



A New Addition to the "Family"



Hiring
In-Home Support
for Individuals
on the
Autism Spectrum

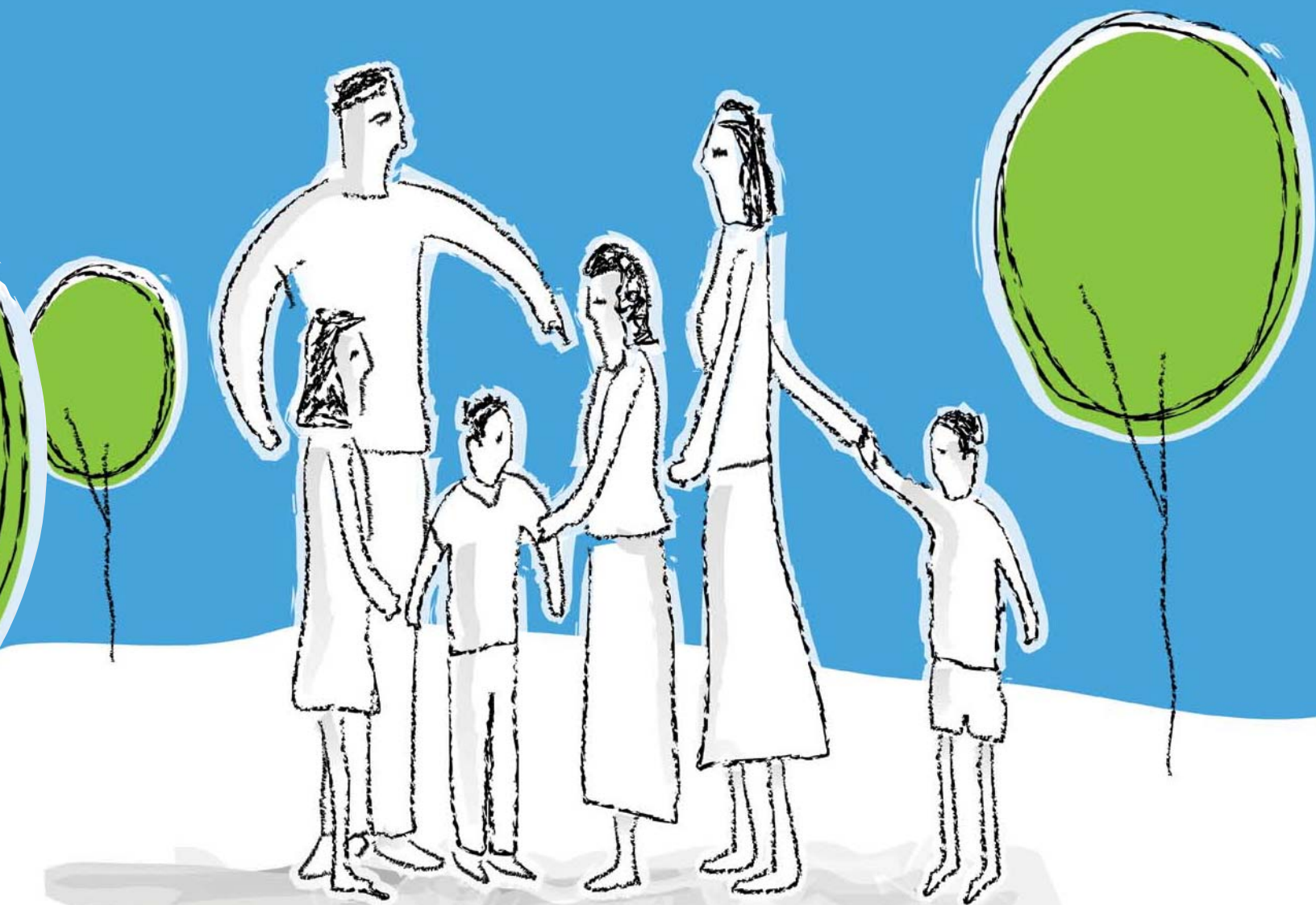
By Lisa A. Lieberman

It is 8:10 on a school day morning. Your husband left early for work. All three kids must leave by 8:30, leaving you 15 minutes to get yourself out the door for work. For the past 45 minutes, your 13-year-old daughter has taken ownership of the only bathroom in the house. Your 10-year-old son frantically searches for his school project, insisting you help him find it. And if that is not enough, your 7-year-old daughter who has autism is in the

middle of a major meltdown on the kitchen floor because you've run out of her favorite everyday cereal.

