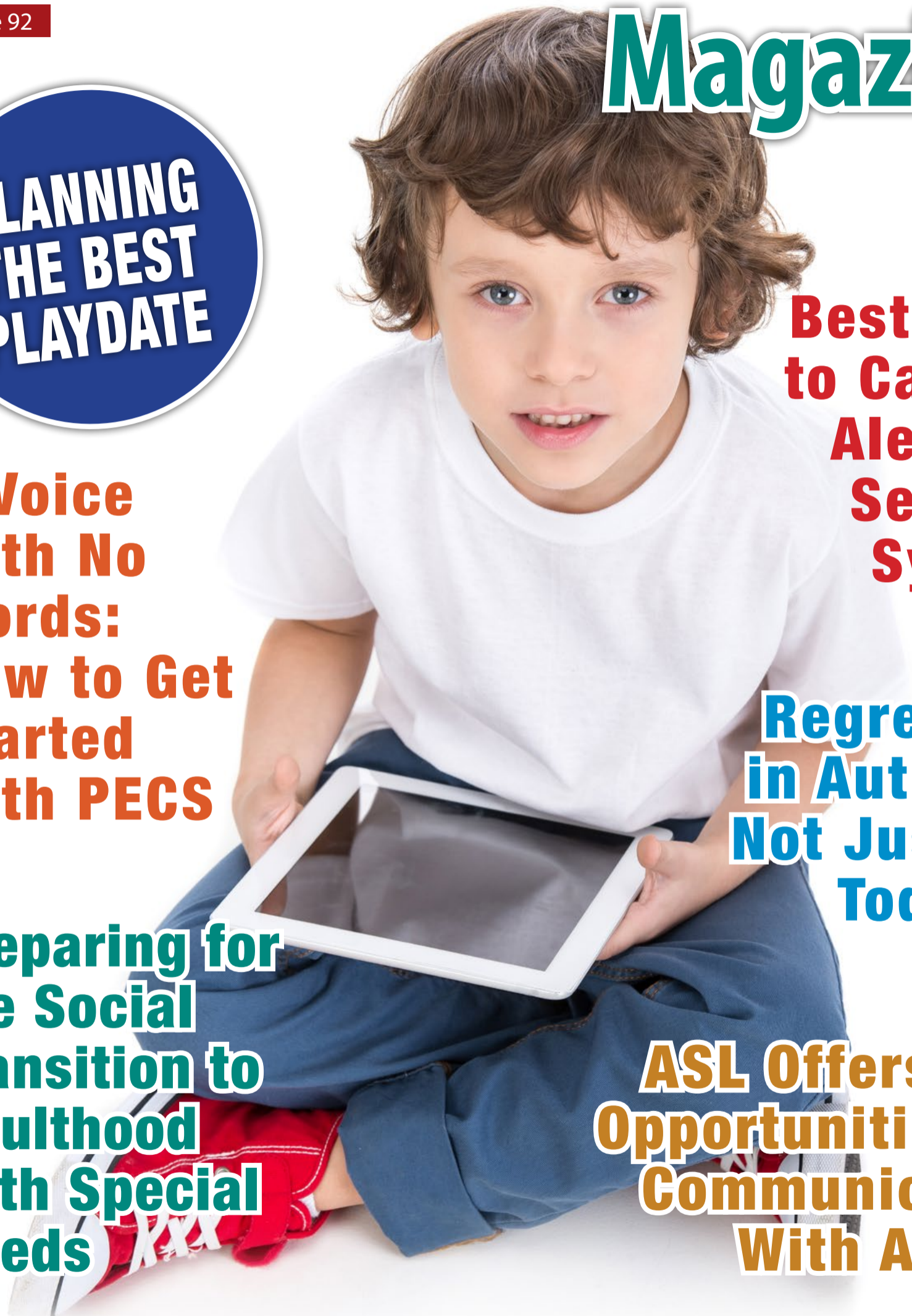


Autism Parenting Magazine

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PLANNING THE BEST PLAYDATE



A Voice With No Words: How to Get Started With PECS

Best Ways to Calm or Alert the Sensory System

Regression in Autism—Not Just For Toddlers

Preparing for the Social Transition to Adulthood With Special Needs

ASL Offers New Opportunities for Communicating With Autism

DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS FOR LIFE

Beaches Turks & Caicos: Paradise for Special Needs Families

By Deanna PICON



Lorenzo Picon at the Pirates Island Waterpark.

