



BY KATHI CALOURI, PhD

PACE Place was founded by Kathi Calouri, PhD and Eric Hamblen, a husband and wife team. Steve Ryan, MA, CCC, speech-language pathologist completes the PACE Place team, which has over 60 years of combined experience working with children with ASD and their families. Dr. Calouri earned her MA & PhD at UCLA. Her years of dedicated service taught her the value of appropriate, intensive services for children and their families. Eric Hamblen's experience reflects his interest in family-based intervention that focuses on leveraging the emotional bond between parent and child to remediate core deficits associated with social learning disorders. Steve Ryan is a licensed speech-language pathologist, earning his MA from Northern Illinois University. Steve's approach incorporates a delicate balance between child-directed and adult-directed interactions. Steve effectively uses movement to develop a child's desire to initiate, respond, and attend to social interaction. The PACE Place professionals created the innovative PACE Place Family Immersion Week™ where families spend five days addressing individual targets within daily living activities and community outings.

Dads and ASD: THE POWER OF A FAMILY IMMERSION MODEL

A child's diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) shakes every parent to the core. Dads can struggle with understanding the diagnosis and coming to grips with their role in helping the family. Vincent Grande's son, Elijah, has a diagnosis of ASD, and Vincent shares, "I was totally lost. I had no skills as to how to manage my very unique son. I felt as if I was failing him and my family. For dads, we just want to fix everything and make it right. We had tried various behavior therapies for Elijah. All helped, but nothing was a 'game changer.' I did not feel as if I had the necessary tools to help my son grow up to be an independent human being."

An individual with ASD often enters the world of autism treatment in early childhood when he or she is in a mom-focused world. Thus, it is understandable that moms often carry the greater responsibility in seeking treatment options, working with professionals, and implementing strategies in the home environment. Very often, dads are helping in a meaningful way behind the scenes, by caring for the other children, maintaining other household responsibilities, and financially supporting the family. However, this division of labor can be frustrating for both parents. All children benefit from having two active parents. Parents benefit from having a partner in family life. Any effort to empower dads must build on the innate strengths that dads bring to the relationship with the child. An empowered dad can have a powerful, positive effect on the entire family system.

Moms and dads have different concerns, expectations, and styles of engagement with their child. Moms and dads provide

different accommodations for their children, while they each provide different opportunities for the child to engage the world. A Family Immersion Model validates and supports these differences, while also guiding parents to appreciate and rely on the strengths of each other. A professional within a Family Immersion Model is the outside agent who can spotlight and nurture each parent's contribution to a healthy family system.

One of the strongest prognosticators of success for children with ASD lies in a family's ability to guide their child's development within the flow of their daily lives. Where does dad fit in the mix of daily life for an individual with ASD? Where do mom and dad find support? How can professionals best guide the child and the family? A Family Immersion Model addresses these questions. In a Family Immersion Model, families spend multiple days with a professional, often away from their own home. The professionals address the family's goals within the context of daily life experiences. The Family Immersion Model integrates an understanding of child development, the impact of ASD on individual development and on family development, and the power of experience-based learning. The Family Immersion Model allows the professional and the family to collaborate more effectively toward the common goal of improving the quality of life for the entire family.

It is rare for both parents to have the opportunity to listen to the same information from a professional at the same time. It is virtually unheard of for parents, their children, and a professional to share



The PACE Place Team. From left to right: Steve Ryan, MA, CCC, Kathi Calouri, Ph.D., Eric Hamblen, Deb Crowell



Vincent Grande with sons Nate & Elijah

the same experiences and information related to home struggles (e.g., toilet training, mealtimes, and family chores) and community settings (e.g., park, grocery store, restaurants, and haircuts). I spent the first twenty years of my career advising parents on how to handle tantrums at the grocery store or better manage mealtimes. But until I worked within a Family Immersion Model, I had never actually been to the grocery store with a client or shared a meal with the family. Now, I have the opportunity to demonstrate effective strategies and adjust them in the “heat of the moment.”

Both parents need the opportunity to ask questions, share their own perspectives, and filter new learning through their understanding of their unique relationship with their child. The guidance and experience each family member gains in the context of real-life situations is what sets the Family Immersion Model apart from traditional models of service. Each parent discovers his or her unique unrivaled strengths that contribute to the growth of the family. The strength of the Family Immersion Model is that both parents learn how to leverage their unique abilities and perspective into the dynamic of how to help their child. Family Immersion is a great equalizer, allowing each parent to contribute, learn, and develop a level of understanding based on a uniquely shared experience.

Both moms and dads often learn best when they are immersed in the experience.

Thus, in a Family Immersion Model, professionals continually bridge the gap between theory and practical day-to-day application in ways that allow parents to readily recognize and apply strategies as they shift their family’s development for the better. The entire family helps generate the daily agenda, and the family’s goals are addressed within the activities chosen. In a Family Immersion Model, families may work on their goals at the bowling alley, the grocery store, or at a restaurant. For example, a simple outing to the bowling alley provides opportunities to work on many family goals. If the child needs to increase their independence, a family may be guided to not carry the child’s bowling shoes, not select the child’s bowling ball, and not remind the child to take a turn. If the child needs to work on emotional regulation, the disappointment of a gutter ball and the joy of a strike are naturally occurring emotional events that can be guided by the adults. Any outing can be the backdrop for addressing a family’s goals and concerns. In this way, when the family returns to their own home environment, they will have gained valuable experience with addressing their family’s goals in settings representative of their real lives.