Times like these, parents realize hiring extra help at home, specifically a one-on-one provider for a child or young adult with ASD, could come in pretty handy. Support of this kind can be an invaluable asset in addressing the complex needs of young people with ASD and keeping the family functionally and emotionally 'intact.'

So, the idea is appealing? Maybe you've even thought of it before? Just where do you start? I'm here to share some of the essential steps involved in finding a quality person. Parents most often tell me their biggest concern is how and where to find competent people to interview, and then how to conduct an interview that singles out the best candidates. It's doable! Let's get started!



The Job Description

Before advertising your job opening, you need to create a comprehensive job description. In part, a job description defines specific duties that meet the unique needs of your child or young adult. But a good job description also reflects the philosophy and personality of your family and the individual who will best fit within it. Think about your family culture while you ask yourself the following questions: Who are you as a family? What are your values? Do you tend to be formal or informal in interactions with others? Is your family environment quickly paced or calm? As you answer these questions you'll gain clarity about the type of person who fits best in your home. (For an in-depth discussion of defining your family culture, see Ch 2 of my book, *A Stranger Among Us*, 2005.)

How and Where to Advertise

"You have to know someone who wants to care for your child or pick someone from a list: A list of strangers. Sounded scary to me. This meant I might have to interview people, and if I didn't like any of the ones on the list, I might even have to advertise. I knew people who had interviewed, hired and trained their own respite people. If they could do it, I could do it." (Kristy, pg. 51. *A Stranger Among Us*)

Many parents share Kristy's initial anxiety about bringing a "stranger" into their home, and prefer to hire only via word-of-mouth referral. Yet, these referrals are not always available. With sufficient preparation and thoughtful vigilance, wonderful "strangers" can be found to support a young person with ASD.

Classified Ads

My family has had the most success placing a classified ad in our local newspaper. Although it requires more time and energy screening prospective candidates, it broadens the field of applicants from which to choose.

When running a classified ad, be prepared to spend a little extra money. Including positive descriptors makes the ad stand out, and communicates the potential rewards of working with your child or young adult.

Employment ads are often listed alphabetically with job title first. Think carefully about the message your job title conveys. For example, "caregiver" connotes a sense of dependency that conflicts with fostering independence in the child. "Child care" may give the impression that a babysitter is needed, resulting in numerous inquiries from teenagers or women who have raised

their own children and therefore believe they have the right qualifications. Instead, consider using words like “mentor,” “companion,” “tutor,” or “life-skills specialist”:

Tutor/mentor for delightful boy (11) with autism. Experience preferred. Enjoyable, no-smoking home. Need own car. References required. Good student schedule. 123-4567

Job Flyers

Flyers can be used instead of, or in addition to, an ad. This format gives you room for more information than in a classified ad. Let creativity run wild in deciding where to post a flyer. Is your child on a special diet? Try the local health food store. If someone of the same religion is desired, put a notice in your congregation’s newsletter. Post flyers at local colleges, in both undergraduate and graduate programs in fields related to autism.

Additional Suggestions for Finding Providers

Some people are more comfortable using an employment agency and companies exist that specialize in different kinds of in-home care. Though more expensive, a quality agency can save you time in placing ads and conducting background checks.

Also, consider posting notices at non-profit organizations, specialized schools like nursing or the healing arts, or via the Internet. Job-search Internet sites such as “Craig’s List” are being more widely utilized.

You’ve defined your family culture, written a job description and decided how to advertise the position – congratulations! You’ve completed the initial, crucial steps involving in finding that remarkable “stranger” who will enhance the circle of your family. You’ve also laid a firm foundation for the next step in the process: screening

candidates and conducting a fruitful interview.

Screening Candidates

You screen to reduce the pool of candidates to interview only those who most closely fit the job description and your family culture. Decide whether candidates will be screened by phone, resumé or Internet. Have a concise checklist of screening criteria, with the highest priority items at the top, “front and center” every time an applicant is screened.

Sample screening checklist

- ✓ Familiarity with ASD (training, education, work experience, volunteer, family member)
- ✓ Reliable car, good driving record and current driver’s license
- ✓ Consents to current criminal check and inquiry into driving record
- ✓ Willing to adhere to non-smoking household policy
- ✓ Available schedule meets your required hours/days
- ✓ Will commit to one year, in good faith
- ✓ Hourly pay desired matches what you are able/willing to pay

Conducting an Interview

You’ve narrowed down your search to a few qualified people to meet. The goal of the interview is to gain a personal impression of the applicant, and decide whether to move forward with that person. Also, this is a time for candidates to ask enough questions to decide if the position is a good fit for their needs.