One wouldn't think you need superior negotiating skills to plan a family vacation, but that's the case when dealing with my husband. I suggest beautiful vacation destinations, with hotels that offer childcare services, only to hear "No way!" And why is that? Because Lorenzo, our non-verbal, young adult son, has autism, and according to Tony, "They won't know how to take care of him."

But this year, I knew he couldn't turn down Beaches Turks & Caicos. It's the first resort company in the world to attain the Advanced Certified Autism Center (ACAC) designation by the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards (IBCCES). The resort's Kids Camps are advanced certified autism centers that ensure team members have all the knowledge, skills, temperament, and exper-

tise to work with individuals with autism. Beaches offers age-specific programs for infants, toddlers, pre-teens, and teens. Youngsters can meet Julia, Sesame Street's first character with autism, and participate in "Amazing Art with Julia" activities.

Best of all, any individual can have a certified 'One-on-One Beaches Buddy,' who provides personalized, private care whenever you need them for a nominal fee.

After I told Tony about the autism services, four more words sealed the deal: Beaches has scuba diving! Then I triumphantly booked our vacation.

Beaches Resort

This all-inclusive, luxury resort is unlike any other we've visited before because it has five distinc-



Left to right: Fedeline Julien, Beverly Stephenson, Lorenzo, Deanna, and Tony Picon

tive areas: French, Italian, Key West, and Caribbean & Seaside Villages. Each village has a unique feel based upon its namesake. The resort has the most beautiful, picturesque beaches, pools, grounds, and hotel rooms. There are unlimited drinks and food at 21 different 5-Star Global Gourmet restaurants. And you'll love the "No Tipping" policy. Leave your wallet in your room safe. You won't need it until you leave.

Staff Expertise

The thing that stands out most is Beaches' spirit of inclusion. Special needs families are welcome here so you and your children can just be yourselves and have a great time. We felt this early on. There's no need to feel self-conscious about your child's behavior. Your kid's a screamer, head banger, or runner? No problem. Does your child have a special diet or need a wheelchair? The staff can handle anything.

I call Beaches the "no guilt, no shame, no judgment" resort. Unlike other places, we didn't hear any insensitive remarks or feel the unpleasant stares with Lorenzo's head twirls and sounds. The entire team,

whether they're groundskeepers, restaurant workers, or the general manager, will make you feel comfortable.

Our Autism Angel

I met with Fedeline Julien, the camp's Children's Activities Manager, to learn about the autism-friendly programs. And within a half-hour of speaking with Fedeline, I knew she was for real. Working with special needs kids and their parents isn't just her job; it's her passion.

"I've learned so much from children on the spectrum. I see their drive to succeed, no matter how difficult the task and it motivates me to be a better person," said Julien. "I admire the strength and dedication of special needs parents. I feel good knowing that during their time here, they're able to take a break from the pressures of their everyday lives and relax and smile a little."

We decided Lorenzo would spend his time at the teen program where there are daily activities for *all* teens. I wanted Lorenzo to have new experiences,

“ Life has unexpected surprises, and boy, did we get a big one the evening we took Lorenzo to Club Liquid, the disco club for teens.

This dancing experience allowed our friends and family to see Lorenzo in a totally new light. ”

so Fedeline suggested a safe ride on a glass-bottom boat among his many activities for the week.

Buddies Are Fantastic

I met Beverly, Lorenzo’s Beaches Buddy who was going to accompany him on the boat trip, and liked her immediately. We spent time getting to know each other during Lorenzo’s lunch, before his trip. As we walked to the buffet restaurant, Beverly asked several questions about Lorenzo: his likes and dislikes, what makes him happy or irritable, and his food preferences. I told Beverly about his personality, quirks and all. I also let her know Lorenzo liked his chicken cut up into small pieces, with rice and vegetables.

