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**>>> on the cover**

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## Parent-to-Parent Network Gives Community a Strong Support System

If you are sick, you go to the doctor. If you need help with investing, you go to a financial advisor. If you need advice on raising a child with different abilities, you can go to the Baltimore Jewish Abilities Alliance's (BJAA) Parent-to-Parent Network.

The Parent-to-Parent Network matches trained support parents with parents looking for someone to share their feelings and concerns with, as well as receive support and resources. Parents are matched based on individual needs determined by conversations with BJAA professional staff.

The relationships formed in the Parent-to-Parent Network can last from a couple of months to a few years or even a lifetime.

If you are a parent interested in participating in the Network, or if you want to be matched with a support parent, go to [jewishabilities.org/parenttoparent](http://jewishabilities.org/parenttoparent), email [bjaa@jcc.org](mailto:bjaa@jcc.org) or call 410-559-3613.

— *Eli Kaufman*



## CONNECT THROUGH VOLUNTEERING

Make a new friend while developing a special connection with someone with different abilities.

Through Jewish Community Services' (JCS) new Special Connection program, volunteers enjoy fun activities while building bonds with an adult with a disability. It's as simple as hanging out and playing games or sharing an ice cream, a ballgame or a movie.

Volunteers can get together one-on-one or in a group — with family or friends. The time commitment is of one's choosing. It can be as little as twice a year or as much as twice a month.

JCS screens all volunteers and provides initial training. For more information, call 410-466-9200 or visit [jcsbaltimore.org/volunteer](http://jcsbaltimore.org/volunteer).

— *Rochelle Eisenberg*

## Modifying Your Home

Need to modify your home for a disabled family member? Low to moderate income Jewish homeowners can get help when it comes to safety modifications and equipment.

CHAI: Comprehensive Housing Assistance Inc. will subsidize the cost of safety equipment, such as grab bars, accessibility modifications, including ramps, and assistive devices in area homes.

Homeowners will be charged on a sliding scale, based on income and family size.

In addition, CHAI will provide repairs for adult homeowners with disabilities and pay for select services such as occupational

therapy assessments if not covered by insurance.

"We want people to be able to live safely and as independently as possible," says Rona Gross, CHAI's senior benefits coordinator.

Jewish homeowners throughout Baltimore as well as all individuals living in one of CHAI's general service areas — Glen, Cheswolde, Mt Washington, Cross Country and Fallstaff — are eligible for these benefits, part of CHAI's Senior Home Repair and Benefits program.

CHAI will provide up to \$800 per household per year for modifications or repairs. If costs exceed that amount, the agency will try to leverage funds from other sources.

For additional information, go to CHAI's Senior Home Repair and Benefits Program at [chaibaltimore.org](http://chaibaltimore.org).

— *Rochelle Eisenberg*





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# *The* A B C's *of the* I E P

## Working with Advocates to Navigate the IEP Process

BY ELINOR SPOKES

Mary and Jonathan Lipnick had genuine concerns about their daughter Irene's development. When she was nearly 2, she was not speaking like other children her age and seemed to struggle with some social interactions.

They tried to get services through Baltimore County Infants and Toddlers Program but were told she didn't qualify. Their worries continued as Irene entered elementary school where teachers observed that she was displaying difficulty with expressive and receptive language.

When Irene was in first grade in her local public school, the Lipnicks presented the school with results of private testing, conducted because they were not satisfied with the response from the County. The tests indicated learning differences and the family requested an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting.

The IEP meeting brings school

personnel together with the parents to determine if a student has an educational disability that negatively impacts the student's education. If so, the team formulates an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that includes goals and objectives to support the student during his or her years in public school.

Once the plan is developed, it becomes a legally binding contract.

Searching for answers to questions about the IEP process, Mary Lipnick discovered MDSNAP, Maryland Special Needs Advocacy Program. A program of The Associated's Macks Center for Jewish Education, MDSNAP provides free educational

advocacy services for Jewish families in the Baltimore area. The Lipnicks contacted MDSNAP's Martha Goodman to advocate for Irene to ensure that the school system was providing the services she needed.

"The IEP meetings are emotional and can be confrontational. Many people are not able to advocate for

**"The IEP meetings are emotional and can be confrontational."**

— MARY LIPNICK

their child, articulate needs and understand the system. Martha is able to do all of this and be emotionally separated so she can be more focused on the issue, instead of the emotions. As a parent I found it impossible to separate my emotions when advocating for my children," Lipnick says.





**Mary Lipnick, who helps her daughter Irene with her homework, was thrilled that MDSNAP could help her navigate the IEP.**

“With Martha’s assistance we were able to improve Irene’s education plan and add services and assistance we knew were necessary for Irene’s education. We also were able to ensure the school was doing its part to help our child succeed.”

Goodman says the IEP process can be initiated when parents have concerns about their child’s development or when a teacher has noticed learning issues in the classroom. (See page 10 for “Red Flags.”)

The process begins with an initial meeting in which parents, a special educator, general educator (student’s teacher) and other specialists,

## Resources For Parents Of Special Needs Children



**MDSNAP:** [cjebaltimore.org/mdsnap](http://cjebaltimore.org/mdsnap)

**SHEMESH:** [shemeshbaltimore.org](http://shemeshbaltimore.org)

**Baltimore Jewish Abilities Alliance:** [jewishabilities.org](http://jewishabilities.org)

**Maryland Disability Law Center:** [mdlclaw.org](http://mdlclaw.org)

**The Parents’ Place of Maryland: A Center for Families of Children with Special Needs:** [ppmd.org](http://ppmd.org)

**Pathfinders for Autism:** [pathfindersforautism.org](http://pathfindersforautism.org)

**Maryland Learning Links:** [Marylandlearninglinks.org](http://Marylandlearninglinks.org)

**Child Find Baltimore County:** [bcps.org](http://bcps.org)

**Child Find Baltimore City:** [baltimorecityschools.org](http://baltimorecityschools.org)

**Great resource for books on the topic:** [wrightslaw.com](http://wrightslaw.com)



## 10 Red Flags That Your Child May Have A Disability That Could Impact Learning.

- ✓ Trouble learning numbers, letters or days of the week or difficulty rhyming words
- ✓ Easily distracted, impulsive, difficulty sitting still or constantly in motion
- ✓ Difficulty following directions
- ✓ Makes careless mistakes in schoolwork
- ✓ Makes consistent letter and number reversals
- ✓ Poor memory skills, often forgetful and loses personal belongings
- ✓ Poor recall of facts and difficulty learning new skills
- ✓ Spelling and writing difficulties
- ✓ Avoids reading and has difficulty with comprehension
- ✓ Struggles with completion and accuracy of assignments

