

Issue 24

Exceptional Needs TODAY

THE DOCTORS'
DR. JIM SEARS
PROVIDES HIS
HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

THE SEASON FOR
SOCIALIZATION SUPPORT

WAYS YOUR EMOTIONAL
STATE REGULATES OR
DYSREGULATES YOUR CHILD

CAN SSI BE SAVED IN A
SPECIAL NEEDS TRUST?

USING TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS
TO CALM AND ENGAGE

FINDING THE
BEST TOOLS

Redefining
Resilience



From the Editor's Desk

Do you ever feel overwhelmed by a special needs diagnosis to the point where it's hard to consider new tools to move forward? Each of us is unique, so finding the best tools to support a lifetime of learning is essential for creating a lasting impact. Sometimes we just need to step back, reassess, and adopt practical methods tailored to these needs.

In this issue, we explore methods for identifying our own strengths and those of our children, highlighting what makes each of us unique, and the best tools for each individual to grow.

We are delighted to introduce Melissa Dean, PhD, a homeschool mom whose three youngest children have exceptional needs. In this issue, she shares her passion for helping people nurture their gifts, especially those often overlooked. In her piece, "Fostering Growth When There Are Special Needs," Melissa describes how each of her children is unique and requires different tools to grow. It's an honor to feature Melissa's daughter, Lydia, on our cover.

As we work to meet our needs and those of our children as caregivers, it's easy to fall into the trap of comparing ourselves to others. Deanna Picon, BA, the mother of a young man on the autism spectrum, has creatively used a fictional story to illustrate tips for caregivers to manage the unique challenges of parenting a child with special needs during the holidays. She covers how to avoid isolation and depression, emphasizes the importance of self-care and maintaining a positive mindset, and suggests strategies for a happy and healthy 2026. Be sure to read "'Flipping the Script' For A Great Holiday Season When There Are Special Needs" as she shares her advice for reclaiming the holidays as a special family occasion, encouraging caregivers not to compare their festive season to that of other families.

Are you looking for holiday gift ideas that match the unique abilities, sensitivities, and needs of a child? Dr. Jim Sears, a pediatrician on the popular daytime show, "*The Doctors*," says that, besides considering sensory, functional, and safety needs, we should also think about how a gift can continue to support the child after the holiday season. Be sure to read "A Pediatrician's Holiday Gift Guide for Children with Unique Abilities" for some holiday gift ideas.

Uncovering the right tools to protect your child's financial future is equally valuable. Special Needs Financial Planner Ryan F. Platt, MBA, ChFC, ChSNC, CFPS's piece "Can Supplemental Security Income Be Saved in a Special Needs Trust?" examines the uses, benefits, and potential pitfalls of using a Special Needs Trust to save supplemental security income.

Some additional articles this month include: "How Your Emotional State Regulates or Dysregulates Your Neurodivergent Child," "Redefining Resilience: Embracing Disability as Identity and Power," "Creating Healthy Relationships for Exceptional Children in the Adoption and Foster System," "How to Ditch Small Talk and Have Better Conversations," "Finding the Tools to Help a Child Cope After Being Abused," "Tips For Staying Happy, Regulated, and Engaged During the Holidays," plus many more!

As always, we thank our readers, contributors, and supporters for the essential role they play in our magazine. Let's keep working together to raise awareness, foster acceptance, and promote inclusion.

Best,

Amy K'D Tobik

Editor-in-Chief, *Exceptional Needs Today*
Publisher, Lone Heron Publishing

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“Flipping The Script” For A Great Holiday Season When There are Special Needs

By Deanna Picon, BA



December 1

Dear Diary,

Well, I wasn't going to, but I've decided to attend the PTA (Parent Teacher Association) meeting tonight. John's teacher sent home flyers about the upcoming holiday party for the kids. It's crunch time, and they're behind in their fundraising efforts, so they need parents to help.

I planned just to send a check, but I really need something to lift me up. It could be a distraction to take my mind off things. I feel so alone and depressed right now.

I had the worst Thanksgiving with Joan and her condescending friends. My sister-in-law and a bunch of other "perfect" moms were talking about their big holiday plans, how excited their kids are, what presents they're buying, and the trips they'll be taking. As usual, I felt they tried to tiptoe around me while they all thought, "You know about her son, right? Kid can't even talk!"

I hate having everybody else's "normal" holidays being paraded in front of me. I know life isn't fair, but it doesn't mean I have to like it.

December 2

Dear Diary,

I'm glad I went. I'm surprised how many parents showed up. The teachers and admin staff really work hard on behalf of our kids. I have to do better next year.

The evening began with the school's holiday plans, but my mind was still preoccupied with the terrible Thanksgiving experience. Joan and her best friend, Annie, one-upping each other about their travel plans ("Barbados? Barbados is nice, but we've been there SO many times!"), and Pat and her clique going on about which toys they're getting for their kids, etc., etc.

I just sat there on the couch, agreeing with everyone about how wonderful this Christmas is going to be and blah, blah, blah, while, inside, thinking of how I'm buying toddler toys for my eight-year-old AGAIN, and which tree decorations are going to be safe for him.

So, last night, I just couldn't focus on the PTA meeting. I walked over to get some refreshments and sat down to take a mental break from all the noise in my head.