Decide whether you want to interview at home or in a public place. Make the candidate feel welcome when you first meet; offer a refreshment, make introductions, and use small talk to put the person at ease.

Let the applicant read over the job description while you look over a resumé or job application. Give her

a chance to ask questions about the job description, or anything else that may have come up since the initial screening.

Once you’re face-to-face with an applicant, listen as attentively as you can to everything said (or not said). Pay attention to first impressions and never ignore a “gut feeling.” If something doesn’t feel right, err on the side of asking too many questions rather than missing a crucial piece of information. For example, if an applicant changes the subject when asked about a one-year commitment, return to that question until answered. When I have pressed that issue, I discovered people were planning to travel in three months, or take a break from school. Avoid taking time to train someone only to have him leave soon after, not to mention the difficulty children with ASD often have in managing changes.

Assessing emotional stability and self-care

The face-to-face interview is your chance to “go deep,” asking questions that explore a person’s emotional stability. Working with a child or young adult with ASD requires the ability to stay calm, have patience, and demonstrate personal maturity. Here are some key areas to explore. Does this person “have a life” outside work? Avoid a provider who looks to meet all her emotional needs in your household. Ask about interests, hobbies, etc. to get an idea of whether the candidate has a balanced life.

This also includes attention to self-care. A solid candidate will have a regular, healthy routine for managing stress. It might include fitness, recreation, yoga, dance, music, artistic expression, prayer and/or meditation. Such routines provide greater internal resources for managing the stressful times that will arise when supporting a young person with ASD. Eating habits are also important. A “junk-food junkie” might have health problems,

as well as being a poor role model for healthy eating.

Explore whether your candidate can define boundaries and set limits. You want someone who has clear ideas about what he will and won't do. Avoid hiring an employee who doesn't speak up and then explodes, or gets burned out by not honoring personal needs. Also, it's most helpful when a provider can effectively set limits with the young person being supported. Ask questions like, "If I ask you to stay later and you can't, how will you let me know that?" or "Tell me about a time you had to say 'no' to someone."

Exploring attitudes toward discipline

The way a candidate was disciplined as a child will have a direct effect on how he handles challenging situations with your child. If he was physically or emotionally abused, it is essential that he be able to demonstrate emotional work done to counteract the negative effects of being abused.

Explore his ideas about discipline and how it is best implemented. I look for someone who interprets discipline in a positive light, as teaching what is expected. Contrast this with punishment: reacting to what the person has done wrong. Often punishment includes venting anger in response to the challenging behavior, rather than teaching desired behaviors. This is perhaps one of the most important areas to thoroughly discuss with a prospective provider.

Familiarity with ASD

Assess how much the applicant knows about ASD. Is she familiar with the sensory processing issues so prevalent for this population, and too often mistaken for "bad behavior"? One way to explore this is to pose a challenging situation and ask her how she would handle it. Listen carefully to the response. How that question is answered indicates to



what extent she grasps the neurological basis of behavior in this population. Avoid individuals who assign negative intent to difficult behaviors. This attitude is almost never helpful when supporting people with ASD, and in fact, can cause great harm.

Sometimes people with a lot of ASD-related experience rely on old information rather than current best practices. For example, do you hear over-generalizations about individuals on the spectrum, and/or comments that underestimate their individual abilities? This can result in lowered expectations about what your child can accomplish. It is far better to hire someone younger with the right temperament and attitude who is "trainable," than to hire someone operating with outdated and potentially damaging approaches.

Red flags

Take care to notice "red flag" items that could rule out a candidate, such as omitted personal information (phone, proper ID, adequate references, etc.). You should also avoid hiring someone

who doesn't listen well, or seems too eager to take the job without asking any questions about it. I would also be wary of an applicant who refers to herself as a "natural caregiver," unless I am satisfied that she can set limits and/or "has a life" outside the work environment.