Source: Rachel Turniansky, Coordinator of Special Education Services, Macks Center for Jewish Education

perhaps a speech language specialist, meet to determine what, if any, assessments are warranted. They then develop a plan. Experts suggest families come armed with as much information as possible to support their concerns.

In addition, parents should know that learning difficulties can arise at any age. Just because your child did well in lower school, he or she may have been able to compensate for learning issues.

By middle school, when students have 10 different teachers, the gaps begin to show.

Children attending parochial or private schools, notes Goodman, go through processes similar to the IEP, but the outcome is called a Service Plan and, unlike an IEP, it is not a contract. In this scenario, school districts can choose what services will be offered, how much, for how long, to whom and where.

And if a school district wishes to, they can provide the service on site.

Liz Simon-Higgs had concerns about her son Daniel's social and emotional interactions starting when he was 2 years old, which were echoed by her son's preschool

teacher. A resident of Federal Hill, she contacted the Baltimore City Infants and Toddlers Program for a basic evaluation and also had her son work on his fine motor skills with a private occupational therapist.

At the time, Daniel was enrolled in a Jewish preschool and through that community, Simon-Higgs was referred to MDSNAP. "Because of her experience with her own daughter who has special needs, Martha knew how to be an advocate and how to push so things were done the way they should be," recalls Simon-Higgs.

As an example, at the first IEP meeting, Simon-Higgs says the City did not have the right staff at the table. Goodman recognized that and pushed the team to reconvene with the appropriate staff people to get the best outcome.

Soon after the initial meeting, Simon-Higgs was referred to a developmental pediatrician who diagnosed Daniel as having an autism spectrum disorder. This prompted another IEP meeting which directed Simon-Higgs to enroll Daniel in a preschool inclusion program in the local public elementary school. There he has been doing well, but the Simon-Higgs family takes each year at a time, reevaluating year by year.

Simon-Higgs also found the Baltimore Jewish Abilities

**“Talking to a parent who has been through it [through BJAA] can help put things into perspective.”**

— LIZ SIMON-HIGGS

Alliance (BJAA) useful; it paired her with a mother of a 20-year-old son with autism. "Talking to a parent who has been through it can help put things into perspective," she says.

BJAA also offers Special Needs Symposiums, a Parent-to-Parent Network and a range of workshops for parents of children with special needs.

SHEMESH, another program offered within The Associated system, provides educational support necessary for Jewish children with learning differences enrolled in a Jewish educational setting to help them reach their academic potential.

According to Faye Friedman, program director of SHEMESH, their services, which are provided at nine local day schools, include professional development for educators, social skills training, specialized reading instruction and executive function coaching. Each of the schools works with SHEMESH to identify the needs of their students and SHEMESH customizes its program accordingly.

If a student is struggling in a Jewish educational setting, and the parent and the school have concerns, a SHEMESH special educator or any of their professional staff can attend a meeting at the public school to provide insight, background information and data about the student's school performance. IEP teams have acknowledged that this input has been a key ingredient in the improvement and added effectiveness of the Child Find process, a special education service provided through the public schools for identifying children from ages three through 21 who are suspected of having an educational disability and who may be eligible for special education and related services.

"Our services extend well beyond the school doors. We are there for the students, teachers and parents offering support and guidance every step of the way," adds Friedman.

# Baltimore

Jewish Abilities Alliance

[www.jewishabilities.org](http://www.jewishabilities.org)

BJAA is an innovative resource that connects individuals and families to each other and to other programs and services.