And that's when this woman, Angela, came over and sat beside me. She's maybe 10 years older, and she's got this very peaceful vibe going on. Before I could say a word, she put her hand on my arm and said, "I know."

I just looked at her, like, "What?" And she tells me she knows what I'm feeling right now because she used to be me.

Turns out she's also a special needs mom and has an autistic, teenage daughter.

Angela started talking about how she recognized the "lonely, hopeless, and overwhelmed" look on my face, describing it as "when you feel you're stuck and there's no way out." Angela said she used to feel the same way.

So, I asked why she doesn't feel that way now, and she said, "Because I flipped the script. I changed the way I look at things and handle things, and my life is so much better."

Well, of course, I was curious (desperate) to know what in the world she was talking about, and what this trick of "flipping the script" means. So, long story short, Angela invited me to her home on Saturday for lunch, and I accepted, which is weird for me. But for some reason, I sense a connection with her.

December 7

Dear Diary,

Wow. I don't even know what to say here. It feels like I've got some light and hope for the first time in a LONG time.

Thank goodness for Angela. For once, I met a person who had actually done what she said about learning to take control of her life and make it better.

It turns out that "flipping the script" means not always taking things the way they're handed to you, or the way you've been taught or expected to. It means taking the same circumstances and writing a new "script" with a plot based on what you and your family REALLY want and need. A plot that has more self-care and a better ending.

I love the way she said it, "Your family will never have somebody else's holidays. That's impossible, because no two families are alike. What's important is that your family has its own holiday: the BEST one you can have."

Which means I'm taking back control, and Joan and her arrogant friends won't be seeing my family for holiday celebrations for a long time. She's his sister, but Dave says he's also sick of Joan's drama and that our family comes first. I think it's a great husband who supports his wife like this!

Today, we accepted our wonderful neighbor Barbara's invitation to spend Christmas with her family. They've seen Dave and me at our best and worst through the challenges of raising John. And yet, they never judge us. Quite the opposite, they're always willing to help or offer a supportive smile.

FAMILY SUPPORT

Angela and I talked a lot more, and she had some terrific advice. More tomorrow!

December 8

Dear Diary,

I want to write down as much as possible today, so I don't forget what Angela and I talked about.

First, you've got to give yourself some credit and cut yourself some slack. Like Angela says, most parents have it easier than we do (not saying that other families don't have challenges, but let's be realistic here). If we're keeping it together, even if we're struggling to do it, that's a real-life victory against the odds.

Angela says she gives herself a medal every year. She literally draws a medal on paper and puts it on her refrigerator. I just love the idea of having that much empathy and respect for yourself. Not to feel superior or anything, just to remember that I'm riding a hard road that not everyone could handle.

Angela also treats herself to something special: a mani/pedi, new clothes, etc. Something, no matter how little, that makes her feel good and smile.

The second thing is to recognize that taking care of yourself is part of taking care of your family. "If you fall apart, your family won't last a week." That's how Angela puts it, and she's right.

She says that special needs parents should take time for themselves, have some fun and joy now and then, and give themselves things to look forward to. Don't let your child's disability define you!

2026. New Year, New Beginnings!



Deanna Picon, BA, is the founder of Your Autism Coach, LLC, which provides personalized guidance, comprehensive support programs and seminars for parents of special needs children. Her personal mission is to empower parents as they advocate for their children, while balancing productive work and family lives. Deanna is a parent of a non-verbal, young man with autism.

Her academic credits include a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology and a Bachelor of Arts degree in broadcast journalism from Syracuse University.

She is the author of [The Autism Parents' Guide to Reclaiming Your Life](#), and [Special Needs Holiday Magic: How to Enjoy a Great Holiday Season with Your Autistic Child](#). Both are available from Amazon. Deanna shows parents how to overcome the challenges of raising a child with special needs, while building a rewarding life for themselves.

Deanna is the recipient of the 2023 "Top Family Guidance Writer" award from Exceptional Needs Today Magazine.

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📖 [The Autism Parents' Guide To Reclaiming Your Life: How To Build The Best Life While Successfully Raising A Child With Autism](#)

📖 [Special Needs Holiday Magic: How To Enjoy A Great Holiday Season With Your Autistic Child](#)

I think about that for myself and for Dave. He's a great dad but I know everything takes a toll on him, too. We both need and deserve a break. Angela's right that we have friends and other relatives who keep offering to help us, so we're going to find ways to accept that help; a meal here, a night out there.

Like Angela says, "Say yes with appreciation, not guilt." She's turning into my role model! Seriously, we're talking on the phone every other day now.

December 11

Dear Diary,

Dave and I had a long talk last night. It was a better kind of talk than we've had in years. We talked about flipping our script to be about our family and us, not what other people think or say or do.

We're going to take Angela's advice and start filling a "Getaway" piggy bank with spare coins and dollars every week. I know we won't get to Barbados, but next year's Valentine's Day will definitely include a romantic night away for us in a nice hotel.

And in 2026, we'll give each other more support and "ME" time to do things we each love. Dave wants to go shoot pool twice a month. I want to join a gym.

It will be good for our relationship and our family, not just for ourselves.

It's been a long time since I've felt I was looking forward. I understand now what Angela meant, that she "used to be" me. I think I'm going to "used to be" me too ...