

# **Parent-to-Parent Support Session**

## **Dianna Rooney and Joan Yen**

### **May 29, 2008**

**At the end of this session, you will be able to:**

- **Describe the importance of forming collaborative relationships with schools/therapists and other care providers overseas**
- **Identify ways to manage stress while caring for a child with special needs**
- **Discuss tips and techniques for raising a child with special needs**

## **WELCOME TO HOLLAND**

**by**  
**Emily Perl Kingsley**

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I am often asked to describe the experience of raising a child with a disability - to try to help people who have not shared that unique experience to understand it, to imagine how it would feel. It's like this.....

When you're going to have a baby, it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip - to Italy. You buy a bunch of guide books and make your wonderful plans. The Coliseum. The Michelangelo David. The gondolas in Venice. You may learn some handy phrases in Italian. It's all very exciting.

After months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later, the plane lands. The stewardess comes in and says, "Welcome to Holland."

"Holland?!?" you say. "What do you mean Holland?? I signed up for Italy! I'm supposed to be in Italy. All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy."

But there's been a change in the flight plan. They've landed in Holland and there you must stay.

The important thing is that they haven't taken you to a horrible, disgusting, filthy place, full of pestilence, famine and disease. It's just a different place.

So you must go out and buy new guide books. And you must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a whole new group of people you would never have met.

It's just a different place. It's slower-paced than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But after you've been there for a while and you catch your breath, you look around.... and you begin to notice that Holland has windmills....and Holland has tulips. Holland even has Rembrandts.

But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy... and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there. And for the rest of your life, you will say "Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I had planned."

And the pain of that will never, ever, ever, ever go away... because the loss of that dream is a very very significant loss.

But... if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things ... about Holland.

## **My Personal Experience as a Parent** **By, Dianna Rooney**

### **What worked:**

- Good school communication
- Research
- Follow your instincts
- Involve your child
- Shift your mindset

### **What did not work:**

- Believing everything you read
- Listening to gossip
- Following the crowd
- Unrealistic expectations
- Comparing schools – ‘at my last school...’

*Effective communication is the key to success!*

## Overseas Success Checklist

### By Dianna Rooney

	<b>Learn/research schools</b>
	<p>Special needs programs  Flexibility  After-school activities  Philosophy  Find info at OBC, Office of Overseas Schools, FLO, websites etc.</p>
	<b>At post</b>
	<p>Start language classes  Learn about culture  Visit school with children, if possible  After-school activities  PTA  Special education programs  Volunteer opportunities  Activities (e.g., sports)  Parent Teacher Association (PTA)</p>
	<b>See how school communicates with parents</b>
	<p>Newsletters  Assignment books  Notes  Email  Phone calls</p>
	<b>Support Groups</b>
	<p>If there isn't one – start one!  Connect with other parents with similar issues  Start a special education library  Invite speakers (e.g., from Embassy or local community, teachers)</p>
	<b>Communication at School</b>
	<p>Educate staff/teachers – gently!  Meetings at School – Set the tone!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bring photo of child</li> <li>• Start with strengths and abilities</li> <li>• Have a purpose</li> <li>• Know what you want</li> <li>• Be organized – papers!</li> </ul>

## Overseas Success Checklist (cont'd)

	<b>Watch for barriers to communication</b>
	Emotions Jargon Intimidation Cultural differences/language Negative history
	<b>Communication at Home</b>
	Give child some down time, time to decompress School is stressful Involve student in setting schedules for homework, snack time etc. Remember other family members!
	<b>Focus on child's strengths</b>
	Seek opportunities to build on interests after school Look for local classes Start a class or group Look for 'hidden' experts/talent at embassy Let your child lead a class

## **Things that Have Helped Us**

**By Dianna Rooney and Joan Yen**

- Exercise on a regular basis. It is one of the best things you can do for yourself.
- Practice some form of relaxation regularly (e.g., massage, yoga, deep breathing, relaxation techniques).
- Maintain a healthy sense of humor! Find something to make you laugh everyday.
- Take some time each week for yourself every week. Get a manicure; play some golf.
- Take time to nurture other important relationships each week.
- Get some help when you need it (e.g., get a housekeeper).
- Let go of any guilt you might be feeling; you (and your child) are doing the best that you can.
- Trust your gut! If you think something is not right with your child or the school situation, trust that parental instinct.
- Remember to pace yourself. You are in this for the long haul.
- Celebrate small successes!
- It's all relative. You always will find someone who has it easier (or harder) than you have it.
- It is natural to have ups and downs with regard to how things are going for your child.
- Forgive yourself (and your child) for things that go wrong.
- Try to live one day at a time. Plan for the future, but don't worry about it too much. Good things will happen for you and your child that you can't imagine now.

# Bibliography



## Books

Sapolsky, Robert M. *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*. New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1994.

Posen, David. *The Little Book of Stress Relief*. Buffalo: Firefly Books, 1994.

Elkin, Allen. *Stress Management for Dummies*. Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 1999.

Seaward, Brian, L. *Achieving the Mind-Body-Spirit Connection: A Stress Management Workbook*. Sudbury, Massachusetts: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2005.

Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, Heather McNamara, and Karen Simmons *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Children with Special Needs: Stories of Love and Understanding for Those Who Care for Children with Disabilities*

Laura E. Marshak and Fran P. Prezant, *Married with Special-Needs Children: A Couples' Guide to Keeping Connected*

Wright Pam and Pete. *From Emotions to Advocacy*.

## Audiovisual

*Letting Go of Stress*

Steven Halpern (Artist), Emmett Miller (Artist)

*Take the Stress Out of Your Life: A Medical Doctor's Proven Program to Minimize Stress and Maximize Health* [Book with Two Audio CDs] (Paperback)

by M.D. Jay Winner (Author)

*Stress & Relaxation Explained: An Introduction to Stress Management and Relaxation Techniques*

Alice D. Domar; PhD, Andrew Johnson

*Yoga for Stress Relief (With the Dalai Lama)* (2006)

Barbara Benagh, Michael Wohl

*Autism: The Musical*, HBO Production (not sure if you can order it yet, but it is really good!)

*Momentary Meditations*, Barbara Biziou, Natural Journeys, 2003. (Used in this session.)