- Our website, [jewishabilities.org](http://jewishabilities.org) provides local resources for toddlers through adults
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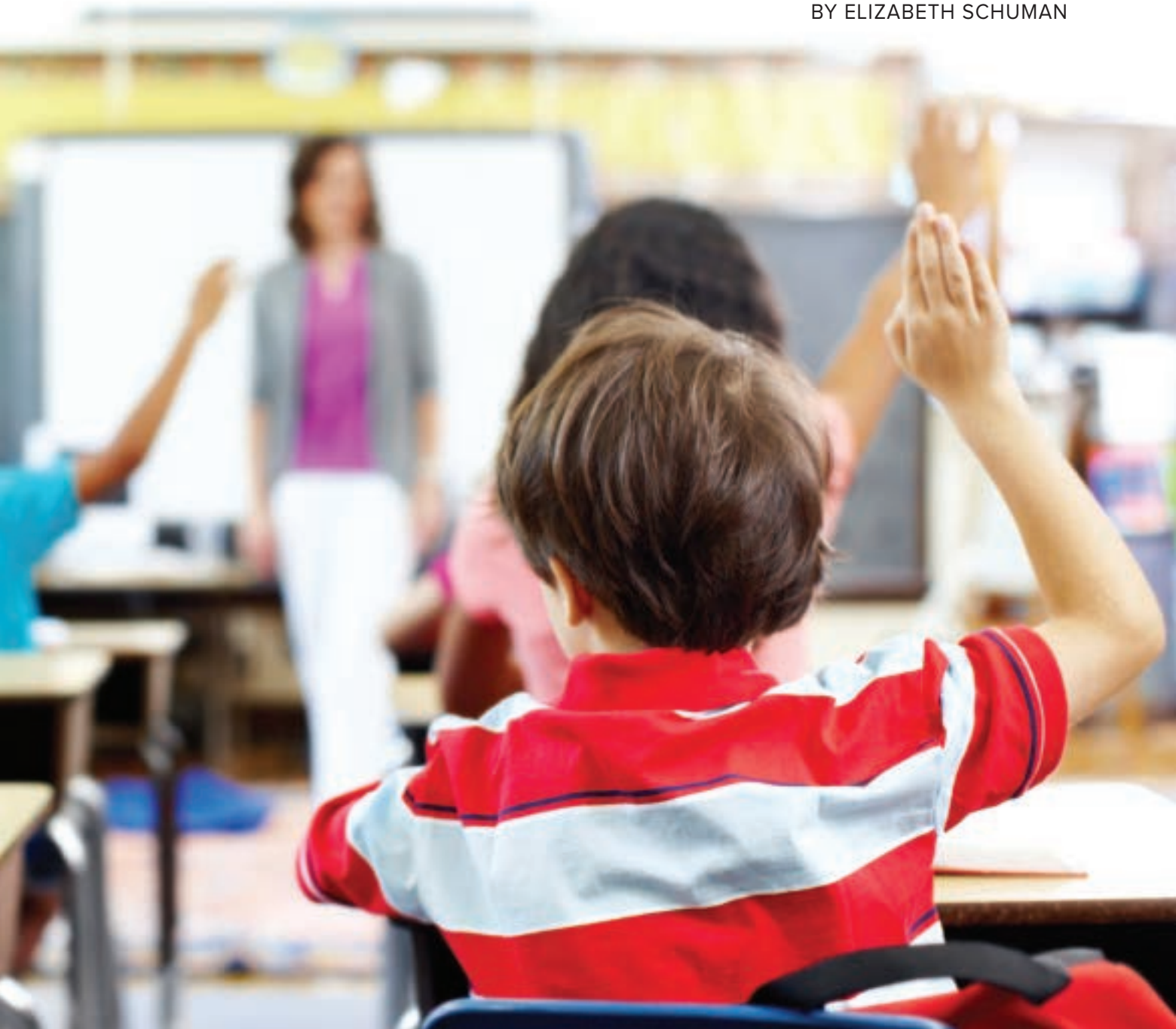
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# LESSONS LEARNED *in the* CLASSROOM

Finding the right educational setting for your child

BY ELIZABETH SCHUMAN





**LIKE MANY** 11-year-old boys, Gavi Stein likes video games and the Ravens. He bickers with his older brother, Nesanel, 17, and he needs to be reminded to straighten his room. He'll talk a blue streak, says his mother, and he has indomitable street smarts. In short, Gavi seems perfectly ordinary.

His story, however, is anything but typical. Soon after he was born, Gavi began showing noticeable developmental delays. Later diagnosed with a rare learning disability – short-term memory loss, Gavi also had lingering side effects from an auto-immune disorder.

The result? Numerous learning issues. Despite the challenges, Gavi refuses to be intimidated by school. He attends class with his

peers and is often a leader when it comes to group activities.

“When I hear the word challenge, I know that it’s just another reason to try harder,” he says. “It doesn’t matter what everyone else thinks. If you want to succeed, you can.”

That confidence stems equally from Gavi’s personal mantra of success and from the teachers at SHEMESH, explains his mother Jennifer “Shaindl” Stein. SHEMESH, a program of The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore, provides educational support for Jewish children with learning differences.

Stein and her husband, Steve “Chaim” Stein, of Pikesville have relied on the agency since Gavi entered elementary school, allowing him to participate fully in the traditional classroom and

**Fifth-grader Gavi Stein is thriving at Talmudical Academy, thanks in part to his teachers and SHEMESH educators.**

receive direct assistance with academic skills. This spring, Gavi received SHEMESH’s highest honor, the Student Academic Achievement award.

Entering fifth grade this fall at Talmudical Academy (TA), Gavi is thriving. “The teachers at TA and SHEMESH recognize each child’s positive qualities and communicate with each other and with parents,” says Jennifer Stein. “SHEMESH is about helping our children succeed.”

The emphasis on personal success is exactly what drives educators at SHEMESH, explains Aviva Weisbord, Ph.D.,

*Story continued on page 15*

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT SCHOOL FOR YOUR CHILD

Parents, do your homework. Before enrolling your child in any school — public, private, magnet, charter or religious — look at the academic, physical, social, emotional and developmental needs of your child, says Patricia Utz, director of admissions at the Jemicy School in Owings Mills. To evaluate a school, Utz offers these pointers:

**Keep an open mind:** Don't opt out of a school based on what you've heard. Visit, talk with teachers, and see what's offered. "You might find that a particular school is not the right fit, but you may see an approach that would work well for your child in another setting." While the ultimate goal is to maximize the services your child needs in the school you choose, she adds it's rare to find a single school that meets every aspect of your child's needs.

**Recognize talent:** Too often people focus on a child's needs and neglect the child's strengths. "A school that is a good fit addresses needs and also ensures an environment that stimulates strengths and talents."

**Remain flexible:** Though you found the ideal school for your child today, that doesn't mean it will be the right fit in two years. "Children with learning differences may not fit into the typical transition times at fifth or eighth grade, for example, and may progress differently. Your child may need a different environment for the next developmental spurt."

**Be involved:** "Attend conferences, review report cards, volunteer and monitor what is happening to ensure that the school continues to meet the needs, interests and abilities of your child."



Rachel Turniansky heads Gesher LaTorah, a community religious school for individuals with special needs.

## BUILDING JEWISH IDENTITY



For Jewish children with significant developmental, language or physical disabilities, having access to a meaningful Jewish education might seem insurmountable. In reality, Jewish learning comes in all forms.

"Individuals with special needs are such an important part of the Jewish community. Anything we can do to make our community inclusive is very important," says Rachel Turniansky, principal, Gesher LaTorah and coordinator of the special needs program at the Macks Center for Jewish Education (CJE).

