



Aspiehelp / The Aspire Trust March 2017 Newsletter

Edited by Hazel Shanks

In this newsletter: Aspiehelp receives Lotteries grant, our most popular brochures go back to the printers, BBQ fundraisers for March, an article on employment, and a scientific survey.

Grant received from Lotteries Commission

Aspiehelp received \$5,000 from the DIA's Lottery National Community Committee! This is very helpful and a great show of faith in the work that we're doing. Thanks to everyone at Community Matters at the DIA for supporting us. Leith put a lot of hard work into the application and understanding the application process, which has paid off.

Aspiehelp brochures reprinted

Selwyn Printing Co. is reprinting our most popular brochures! These have been so popular that we actually ran out. The three brochures are Myths about Autism and Aspergers Syndrome, A Guide for Teachers and Parents of Autistic Students, and Autistic Meltdowns and Shutdowns.

When Aspiehelp started, these were our second publication (after the rack cards). It's been 5 years and now we've redone them, fixing spelling errors and other minor issues for their reprinting.

This feels like a milestone for us — so many people have received these, so many of them are out there... hopefully we're all a little bit more informed on these basic issues because of them.



Our most popular brochures are heading to the printers for their second edition.

Upcoming Sausage Sizzle fundraisers

Aspiehelp is holding BBQ fundraisers later this month, with two events on the 25th of March and 1st of April (both are Saturdays). As usual, these will be at Mitre 10 Beckenham.

For \$2.50, we sell a sausage on bread with fried onion, mustard, and tomato sauce. If you're in the area, come say hi and please have one — all profits go to a good cause!

Our high-quality sausages are provided by Fresh Meats Barrington.



Scientific survey about autism and parenting

Colin Morris at Bond University has asked us to publicise his survey about how autism affects parenting and relationships between parents.

If you are the parent of a child and living with a partner who is helping raise them, and *either* your child or one of you has a diagnosis of autism, please take part in this study by filling out the survey.

In Our Office

A steady stream of clients continues to ascend our stairs!

Planning for the Symposium in November progresses most pleasingly. It looks as if we will be combining forces with the University of Canterbury Disability Resource Centre. We have a long list of possible speakers, all very interesting!

We met with Kerri Bonner from Carabiner, a new mentoring organisation which is in place to encourage young people who need some guidance about the next stage of their life.

Leith has been slogging away at refining her application for registration as a Social Worker and catching up with recent books about Social Work.

We desperately need our Library books returned, especially if you have had them for more than one month! We seem to be steadily losing some of our best ones, where people have borrowed them without noting them in the library note book. You can post them to us at 2a MacMillan Avenue or drop them in between Tuesday and Thursday between 10.30am and 3.30pm or at the Church office Monday, Tuesday, Thursday or Friday, 9.30am to 12.30pm.

Donations towards buying new books always gratefully received!



*Our staff, clockwise from top left:
Leith, Olivia, Julie, and Hazel*

Social evenings

Our regular social evenings are on the first and the third Wednesday of the month, at a venue near Church Corner at 7:30pm. (Please contact Leith for the exact location).

We have board games, hot drinks and biscuits, and a selection of books from the Aspiehelp library available at every meeting. Please bring a \$2 donation.

The next meetings are on the 15th of March and the 5th of April.

You are welcome to attend. (New members should contact Leith or Julie first.)

Women's group

Our Aspiehelp women's group meets fortnightly on Tuesdays at 2pm.

A get-together for autistic-spectrum women and women living with aspie family.

The next meeting is on the 28th of March.

Please contact us if you're interested in attending.

Our Patron is Stephen Mark Shore, PhD.

The Aspire Trust, Inc is a registered Charitable Trust. Charities Services registration number is CC46192.

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Co-parenting, Autism and Asperger's Syndrome

AIM: To investigate the impact co-parenting has on relationship satisfaction, depression, anxiety and stress in parents who have a child with ASD or when a parent is on the spectrum.



Take the survey at this link!
<http://bit.ly/bondsurvey>

WE INVITE:

- Parents who live together and are raising a child with ASD or Asperger's

OR

- Parents who live together, when one of the parents has a formal or informal diagnosis of ASD or Asperger's

Both parents, heterosexual couples, homosexual couples, biological parents and non-biological parents are welcome to participate

Your participation will involve 40-50 minutes of your time to complete a questionnaire.

The aim of this research is to investigate the impact co-parenting has on relationship satisfaction, depression, anxiety and stress in parents who have a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or when a parent is on the spectrum. Due to the increased prevalence of ASD, researchers, psychologists and other professionals have given increased attention to the influence ASD has on the overall family system. Research in this area tends to focus on the child and the child-parent relationship, parental psychological well-being and marital satisfaction. However, little research has investigated your experiences as a parent within your co-parenting role.

