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ZOOM WORKSHOPS DURING COVID-19 CRISIS

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Even during the best of times, parenting a child with autism can be challenging. In the current environment with schools and programs closed, parents are in even more need of support. **Autism Parents Connect (APC)** is a non-profit whose mission is to empower parents through education and connection to navigate the complex journey of parenting a child with autism. We offer interactive workshops that combine practical help grounded in evidence-based techniques and a supportive community. Parents gain immediate access to functional tools and an ongoing active learning network to support them in meeting parenting challenges.

APC proposes to offer a series of virtual workshops based on its established in-person program. The workshops are created and facilitated by an educator who is also the parent of a young adult with autism. Due to the realities of parents' limited availability during this time, the virtual workshops will be shorter in duration (one hour each), with the content spread over six sessions. They will cover the same material as the original workshops plus some additional tools for parents during this extra-stressful time. The one-hour workshops can be tailored for different child age groups to meet the needs of the community and will be interactive with time for questions so that parents can ask for specific help in applying the tools to their most pressing challenges. Though each workshop stands on its own, we encourage parents to participate in the entire series since the strategies work together and the learning experience will deepen. In addition to the workshops, APC hosts a closed Facebook Group for participants. The forum serves as an ongoing opportunity for education and support by posting educational materials and encouraging respectful discussion of issues raised by participants. (Autism Parents Connect is an independent resource, not affiliated with CUIMC).

Andrea Pollack, MEd., is the Founder and President of APC. She was a lawyer for 19 years, practicing at prestigious NY firms and Corporations. When she could not find a school that met the needs of her son who has autism, she left her law career to homeschool him. After eight years of homeschooling, her son returned to school and Andrea knew she wanted to share all she had learned with other parents. She too returned to school, doing some coursework in Social Work and earning her M.S. in Education to become an effective educator and advocate for parent training.

Below is a brief description of each workshop:

WORKSHOP #1 Understanding how parents drive their child's growth: Introduction to **Six Strategies** for improving interaction and reducing challenging behavior.

APC teaches six strategies that, combined, are able to help parents navigate most parenting challenges. Most importantly, APC does not provide only information, but also teaches parents how to implement these strategies. Though the interactive learning activities are modified for the virtual environment, they are effective in teaching parents how to interact more comfortably and effectively with their children.

WORKSHOP #2 A deeper dive into understanding **self-regulation**: reducing the stress and learning to focus on what matters.

A substantial factor underlying challenging behavior is the child's dysregulation. This workshop helps parents understand what causes dysregulation in their child, how to prevent or reduce it and how to teach coping skills. In addition, it offers parents tools to maintain and model their own self-regulation in the face of highly emotional interactions with their child.

WORKSHOP #3 Modeling self-regulation and setting your child up for **success**

Another factor contributing to dysregulation is a demand on the child that is too far above his/her current skill level. In this workshop, parents will learn how to help their child grow by setting goals that offer a comfortable amount of challenge without causing tantrums and meltdowns. We also teach parents to see the source of their child's challenging behavior as a skill deficit (such as lack of impulse control or frustration tolerance) rather than pure defiance. That perspective shift helps parents keep their own emotions in check and identify opportunities to build their child's skills.

WORKSHOP #4 Understanding **reinforcement** to shape your child's behavior

Most parents have a basic understanding of offering incentives to achieve compliance. This workshop helps parents go deeper to understand how to identify the need the unwanted behavior is serving. Such understanding can help parents avoid inadvertent reinforcement of unwanted behavior. We also discuss positive reinforcement as well as when and how to effectively use consequences. Finally, we help parents understand why incentives or consequences they use might be ineffective and how to consider the use of a different strategy.

WORKSHOP #5 Sensory needs and **sensitivities**, modeling **flexibility** and getting your child's buy-in

This workshop teaches the three remaining strategies. We emphasize the need to be aware of **sensory overload as well as sensory seeking behavior**. We also discuss the need for parents to give children choices and control in areas where they can, and to point out for their children examples of their own flexibility. Finally, we help parents learn how to combine their child's interests with everyday activities and how to increase cooperation by making activities relevant to the child.

WORKSHOP #6 How our beliefs, words and vision for and about our children shape our **parenting**.

This workshop focuses on the parent and how we can replace our limiting **beliefs and habits** with new ones that uplift the parent and the entire family. We conduct exercises in shifting from victim language to empowered language and visualizations designed to help parents combat negativity and bolster creativity. We also do an exercise designed to help parents acknowledge and release guilt. Though these exercises seem to have little to do with autism, they are designed to address parenting stress. The research is compelling that reducing parenting stress improves outcomes in children with ASD.

Additional potential workshops:

- 1) Using the SIX Strategies to develop language.
- 2) Guilt: why we feel it and what to do about it. Though guilt is addressed in workshop #6, we could devote an entire hour to that subject.
- 3) Loving and accepting your child as they are while still pushing for more.
- 4) A special session for parents of children who have not yet been formally diagnosed.

Practical considerations:

- 1) Workshops will be **free** for participants.
- 2) The meeting will be held via **Zoom** which can be accessed via computer or phone. For more information on how to access Zoom, please find a tutorial here: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/209743263-Meeting-and-Webinar-Best-Practices-and-Resources>.
- 3) Participants can register by emailing andrea@autismparentsconnect.org. I will then send a link to the Zoom meeting.
- 4) I would propose to hold the workshops twice per week in the evenings. Once we are connected to interested parents, however, we can either shift to midday or hold separate midday and evening sessions, depending on interest. Once connected to interested parents, we can also assess whether dividing groups by child age is practical.
- 5) For more information about **APC**, go to: www.autismparentsconnect.org