Gesher LaTorah classes are held each Sunday during the school year at the Weinberg Park Heights JCC. Lessons encompass Jewish holidays and customs, Torah, Hebrew reading, life cycle events and life skills.

The community religious school serves some 30 students who range in age from four to 21.

During the week, the students learn in vocational programs, self-contained classrooms, inclusive public schools or self-contained schools.

"Families of children with significant special needs may not make Jewish learning a priority because of the resources and energy needed for daily activities," says Turniansky. "Part of our job is to see Jewish education as essential. Through this program, students increase their knowledge and build Jewish identity."

Gesher LaTorah students learn Jewish holidays, customs, Torah, Hebrew and life skills.

Story from page 13

SHEMESH's executive director. The agency's six learning centers in Baltimore Jewish day schools provide targeted, individualized, educational support for children with learning differences ranging from autism and developmental delays to hearing impairment and intellectual disabilities. SHEMESH also provides assistance to preschools and kindergartens in the region, as well as support in area congregational schools.

"We accept that children have various learning profiles and that all of us have different ways of learning and working," explains Weisbord. Children may have a SHEMESH helper in the classroom or may receive individual or group lessons at a designated time during the week.

In the not-too-distant past, children who learned differently were dismissed as "dumb or lazy," continues Weisbord. Today's multifaceted approaches to

## "WHEN I HEAR THE WORD CHALLENGE, I KNOW THAT IT'S JUST ANOTHER REASON TO TRY HARDER"

— GAVI STEIN

classroom inclusion, once called mainstreaming, have helped change that mindset.

"Students in school learn with classmates who have special needs," she says. "When these students become entrepreneurs or CEOs or are in a position to hire, they will not think it's a big deal to hire someone with a disability. At the same time, today's children with special needs may themselves be the entrepreneurs or CEOs of tomorrow and there is already a culture of acceptance."

Stein, whose older son also has his challenges at school, albeit different than those of his younger brother, admits that parents may

be overwhelmed and unsure about how to provide for their children who learn differently. "I guarantee that every child who has a special need also has wonderful qualities and an intellectual ability that you may not have recognized yet. Yes, it can be stressful when all you want is for your child to succeed and be happy. It takes energy and a partner like SHEMESH to achieve that."

Stein stresses the importance of learning beyond the classroom, with structure and support in the home and in outside activities. "These positive experiences overflow into the school year and into the classroom," she adds.

## UNDERSTANDING THE LAW

In Maryland, some 102,000 students received some variation of special education services in 2013. These services addressed a full range of learning and physical disabilities, including autism, ADHD, developmental disorders, emotional issues, physical conditions, behavioral disorders, dyslexia, deafness and blindness.

The federal government has two specific pieces of legislation tied to inclusion. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 guarantees that children with disabilities have access to the same public education programs, activities and services as their classmates without disabilities. For example, a child in a wheelchair needs access to a classroom. A child with a hearing impairment may need a seat in the front of the classroom.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that all eligible children with disabilities have access to a free, appropriate public education. The public school system must provide more or different education and services to children with disabilities so that the education program is tailored appropriately to their needs.

"The best way to distinguish the two is to think of Section 504 as leveling the playing field and think of IDEA as

addressing the disability," says Marjorie Shulbank, section chief, Division of Special Education/Early Intervention Services, Maryland State Department of Education.

No matter the disability, the overarching concept is that students receive education in the regular classroom environment to the maximum extent possible. "The disability must adversely affect educational performance," she says. "Special education services move from the least restrictive classroom setting to residential services, both in-state and out-of-state."

Shulbank emphasizes that tapping into the network of services often begins with Child Find, a federal program that identifies and tests children who may have developmental or physical disabilities. From there, educators, therapists or other health care providers, and parents work together to create an Individualized Education Program (IEP), a written statement of any special education and related services tied to performance, goals and specific needs.



# HELP WANTED



## Finding a Job

BY AMY LANDSMAN

**“MAKE EYE CONTACT,”** is Anthony O’Bannon’s main piece of advice for young people with disabilities who are looking for a job.

O’Bannon is the director of the JCC’s Camp KLAL, a summer camp for young people with disabilities. The campers, age 16 to 24, are on the autism spectrum or have other developmental, social-emotional, or physical disabilities.

The KLAL staff works with the campers on social and vocational skills, with the hope that they’ll ultimately find jobs in the community. During the remainder of the year, KLAL meets on Sunday, offering vocational and life skills activities for adults, 16-24 with disabilities.

In addition to making eye contact, O’Bannon teaches his campers about what to — or not to — wear

in an interview or at work. Plus, the KLAL campers practice real-world workplace skills at their weekly KLAL Café at the Rosenbloom Owings Mills JCC.

runners, and then we have people that help prepare.”

Having a disability — and that can mean everything from intellectual, physical or mental

## **JCS CAN WORK WITH EMPLOYERS, REVIEWING TAX CREDITS THE COMPANY CAN RECEIVE FOR HIRING SOMEONE WITH A DISABILITY.**

“On Monday afternoon we all plan what we’ll do. During art, we make decorations. It’s very focused,” says O’Bannon, who adds that when Thursday comes, everyone helps out.

“During café, each camper gets a job. We have servers, we have

health challenges, to learning disabilities like dyslexia, to traumatic brain injuries to multiple sclerosis or other medical conditions — can make finding a job tough.

Often, it’s really challenging for people with special needs to join — or rejoin — the workforce, and





many need help with the ins and outs of the whole process.

Sometimes, people with disabilities process information a bit more slowly than others. O'Bannon says it's OK to ask a potential employer to repeat a question, or to give them more time to respond.

### **JOB TRAINING AND SUPPORT**

Job seekers don't have to go it alone, because several agencies offer support and training to people of all abilities.

The Career Center at Jewish Community Services (JCS) helps over 1,300 clients a year find work, and about a third of those clients have some sort of disability.

"Our clients with disabilities get jobs at about the same rate as our other clientele," says Career Coach Mary Blake.

