together—she's a friend of mine.")
- ¥ Challenge your thoughts: The best (and most entertaining) way to do this is to teach your children to have a debate within themselves.

## 5. Allow Them to Worry

As you know, telling your children not to worry won't prevent them from doing so. If your children could simply shove their feelings away, they would. But allowing your children to worry openly, in limited doses, can be helpful. Create a daily ritual called "Worry Time" that lasts 10 to 15 minutes. During this ritual encourage your

children to release all their worries in writing. You can make the activity fun by decorating a worry box. During worry time there are no rules on what constitutes a valid worry; anything goes. When the time is up, close the box and say good-bye to the worries for the day.

## **6. Help Them Go from What If to What Is**

You may not know this, but humans are capable of time travel. In fact, mentally we spend a lot of time in the future. For someone experiencing anxiety, this type of mental time travel can exacerbate the worry. A typical time traveler asks what-if questions: “What if I can’t open my locker and I miss class?” “What if Suzy doesn’t talk to me today?”

Research shows that coming back to the present can help alleviate this tendency. One effective method of doing this is to practice mindfulness exercises. Mindfulness brings a child from what if to what is. To do this, help your child simply focus on their breath for a few minutes.

## **7. Avoid Avoiding Everything that Causes Anxiety**

Do your children want to avoid social events, dogs, school, planes or basically any situation that causes anxiety? As a parent, do you help them do so? Of course! This is natural. The flight part of the flight-fight-freeze response urges your children to escape the threatening situation. Unfortunately, in the long run, avoidance makes anxiety worse.

So what’s the alternative? Try a method we call laddering. Kids who are able to manage their worry break it down into manageable chunks. Laddering uses this chunking concept and gradual exposure to reach a goal.

Let’s say your child is afraid of sitting on the swings in the park. Instead of avoiding this activity, create mini-goals to get closer to the bigger goal (e.g., go to the edge of the park, then walk into the park, go to the swings, and, finally, get on a swing). You can use each step until the exposure becomes too easy; that’s when you know it’s time to move to the next rung on the ladder.

## **8. Help Them Work Through a Checklist**

What do trained pilots do when they face an emergency? They don’t wing it (no pun intended)!; they refer to their emergency checklists. Even with years of training, every pilot works through a checklist because, when in danger, sometimes it’s hard to think clearly.

When kids face anxiety they feel the same way. Why not create a checklist so they have a step-by-step method to calm down? What do you want them to do when they first feel anxiety coming on? If breathing helps them, then the first step is to pause and breathe. Next, they can evaluate the situation. In the end, you can create a hard copy checklist for your child to refer to when they feel anxious.

## **9. Practice Self-Compassion**

Watching your child suffer from anxiety can be painful, frustrating, and confusing. There is not one parent that hasn’t wondered at one time or another if they are the cause of their child’s anxiety. Here’s the thing, research shows that anxiety is often the result of multiple factors (i.e., genes, brain physiology, temperament, environmental factors, past traumatic events, etc.). Please keep in mind, you did not cause your child’s anxiety, but you can help them overcome it.

Toward the goal of a healthier life for the whole family, practice self-compassion. Remember, you’re not alone, and you’re not to blame. It’s time to let go of debilitating self-criticism and forgive yourself. Love yourself. You are your child’s champion.

*Renee Jain is the founder and chief story teller at GoZen! GoZen! offers a suite of educational programs and tools, through animated videos, designed to give parents and practitioners what they need to arm kids with essential life skills to not only manage anxiety, but to live with deeper engagement and purpose. This article was first published on the website GoZen in February 2018.*

## Interview with Vicki Scott

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*Early this summer, Sef Scott grabbed headlines with his “Unexpected” speech at the graduation ceremony for the Class of 2018 at the Plano Senior High School. His speech has motivated and renewed hope in the autism community that nothing is impossible, and that every one of our children can reach unexpected heights. His mother, Vicki Scott, generously shared her time and experiences with the community, through this interview. If you haven’t watched his speech, view it here:*

<https://youtu.be/y3S-W5TYtNY>

Sef Scott turns 18 in August '19. In June this year, he grabbed headlines for having given a speech at the graduation ceremony of the class of 2018 at Plano Senior High School. Sef was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder and has limited verbal and social communication skills. His mother, Vicki Scott shared her experiences of how Sef was chosen to give the speech and the impact it has had on them and others in the community.

### **Tell us a little bit about Sef’s school life.**

All my three sons were born and raised in Plano, TX. Sef, my oldest, was diagnosed with PDD, until his autism diagnosis at the age of 4 . He received services through the Texas Infant Toddler Intervention Program, and then attended Pearson ECS, Hughston Elementary, Haggard Middle School, Vines High School and Plano Senior High School. He was mainstreamed at various levels until high school, when he needed a modified curriculum in a small classroom setting.