Co-parenting is made up of five dimensions: childrearing agreement, co-parental support and undermining behaviours, division of labour, joint management of family dynamics and parenting-based closeness. By understanding how these different aspects of co-parenting impact on the intimate relationship, as well as individual parental stress, depression and anxiety, health professionals will be better able to understand the unique challenges and issues that arise in co-parenting within the context of the Autism Spectrum Disorders (including Asperger's Syndrome).

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without penalty. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential. The data collected will be used to satisfy the curriculum for the Masters of Psychology (Clinical) degree, as well as being used to produce an article for possible publication.

If you have any questions regarding this research project, including being notified of the project findings, please feel free to contact **Cody Morris** via email or mobile (cody.morris@student.bond.edu.au, 04 34 219 361) or Dr. Lisa Abel via email or phone (label@bond.edu.au, 5595 2564)

Changing perceptions

Once shunned and undervalued, people with autism are gaining respect and independence as sought-after employees, writes Bruce Munro. The young man is wearing jeans, a Led Zeppelin T-shirt and an intense gaze. He sits on a couch in the lounge of his family's South Dunedin home and tries to make sense of the questions. Where did you go to high school? And where before that? The responses are fired back; quick, precise, complete.

"At Bayfield. From 2011 to 2015. Macandrew Intermediate, now Bathgate Park, from 2008 to 2010. And Musselburgh School from 2002 to 2007."

You've been working at New Zealand Couriers. What were you doing there?

"Freight sorting."

What does your work involve?

"I work part time."

Change of tack. What did you do there, Jordan?

"Freight sorting."

Another try. How did you do it?

"I put it in the right destinations."

“People with autism have trouble making sense of the world, but they often have qualities and abilities that are highly attractive to employers.”

Did you have to learn the names of different places in New Zealand to do that?

Jordan's mum, Raewyn, jumps in with a response. "There's a good story about that," Mrs Elliott says.

"When Jordan started high school, in the very first social studies class they were given a map of New Zealand with about six blank place names and they had to look up an atlas and write the place names on the map. This one doesn't need that. He's got the map in his head," she says nodding towards her 20-year-old son. "He put the six names in place without using an atlas, added another four or five for good measure and drew the main trunk lines on as well, all within 10 minutes flat. We're pretty sure he's got a photographic memory."

If geeks are inheriting the earth, autistics are emerging as their kings and queens.

The once-bullied geek is now the star of television and film — think Napoleon Dynamite and The Big Bang Theory. But from within their ranks, it is those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who are increasingly sought-after as prized employees. People with autism have trouble making sense of the world, but they often have qualities and abilities that are highly attractive to employers. So, around the globe, organisations and businesses are falling over themselves to get a slice of the autism employment market.

Three years ago, Los Angeles company MindSpark began deliberately employing analysts on the autism spectrum to test software for companies in the United States. Last year, in August, the company began its global expansion. Not that the globe is MindSpark's oyster alone to shuck. Not by a long shot. Across the Atlantic, Denmark-based Specialisterne matches autistics with jobs as software testers and programmers.

Since 2011, social enterprise Auticon, has been exclusively hiring information technology (IT) consultants with autism. The German business opened offices in the United Kingdom early last year. By October, it had financial backing from Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Group and UK charity Esmee Fairbairn Foundation.

Two months prior, multinational Microsoft also began recruiting people with autism.

It is a trend that has reached this corner of the world. And it is not only the IT sector that is recognising the benefits. Dane Dougan, who is chief executive of Autism New Zealand, says that during the past 18 months in the Auckland region alone his organisation has placed 17 people with ASD in jobs ranging from fashion retailing and building to IT and gardening.

With an estimated 65,000 New Zealanders living with autism, and international studies suggesting only 15% of autistic adults are in full-time employment, it is no surprise this new-found popularity is being heartily embraced by those on the spectrum and their families.

Last July, Jordan, who has moderate autism, began temporary part-time work on Thursday afternoons at the Dunedin branch of New Zealand Couriers on Portsmouth Dr. Which is ideal, Mrs Elliott says. For three hours, Jordan would sort dozens of courier packs, meticulously matching addresses to two dozen geographically-labelled bags so they could be whisked off to their intended destination.

"It's that methodical, predictable thing. There are no surprises," Mrs Elliott says. "One thing that autistics are really rigid about is that the right things have to be in the right place. So, that job is perfect for him, because that is what is required."

Autism is a sliding scale of life-long developmental disability. The spectrum ranges from high functioning autistics, mostly with above average academic intelligence, to those needing 24-hour care. All autistics, however, have a triad of impairments affecting social interaction, social communication and imagination. Employers are keen to avail themselves of the autistic person's special skills or interests, their ability to do repetitive tasks without faltering and their loyalty.

"If that special interest has something to do with the place of work, that person will probably end up being the best at that particular area," Mr Dougan, of Wellington, says.

But the autism package can also include difficulties initiating and maintaining social relationships, fixating on objects or behaviours and being either hyper-sensitive to or unaware of sounds, smells and other sensations.