JCS clients find jobs at every level, from custodial to executive management. And clients range in age from 16 to 80 — amazing, but true. "There really isn't any type of disability that we don't work with," says Blake. JCS helps clients fine-tune their career search. They learn how to market themselves, and they practice and prepare for interviews. If necessary, JCS will even go to the client's new workplace to help him or her settle in: lending a hand, for example, with the pre-employment paperwork.



**Matt Sussman (left) gets a lesson from Anthony O'Bannon about how to calculate costs of food when shopping. Arielle Terle (middle), Gabi Levin and Hannah Terle also participate in the activity.**

JCS also works with the employers, reviewing the tax credits the company may receive for hiring someone with a disability, which could offset the cost of their longer learning curve on the job. Or the job coach will go to the workplace and help the client learn new tasks, so the manager doesn't feel like the new hire is taking disproportionately long to train.

VSP is another resource. Owned and operated by LifeBridge Health, VSP maximizes the employability of people with barriers to employment, from economic to special needs. Its wide-ranging mission includes career assessment, (helping people zero in on a realistic vocational path), training in work behavior and job-related skill development, office technology training and job placement services.

VSP works with everyone from students getting ready to transition out of high school, to kids who've

left school but find themselves floundering, to veterans and adults. Through VSP's Work Readiness at LifeBridge Health, VSP meets the client and assesses vocational strengths and weaknesses. The client receives eight to 16 weeks of supported, paid training in a

range of functions — from clerical to housekeeping, from food service to the mailroom — at one of LifeBridge's facilities: Sinai Hospital, Levindale, Northwest Hospital or Pikesville Adult Day Care.

“We award a stipend to an individual to train in a LifeBridge Health department,” says Mira Appleby, VSP program development manager.

“The purpose of our program is for participants to gain appropriate work behaviors, job-related skills,

job seeking and retention skills. These skills are acquired through individual counseling and group training session,” says Marla Friedman, VSP work adjustment supervisor. Sometimes, JCS

## **IT'S OK TO ASK A POTENTIAL EMPLOYER TO REPEAT A QUESTION.**

— ANTHONY O'BANNON, DIRECTOR OF KLAL

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gets involved with VSP, providing on-site coaching.

When clients do move to the job search phase, Jacqueline Reavis, job placement specialist, is there to help them every step of the way. “We set clear expectations, while providing support and direction throughout the job search,” Reavis says.

“Some people don’t know about the business world and how to conduct business affairs, so they’re guided about that: What to say, what not to say. How to negotiate a salary. How and when to make that follow up.” Reavis reviews important job search techniques, like self-marketing, on-line job seeking and dress for success.

Reavis preps clients for their interviews, reviewing the most likely interview questions, such as ‘How do you handle problems?’ or even ‘Tell me about yourself.’

Many people with disabilities need workplace accommodations. If you do, you should talk about it when the time is right, which is generally after you have been offered the job.

“If you have depression you don’t have a big sign on you,” says Blake. “But you may want to address it because maybe the medication you take makes it very hard for you to get up early. Maybe you need a later start schedule. That may be your accommodation.”

“Twenty years ago, we didn’t think about employing people with disabilities,” says O’Bannon of Camp KLAL. These days, “look at the number of people with disabilities you see with jobs in the community who are contributing to the community in a very, very positive way.”



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# Agencies and Programs of The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore

## SERVING INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

### **Baltimore Jewish Abilities Alliance (BJAA)**

The Baltimore Jewish Abilities (BJAA) promotes an inclusive, spirited environment that celebrates the diversity in our community and the uniqueness of every individual. The BJAA offers an array of support services in partnership with agencies of The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore. Housed at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Baltimore, the BJAA is an innovative resource that connects individuals and families to each other and to other programs and services. Its website, [jewishabilities.org](http://jewishabilities.org) serves as a user-friendly gateway to resources in the Jewish or general community for people with disabilities. [jewishabilities.org](http://jewishabilities.org), 410-559-3613

### **Camp Milldale**

Through Camp Milldale's Inclusion Camp, a program of the JCC, children with disabilities, ages five to 13, can enjoy the summer camp experience in Reisterstown. Individuals, paired with a one-on-one counselor, are included in camp bunks with their peers and take part in camp activities. Milldale also offers the Bogrim program for teens with special needs, ages 13 to 15, where they engage in recreational activities, from archery to team building, while learning social and life skills.

[campmilldale.org](http://campmilldale.org), 410-559-2390

### **CHAI: Comprehensive Housing Assistance, Inc.**

CHAI's Senior Home Repair and Modification program ensures that each year, 200 low-to-moderate-income disabled person's households in Northwest Baltimore receive necessary home safety repairs, modifications and assistive devices. CHAI also provides this service to all Jewish low-to-moderate-income families with disabilities in Baltimore.

[chaibaltimore.org](http://chaibaltimore.org), 410-500-5300

### **The Jewish Community Center**

The Jewish Community Center features a range of programming specifically for individuals with disabilities, from children to adults. KLAL for Every Season, for adults ages 16 to 24, offers life-skill training and vocational activities that provide invaluable social skills to help them thrive in their adult life. Other programming for individuals with disabilities includes Sunday Funday, an afternoon of recreational and social activities for children, and a weekly Getting Together Club.

[jcc.org](http://jcc.org), 410-356-5200, 410-542-4900

### **Jewish Community Services (JCS)**

JCS offers a wide array of services for adults and children with disabilities and their families, which are designed to help individuals with special needs grow, learn, work and participate fully in community life. Services include counseling, advocacy, case management, assistance with independent living skills, help in accessing resources and equipment through sources, including the Developmental Disability Administration (DDA), and comprehensive vocational services through JCS Career Center. In addition, JCS operates Alternative Living Units, professionally-staffed residences that enable adults with developmental disabilities live as independently as possible.