### **How did Sef end up being a commencement speaker at the graduation ceremony?**

Early this year, the school sent out general emails to all seniors in preparation of the graduation ceremony. Included in the email was a call for auditions for the commencement speech. When I saw the email, I wondered if Sef would be interested in auditioning - I wanted him to have as much or as little of the graduation ceremony experience as he wanted, like any other senior. When I asked him, I was surprised at his reaction — he wanted to do it so badly that he was shaking with excitement — it was “unexpected” and sowed the seed for what would be the theme of his speech.

My middle son and Sef’s younger sibling, Sim, is a brain tumor survivor. He has been giving speeches to raise funds since he was seven. Sef has attended these speeches and witnessed first-hand, the impact of his brother’s speeches on the audience. Nevertheless, I was surprised by his response to being asked about the audition.

Sim and I worked for a couple of weeks on the speech – Sef is verbally limited, but he knew what he wanted to say. We ran every sentence of the speech by him. In the end, he made the decision on what he wanted included in his speech, and more importantly, what he did not. Sim coached him on speech delivery and he practiced every day.



## Why do you think the school picked Sef to give the speech?

It was a closed audition. Sef's paraprofessional was allowed to be present and took a little video of the audition to share with me. Sef seemed to be gesturing with his hands for emphasis during the speech. It was unrehearsed and to me, unexpected. I was later told that every judge in the room was moved to tears by the speech. One of the administrators on the panel was concerned about the risk of his unpredictability during the actual ceremony, if he got overstimulated. I had that concern, too, but all the other judges and the principal seemed unconcerned.

## Please share your most memorable moments of the ceremony.

Sef, Sim and I kept the speech a secret from the rest of the family. We practiced at nights, when Dad was at work, and reminded Sef that it was a secret. As the day of the graduation ceremony approached, I knew he was nervous when he began stammering about it. He began telling my husband about it, who he kept reminding Sef that there was a graduation ceremony and not a speech (he wasn't in on the secret). It confused Sef a little bit but we managed to keep it quiet.

On the day of the speech, I had to make sure that Sef was aware of the logistics of where he would wait and what he would do after the speech. The paraprofessionals and security were extremely flexible and helped make it easy for him. We had family from different parts of the country come in, with no clue of what was coming. The printed program had his name against the title of his speech "Unexpected". My husband and the rest of the family did not make the connection. They thought that Sef might be singing a song titled Unexpected - my husband even told a family member that Sef was on stage probably because he would walk first, since waiting was hard for him. The possibility that he might be giving a speech was completely unexpected.



*Sef ( right) with his siblings Sim (left) and Zane (middle)*



A couple of things told me that Sef was nervous — he took a deep breath before he started, and he stumbled at some parts of the speech. He had practiced flawless delivery during his many hours of rehearsals. I knew what he was speaking, but the reaction of the audience around me was unexpected — several of them, including the security were moved to tears. At the end of the speech, Sef proudly said, “It was great. I want to do this again”.

## **Why did Sef choose to shine the spotlight on unexpected acts of kindness in his speech?**

We have been at the receiving end of a lot of kindness in our lives. All my kids have had positive experiences at the public school, as a result of various acts of kindness by teachers and students. We have been associated with organizations like HopeKids, which provides special and memorable experiences for children facing a life-threatening medical condition, and their families. These one-of-a-kind experiences have provided respite to parents and siblings and have filled our family with positivity and kept us going with something to look forward to, especially during the difficult times. The gifts of kindness that we have received have been completely unexpected.

## **Has Sef’s speech had an impact on the community?**

Yes, I would like to think that it has. A person in Minneapolis saw Sef’s video and googled HopeKids. She donated tickets to a much coveted concert, having drawn inspiration from his speech.

The day after the graduation, the principal of Plano Senior High School contacted me to check if she could post the speech on social media. Her reaction is testimony to the impact of Sef’s speech. She shared that the whole experience got her thinking about how much more she could do for the special needs population in her school, as an administrator. It made her realize that she needed to work more with them, as there may be many more who would want their voices to be heard, but did not know how to spontaneously ask for it.

Several teachers in the general education classrooms plan on sharing the speech with their student on the first day of school.

## **What has the impact been on Sef after the speech?**

As a mom, I have seen Sef experience and display joy and sorrow in all these years. After the speech, he displayed a new emotion — pride — for the very first time. That was unexpected.

Sef has had limited conversations with us. He usually asks us for something he wants or asks a narrow range of questions. After the speech, I spoke with him about how people loved to hear him speak and want to hear more from him. I told him that I would love more from him, and if he could actively work on sharing his thoughts with us. Since then, I have seen him make an effort to share his thoughts or observations. We definitely see an unexpected leap in his communication.

Sef will move into the Adult Transition Services at PISD. With the combined efforts of his warrior mom and warrior brother, and his determination, Sef has made a powerful case for all individuals with special needs to be provided opportunities similar to their peers.

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## 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?ref=ts> or <http://BuyHousesSellHomes.KWRealty.com>



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