In Family Immersion, professionals partner with parents. Very often, the presence of an outsider can shift the family dynamic by nudging the child in a way that the parents can’t and/or the child won’t allow. I will provide a concrete example. A priority for

some families is to encourage the child with ASD to eat a wider range of foods. I am able to successfully introduce new foods to the child that neither mom nor dad can. I can provide an emotionally neutral tone to mealtime that is impossible for the parents due to the family’s history with food issues. I use a “baby steps” approach whereby the family selects a food that is a reasonable stretch for the child. Then, I present a bite of the new food that is literally the size of a half grain of rice. We might spend several hours in a relaxed atmosphere, playing and experimenting with new foods. I see the family several times during the course of a week, so we can practice multiple times. Most importantly, by the end of the week, I transfer the strategies to the parents so that they can maintain our successes when they get back home. We have been wildly successful in getting kids to expand their diets during an Immersion Week. I could never guide this process successfully in traditional 1-hour therapy sessions at an office.

A common frustration for families with a child with ASD is the lack of family balance. Very often, the member of the family with ASD controls the family’s agenda, dictating or limiting the breadth and quality of family outings and activities. This is unhealthy for all members of the family. Clearly, the other members of the family can feel disgruntled by the lack of balance. Equally important, the child with ASD who limits the family’s agenda misses out on opportunities to learn

from new environments and experiences. One goal of Family Immersion is to restore family balance. Steve Ryan, MA, CCC, a speech-language pathologist explains, "I provide a different emotional compass for the family. It's a shift in thinking for the child and parents. It is important to remember that each family member has a valuable voice and when one person's emotions dominate, the entire family system will suffer."

Rather than interfere with family life, professionals within a Family Immersion Model help parents learn how to assess and develop compensatory systems that lead to a higher quality of life. Families enjoy being a family while addressing the obstacles they face. Parent-led experiences create the core of Family Immersion. As with all children, children diagnosed with ASD are the happiest, most secure, and most available for learning when the parent is the guide. During Family Immersion, the professionals and the parents share their moment-by-moment observations, questions, ideas, and expertise within the daily routine, thus ensuring meaningful learning that can be replicated at home. The Family Immersion approach fortifies the parent's determination to be the central reference point in the family.

Dads can feel especially empowered and productive in a Family Immersion Model of service when some of the professionals are men. Thus, dads have the opportunity to listen to male perspectives and observe male styles of engagement that they can draw on as they address their family's unique set of goals. After spending time with a male clinician, one dad happily reported, "That was refreshing. I didn't have to play puppets with my son." In a female-dominated field, dads can often learn more readily from a male style of engagement and male preferred activities. Coaching dads is especially satisfying.

Jim Reidenbaugh from Idaho, whose family participated in an Immersion Week, experienced the shift in family balance while sitting at Starbucks. He asked his sons (one son with ASD), "Do you know how long it has been since we sat together at Starbucks?" After letting the boys ponder for awhile, Jim offered, "We've never gone to Starbucks because I never get to pick the adventure." The outing turned out to

be pleasant for everyone. Jim rediscovered his role as the guide for his sons. His sons experienced the joy to be found when following dad's lead.

Petro Tsarehradsky from Minnesota has engaged in a Family Immersion experience several times with his three boys, all with some gradation of ASD. "The ability to take advantage of any activity and turn it into a learning experience has never ceased to amaze me. Participating in the program this past summer, we wanted to work on increasing the amount of awareness and respect our three boys have for each other, especially since their personalities are so different. So, we proceeded to a putt-putt golf facility to play a bit. The live coaching we received during our game demonstrated that our boys can behave differently. We turned a golf game that could have become mundane and irritating to everyone into an event of peer awareness, turn-taking, and respect. And all of that was while they were having fun. The experience also allowed my boys to receive me as a dad much more fully in transferring some golf skills, which was flat out satisfying as a bonding moment with my boys."

A core goal of Family Immersion is to create a safe and challenging environment for parents to discover their competence and confidence. Parents take the opportunity to think about the child and the entire family in a fresh way. Equipped with memorable experiences and a fresh way of thinking about their family relationships, parents continue to build on the strategies they learned during Family Immersion. Armed with knowledge and experience, families return to their homes filled with ideas and memories that can be drawn upon as the events of daily life continue to unfold. With this knowledge and experience, families can limit the impact that a diagnosis of ASD can exert on the development of their children and on their development as parents. Parents continue to discover and evolve their own vision and abilities for raising their child with ASD.

After spending five days in a Family Immersion program, Barry Flamm from Minnesota speaks about the experience and about his son, Dillon, who has a diagnosis of ASD. "There were a lot of firsts for our family. You get caught up in your day-to-day life when you're at home. The 'fresh'



From left to right: Alec, Jacob, Tyler with Petro Tsarehradsky.

environment helps. I think that I have an idea on what I can do to better regulate his emotions. At the same time, we need to regulate our emotions because he reacts to how we're feeling and how we react to things. My family was close to me that week and that's something I'm always going to remember."

Annie Marks wrote, "We've struggled on many days. But we don't have that sick feeling in our stomachs anymore wondering what in the world to do in certain situations. My husband's a much more active parent now because he now feels competent in parenting our special needs child."

The impact of competent and confident parenting is felt by every member of the family. As Eric Hamblen, Program Director of PACE Place shares, "Parents get to see their interactions with their child through an entirely new lens. Empowered with a new way of seeing and thinking about their child, parents begin to explore new strategies and experience more positive interactions with their son or daughter. I routinely get to witness a parent's rediscovery of hope for their child, their family, and the future. I often enter a family's life when they are the most vulnerable. We do not take our role lightly. That said, I have one of the most rewarding jobs in the world!"