[jcsbaltimore.org](http://jcsbaltimore.org), 410-466-9200





### Macks Center for Jewish Education

The Macks Center for Jewish Education offers educational opportunities so that individuals with disabilities can be successful learners. The Maryland Special Needs Advocacy Project (MDSNAP) helps families access testing and services through the public school system. Programs such as Gesher LaTorah, a community-based religious school for students with significant special needs, ages four to 21, teaches Torah, Hebrew, prayer and Jewish heritage, while TAG, for adults over 17, focuses on Jewish heritage, identity and community, self-advocacy and leadership. Jewish Advocates for Deaf Education (JADE) provides funding for Oral and Sign Language interpreters and promotes access for deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals.

[cjebaltimore.org](http://cjebaltimore.org), 410-735-5023

### SHEMESH

SHEMESH serves as a community-wide program providing the educational support necessary for Jewish children with learning differences to reach their full intellectual, academic, emotional and social potential in a Jewish setting. Our team of experts includes reading specialists, an early childhood educator, speech and language pathologists, social skills coach, executive function coach and a professional development coordinator. We offer training and mentoring to general and special education teachers as well as educating the community and parents about learning differences and current research-based strategies.

[shemeshbaltimore.org](http://shemeshbaltimore.org), [info@shemeshbaltimore.org](mailto:info@shemeshbaltimore.org), 410-843-7524



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The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore strengthens and nurtures Jewish life by engaging and supporting community partners in Greater Baltimore, Israel and around the world.

From pioneering care for the vulnerable to investing in our youth, deepening Jewish life to developing a global peoplehood, we ensure that our community continues to thrive.

Check out our community-wide calendar for a listing of events hosted by The Associated agencies and programs at [associated.org/baltimoreevents](http://associated.org/baltimoreevents) or call 410-727-4828 to learn how you can become involved.

*These agencies and programs are proud partners of the Baltimore Jewish Abilities Alliance, an innovative resource for people with disabilities that serves as a user-friendly gateway to resources in the Jewish and general community.*

[jewishabilities.org](http://jewishabilities.org)



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 **The Associated**  
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**Morgan Schwartz (right) depends on his parents, Amy and Michael, to handle the logistics of getting him to and from dates.**

# F♥RGING A SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIP

Finding love when one has a disability might be challenging, but planning ahead will help

BY MELINDA GREENBERG

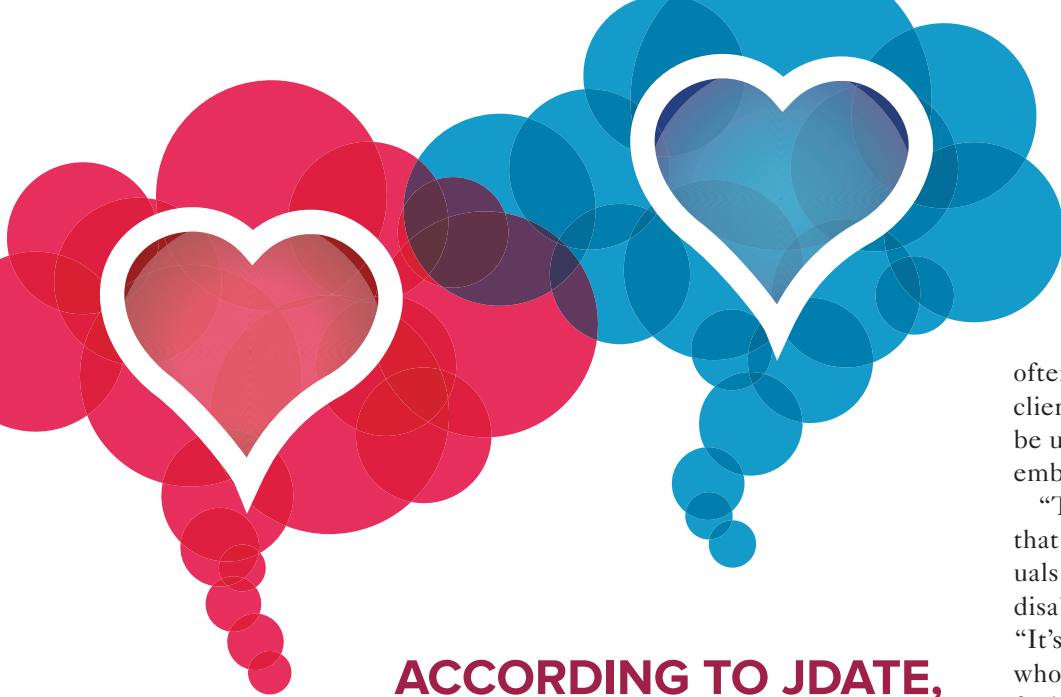
**B**rian Rubin struggled for many years to make a relationship work, from high school to college and into adulthood. But, there was always something that stood in the way of his relationships being successful. Rubin, now 46, took it personally until 13 years ago when he was diagnosed with Aspergers syndrome. Aspergers syndrome is an autism spectrum disorder that is characterized by an inability to understand how to interact socially. “It was very comforting to me to hear that it wasn’t me personally,” says Rubin, who lives in Potomac Village, MD.

Rubin found that his inability to understand social cues and read facial expressions or body language prevented him from forging a successful emotional relationship, despite many decades of trying. Today, he describes his dating life as more transactional and less emotion based. He feels safer, happier and generally more comfortable with the black and white nature of that type of interaction.

Navigating the dating world can be challenging for a person with a disability, particularly if there is a cognitive impairment. Amy Schwartz’s 19-year-old son, Morgan, who has cerebral palsy

and some intellectual disabilities, has been dating for a few years. His mother notes that she and her husband, Michael, had to set rules and establish parameters to help Morgan handle the complexities of dating. “We had conversations about what is appropriate behavior,” she says. “Some of the conversations we have had to have with Morgan might have occurred at an earlier age for some families, but he was not socially ready to have those conversations a few years ago.”

Like many of his typical peers, Morgan expressed an interest in dating when he was 16 and began socializing with a large group of



## **ACCORDING TO JDATE, PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES ARE USING THEIR SITE IN GREATER NUMBERS TO CONNECT WITH OTHER MEN OR WOMEN.**

boys and girls who attended events together. Those interactions evolved into more one-on-one outings as he got older.