After we sat down at a table, I went to the buffet line and fixed Lorenzo a plate of rice, barbeque chicken, and steamed vegetables. I brought the plate back to the table and went to get Lorenzo a drink.

The most amazing thing happened when I returned. It was definitely an “I’m really impressed” moment, which I rarely experience with caregivers. Beverly prepared Lorenzo’s lunch exactly as I told her and he was eating as she spoke to him, just like a friend. Right then, I knew Beverly would not only be great for Lorenzo; she’d be wonderful for me.

After Lorenzo finished his lunch, I instinctively got up to walk with them to the boat. But a second later, I stopped myself, because I realized something important. *I didn’t need to go.* Beverly knew exactly how to handle Lorenzo, and he’d be fine. This was such a new and unexpected feeling for me.

After they left, I prepared a delicious meal for myself. As I *leisurely* ate my lunch, I couldn’t believe what a delightful time I was having. Tony was scuba diving; Lorenzo was on the boat, and I had some quality “me time.” My next stop: Red Lane Spa for a mani/pedi.

An Underwater Date

Before Lorenzo was born, Tony and I went on Caribbean vacations. One of the things we most enjoyed was snorkeling together. And now, thanks to Beverly, we did something we hadn’t done in years: snorkeled together. In past visits to other resorts, one of us always had to stay with Lorenzo. But our Beaches snorkeling excursion felt like old times. And we thought, “This could be our new normal.”

Lorenzo’s Dancing Adventure

Life has unexpected surprises, and boy, did we get a big one the evening we took Lorenzo to Club Liquid, the disco club for teens. Normally, dancing and Lorenzo don’t go together, but I thought, “Hey, why not. He’s on vacation. Let him have some fun.”

When we entered the club, the music was pulsating as the DJ spun “techno-pop” tunes. Tony and I showed Lorenzo the dance floor and told him to dance if he wanted to. Lo and behold, Lorenzo danced, in his unique style, for at least 15 minutes, with a camp counselor. This will forever be known as Lorenzo’s *Saturday Night Fever* moment when he released his inner “John Travolta.”

As I watched with pride and joy, Tony was posting photos and videos on Facebook. As the “likes,” “thumbs up,” and “Way to Go Lorenzo!” comments appeared, something important hit me.

This dancing experience allowed our friends and family to see Lorenzo in a totally new light. And it showed them Lorenzo could “party with the best of them.”

A New Tradition

Tony and I were happy, yet sad the evening before we left Beaches. We couldn’t believe the week we had. All of us had wonderful, *individual* experiences

as well as memorable family time. Knowing Lorenzo was well-cared for with Beverly had allowed us to have a guilt-free vacation. We're going back next year. But there will be one major event added to our itinerary: a "vow renewal ceremony" on the beach.

It'll be a simple ceremony with just the three of us, recommitting ourselves to being the best family we can be. Despite all the ups and downs, challenges and responsibilities of being special needs parents, we're still here and standing (albeit wobbly at times). But with a great support team, whether that's our family and friends at home, or the caring and attentive Beaches staff, we can have a good life, just like any other family. And that's what life's all about!

My Reward

When we arrived home, I received a wonderful gift from Tony. No, it wasn't jewelry or perfume. It was much more special. Tony gave me the biggest hug

and said, "Thanks for finding Beaches. It was amazing, and they took great care of Lorenzo." And that just meant the world to me.

Deanna Picon is the founder of Your Autism Coach, LLC, which provides personalized guidance, comprehensive support programs, and seminars for parents of special needs children. Her mission is to empower parents as they advocate for their children while balancing productive work and family lives. She received her BA in psychology and BA in broadcast journalism from Syracuse University. Deanna is a parent of a non-verbal young man with autism. She is the author of The Autism Parents' Guide to Reclaiming Your Life, available from Amazon and through her website.

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