Jordan loves trains, planes, buses ... and his camera. At present, on most mornings, with his digital camera in hand — "It's a Canon SX410IS. I got it for Christmas, in 2015" — he catches the bus along the western edge of Otago Harbour. Getting off at Sawyers Bay, Jordan watches and photographs any trains passing through. He then walks the remaining 2km to Port Chalmers and up to Scott's Memorial on Blueskin Rd — a prime spot for taking snaps of visiting cruise ships.

Jordan is extremely sensitive to noise. He used to walk the high school halls with his hands over his ears. Then his Dad, Pete, gave him some industrial ear plugs to wear.

"He popped them in and, voila, no more hands over ears," Mrs Elliott says. "That was a breakthrough, an absolute breakthrough. Immediately, he just looked like everyone else."

He still is no fan of sudden, loud sounds. Out the window, Jordan spies dark clouds and a few spots of rain. He begins to pace, concerned that it could signal an imminent storm. His mum assures him thunder is unlikely. He re-takes his seat.

"Thunder," Jordan says, "Like AC/DC's Thunderstruck." "Yes, put that on nice and loud and you won't hear thunder," Mrs Elliott says.

"Thunderstruck, from The Razor's Edge," Jordan continues on his new tangent. "It's written by Angus Young and Malcolm Young. Released in 1990."

Jordan has several friendly acquaintances from school days, most of them young women, whom he still greets in the street. But no firm friends.

"That's one down side. He doesn't have a buddy," his mum says. "It's not surprising, because they are so happy in their own company they just don't worry about it. It bothers us more, that when he goes out in the big wide world he doesn't have someone to have some fun with who has the same interests. It would be quite nice if he could actually share it with someone else. It would be good for his well-being, the socialising. We would love it. Him, I don't think he cares one way or the other."

What Jordan does care about is predictability. Every Thursday, after work, it was off to the same fast food outlet for the same meal. "KFC stands for Kentucky Fried Chicken," he announces. "I'd get a chicken combo."

Routine is paramount; surprises discombobulating and anxiety-provoking. "You can't spring things on him, even good things," Mrs Elliot says.

"A few years ago, a steam train visited at the Railway Station. We didn't tell Jordan, we just took him down there. One look at the steam train and, no, we had to take him home. About an hour later he decided, yes, he would like to do it."

With that in mind, in January, when after six months his work at the courier depot was coming to a end, Jordan's parents broke the news to him a couple of weeks ahead of time. He was upset. But by the end of the fortnight, he had grown accustomed to the idea. That anxiety is not felt solely by the person with autism. Some employers are also fearful, of giving work to those on the spectrum.

Paul Arnott works for CCS Disability Action Otago. He is a vocational and transition co-ordinator, based in Dunedin. During Jordan's last year at high school, Mr Arnott worked with him, his teachers, his family and the prospective employer, to prepare for and help Jordan take the next step.

It is important to work with the employer, Mr Arnott says. Often, bosses and managers will be concerned about the health and safety implications of employing a person with a disability.

"There's still very much a focus at times on what people can't do rather than what they can do; or, rather, what people think they can't do."

But a growing number of employers are getting their head around how to accommodate the needs of people with autism and tap in to their potential. Employers such as Craig Cochrane, who manages the Dunedin branch of New Zealand Couriers. He has no doubt he will be employing Jordan again as soon as a position comes up.

"From my perspective, it went very well," Mr Cochrane says. "And to be perfectly honest, the controls we had to put in place for Jordan's disability weren't very onerous. We kept a bit of an eye on him, but apart from that he got dealt with like any other staff member."

Jordan's autism is a strength in a couple of ways. Sorting courier packs is "not rocket science", but it does require attention to detail, Mr Cochrane says. "Because if we send it to the wrong city, I might end up having to fly it back the next day. So there is potential for a mistake to be quite costly to the branch."

Jordan's capacity for relentless focus meant he was "was on-point the whole time". And whenever there was a lull between courier van deliveries, Jordan would ask for another task.

"He would always be sweeping or cleaning ... I would have to tell him to take a break."

Mrs Elliot can see the difference employment has made to her son — the growing independence and the pride he takes in his work. "It makes such a difference when you've got an employer who is open to the idea of employing someone with a disability ... That's the biggest thing you could ask, for people just to give someone a go."

The tide seems to be turning on that one, in favour of people with autism. For the past 18 months, Autism New Zealand has had a part-time facilitator, funded by the Ministry of Social Development, whose job it has been to match job-seekers with employers keen to take on someone with autism.

"We are seeing some really strong interest in employing people with autism," Mr Dougan says. "We are starting to get more people coming through the door than we can handle." He would like to see the scheme rolled out nationwide. Employers, agencies and parents could not be happier with the new, positive direction.

One final check, to make sure it is also benefitting those with autism. Do you enjoy doing your work, Jordan?

"Yes."

What do you enjoy about it?

"Getting things to the right destination."