Because he does not drive, Morgan relies on his parents to handle the logistics of getting him to and from his dates, adding a layer of planning likely missing from dating for his non-disabled peers. “Everything Morgan and his girlfriend do has to go through two sets of parents,” Schwartz says.

Likewise, Michael Schwartz initiated a conversation with the young woman’s father to address the attitude the parents could adopt to help foster the relationship between these two young people.

“We knew that they were going to have a somewhat limited access to social opportunities, so I thought we had to be more forgiving and allow them to grow together as a couple and as a

young man and young woman,” he says. “I need to be aware and accepting and accommodating of things that parents of developmentally typical children probably never have to accommodate for.”

While some of the intricacies of dating when one or both of the individuals are disabled may be different than for typical daters, the emotions associated with dating are the same, notes Stacey Meadows, manager of Child and Family Therapy for Jewish Community Services, an agency of The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore. “People with disabilities have the capacity and the desire for love, affection and companionship.”

Still, whether the disability is physical, neurological or related to mental health, it can impact the person’s experience in the dating world. Professionals who work with populations with disabilities

often address this topic with their clients and encourage them to be up front and honest as they embark on new relationships.

“The same dating principles that apply to able-bodied individuals apply to those who have disabilities,” Meadows says. “It’s about finding someone with whom you are compatible and can feel comfortable and be yourself.”

Michael Schwartz says it succinctly: “Just because my son has ‘special needs,’ doesn’t mean his needs are special.”

The advent of inclusion education has helped people feel more comfortable around those with disabilities, says Meadows, noting that dating is a natural extension of both those positive experiences.

About 56.7 million people — 19 percent of the population — had a disability in 2010, according to a broad definition of disability, with more than half of them reporting the disability was severe, according to a comprehensive report on this population by the U.S. Census Bureau. Accordingly, the general population is likely to encounter a person with a disability in work, school or in a social setting.

“There is much less stigma today around disabilities and mental illness,” Meadows notes. “People are in a much better position in this day and age to take part in meaningful relationships.”

While JDate, the Jewish dating site, does not have data about the number of people with disabilities who have met on their site, they are seeing daters with disabilities use their site in greater numbers to connect with other men or women in their communities.



Recently JDate highlighted a successful couple in which the young man had cerebral palsy and revealed it to his now wife before their first date. There are now also online dating sites dedicated to people with disabilities.

Meadows recommends what people with disabilities prepare for their dates to ensure that they are comfortable with the logistics and arrangements. “If you are not comfortable dating on your own, for instance, plan a double date or a group date,” she says.

Talking to a friend for advice can also be helpful, Meadows adds, and that certainly does

## “IT’S ABOUT FINDING SOMEONE WITH WHOM YOU ARE COMPATIBLE AND CAN FEEL COMFORTABLE AND BE YOURSELF.”

— STACEY MEADOWS, MANAGER, CHILD AND FAMILY THERAPY, JEWISH COMMUNITY SERVICES

not only pertain to a person with a disability seeking relationship guidance.

For Schwartz, she is glad that Morgan can seek advice from his parents and school and learn

the skills that will help him throughout his life. “The work he does around getting together socially with his friends and his girlfriend will also be important for him if he works and has a boss.”

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# Family Matters

**Navigating family dynamics with a child with a disability**

BY ROCHELLE EISENBERG

**G**rowing up, Stacy Israel can remember feeling a seesaw of emotions. As a member of a family of four siblings with varying abilities,

I would be curing disabilities.” As she grew older, Israel became aware of other people’s responses to her siblings. “I would see the looks we’d get in the supermarket.

and sisters — a recent Easter Seals study found that 60 percent say their siblings have had a positive effect on their life — they often experience myriad emotions that can range from anger to resentment to even “survivor’s guilt” at times. Parents can and should play a role in helping siblings navigate these emotions.

It’s important, says Atara Ziffer, social worker in the special needs department, Jewish Community Services (JCS), for parents to openly communicate with their typically developing child. “Let them know that while nobody can change the fact that their sibling has a disability, they should always feel comfortable expressing difficult emotions, such as anger, resentment or embarrassment.”

**60 percent of people who have siblings with disabilities say that these siblings had a positive effect on their lives**

Israel recalls, at times, withdrawing from difficult situations.

“The house would be loud and I’d go outside to my backyard to play by myself. I would often go into my own fantasy world where

It made me realize I wanted to go into the field. I was determined to change how the world sees people with disabilities.”

Although siblings of children with disabilities love their brothers



The Schwartz family (left to right) Zara, Jennie, Andrew and Jonathan, enjoy spending time as a family.

Israel believes siblings also need to be honest with their parents about how they feel. “You need to feel you can vocalize your emotions,” she says.

In addition to parental support, Jewish Community Services Big Brother and Big Sister Program can match siblings of children with disabilities to an adult volunteer mentor to provide attention and support.

Often siblings without disabilities put a lot of pressure on themselves to be perfect. Parents should be careful to not put unrealistic

expectations on the sibling without the disability.

Jonathan Schwartz and his wife, Jennie Faber Schwartz, make it a point to let their daughter, Zara, whose brother is on the autism spectrum, know she does not have to be perfect. In addition, they want her to know that all families “have their own set of challenges; sometimes you just might not be aware of them,” says Jonathan.

Parents also need to carve out private time for these siblings, even though it may get challenging. And don’t discount family time

even if outside trips and activities are carefully scripted out to accommodate the child with a disability.

Jennie believes that Zara gets a lot of individual attention, and in some ways it’s more positive attention. “She appreciates that it’s good to be her.”

She also adds that Zara, who does not have a disability, has learned to stand up for herself and is more compassionate, often helping out inclusion students in class as a result of having a brother on the autism spectrum.



Stacy Israel: “Growing up in a family with siblings of varying disabilities was the greatest positive influence on my life.”