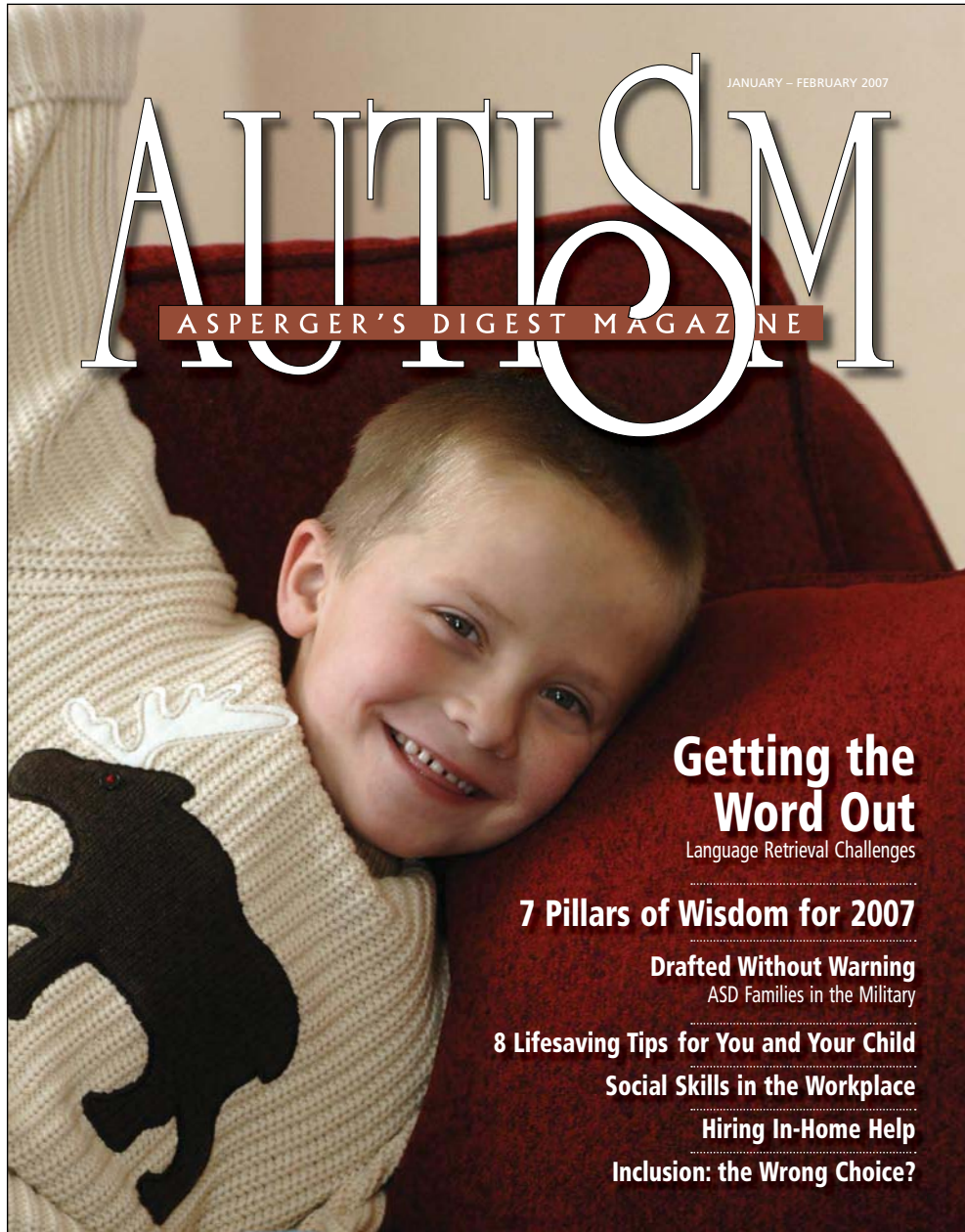
Pay attention to anything that doesn't feel right to you. Don't be afraid to get too personal. Ask more questions, request additional references, meet with the candidate a second time – do whatever it takes to feel at ease.

Never allow desperation to rule your decision to hire someone. Better to wait until another candidate comes along who meets your criteria than to proceed with a less than adequate candidate. This person will play an intimate part in your family life. Ask questions, insist on a criminal check, and do thorough reference checks; anything to protect the well-being of your child and family.

Then, Reap the Rewards!

Many parents overlook the option of using in-home providers simply because they are unfamiliar with how to hire a quality person. We know, from experience, that having that special individual supporting your child and family far outweighs the effort required. Your family will be enriched by the experience, your child will receive valuable one-on-one attention and the provider has the chance to develop a deep, positive connection with your child and family. It's a win-win situation for everyone! 🎉

Lisa Lieberman, LCSW is a psychotherapist, national speaker and author of the book *A Stranger Among Us*, a guide to hiring one-to-one providers for children and young adults with autism. She and her husband, Craig Ackerson, are blessed with an 18-year-old son, Jordan, who has autism. Send comments to Lisa at lisa@disabilityinthefamily.com



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