Adds Israel: “Growing up in a family with siblings of varying abilities was the greatest positive influence on my life. I went into my field, not only to change things but because it’s what I love most about myself. Growing up around people with differences has made me live a happier life.”

**Couple Dynamics**

When the Schwartzes’ son, Andrew, was diagnosed on the autism spectrum, the couple went through a range of emotions similar to that of many parents. While Jennie recognized Andrew would never play sports or drive a car, she slowly accepted this new reality.

Jonathan, on the other hand, had a harder time. “I didn’t want to give up. I would push him and tell Jennie, ‘I know he can do this.’”

Different coping styles among couples are natural when a child is diagnosed with a disability, says Ziffer. “One parent may be sad, while one parent may be hopeful. Many times one or both

a new rhythm. The hope is that families band together during this time. However, the variation in which different people cope means that relationships may suffer at times. Professional input can help ease this process.”

While research on divorce rates for families who have children with disabilities vary — some indicate higher divorce rates than “typical” families, others saying the rates are about the same — there are certainly added stressors on these families. And like any stressor a family faces, the key to successfully navigating the years ahead is open communication and trust.

With the many decisions the family must face — from who stays at home with the child to the best disciplinary styles — the key is figuring out how best to compromise.

For example, says Stacey Meadows, manager of child therapy service, JCS, “you can’t assume one particular parent will be the one staying home. You want to make sure you discuss this so there is no room for resentment in the future.”

For some families, that decision is pretty easy. “Our relationship

.....  
**“Let the [typically developing child] feel comfortable expressing difficult emotions, such as anger, resentment or embarrassment.”**

— ATARA ZIFFER, SOCIAL WORKER IN THE SPECIAL NEEDS DEPARTMENT OF JEWISH COMMUNITY SERVICES

.....  
parents can be in denial. The process of grieving and then eventual acceptance is a continuum that varies for each individual. It may take time for families to find

before the kids was structured around Jennie’s medical career,” says Jonathan. “So it was never a consideration. I had no problem staying home.”

For Ron Snyder, whose son suffers learning disabilities and hearing disabilities as a result of surgery to remove a brain tumor a number of years ago, it was his wife who decided to stay home. Running around to doctor's appointments made more sense, they believed, as she was a nurse and had a better grasp of medical issues.

Later, when their son got older, she returned to work as a school nurse. Today, they take turns running to appointments and they also get help from in-laws.

Hiring help is critical so parents can get both personal respite, as well as a chance to reconnect with spouses. Some families turn to grandparents or other relatives, while others use former special education teachers or teaching assistants who know their child.

Support groups, such as the Parent-to-Parent network of Baltimore Jewish Abilities Alliance (BJAA) also provides a chance for parents to connect with other parents with similar needs, ask questions, find resources and receive support.

Despite the many difficult moments, the Schwartzes believe they've learned some interesting lessons about themselves and about raising children.

Jennie believes she's become more laid back and accepting that she can't always be in control.

Jonathan has noticed he's not as goal driven. "So many parents are worried that their child has to be the best, they have to take such and such a lesson to be successful. I've realized that it's just not that important," he says.

"I think I've become a better person because of Andrew," adds Jennie.



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# Getting Screened

BY BARBARA PASH

The couple was in their early 30s, seeking their first child. Both husband and wife were Jewish. Through in vitro technology, they had created a number of embryos. But when it turned out that all the embryos tested positive for Gaucher disease, the couple discovered that both were carriers of a disorder that causes bone, blood and lung problems.



The heartbroken couple turned to Sinai Hospital's Institute for Maternal Fetal Medicine for genetic counseling.

"They wanted to know the chances of the child having symptoms, the severity and the quality of life," June Dennen, a genetic counselor at Sinai Hospital's Louis and Henrietta Blaustein Women's Health Center, says of a condition that ranges from so mild that individuals may not develop obvious symptoms to debilitating complications that begin in childhood.

Dennen could discuss the probabilities. She could talk about the variables. "But it's not like Tay-Sachs disease, which is more straightforward to counsel," she says of a disease that is nearly always fatal to the child and pregnancies that are almost invariably terminated. "The decision whether to go ahead and have a baby is theirs."

The brave new world of genetic testing arrived a decade ago. It is now possible for American Jews of Ashkenazi heritage to be clinically tested for 19 recessive diseases that are prominent in their genetic composition. Of the 19, two, cystic fibrosis and spinal muscular atrophy, occur with similar frequency among Jews and non-Jews.

However, to illustrate how complicated the situation gets, even the experts don't agree on genetic screenings.

Of the 19 recessive genes, the American College of Obstetrics &

Gynecology (ACOG) recommends prenatal screenings for four: Tay-Sachs, Canavan disease, cystic fibrosis and familial dysautonomia. It also suggests that physicians make patients aware of other diseases for which screening is available. But

For example, she notes that clients tell her they are secular Jews and not religious, as if that negated their genetic composition, or that there is no family history of the disease, or that they are not at risk for Ashkenazi genetic

**"They [obstetricians] need to go beyond the ACOG's list of four screening recommendations and talk about the other diseases. They should direct people to genetic counseling."**

— PAUL TANENHOLZ

while recommended, the four-panel screening is not mandatory and may not be covered by insurance.

The American College of Medical Genetics (ACMG) has its own list of recommended screenings, a total of 10 diseases.

Besides ACOG's and ACMG's lists, there is a third list of recommended prenatal genetic screenings. The Victor Center for the Prevention of Jewish Genetic Diseases, at the Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia, recommends screening for all 19 genetic mutations, including for people with one Jewish grandparent.

Thanks to the attention surrounding the disease, the Jewish community is familiar with Tay-Sachs. "But they are not aware of the other genetic testing options or who should be tested," says Dennen.

mutations because only one member of the couple is Jewish.

The American Jewish community does not have a uniform position on genetic testing. The Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) has issued the following statement:

"In 2014, JFNA has ramped up its efforts regarding genetic screening and has worked proactively with screening centers to establish education and outreach efforts to ensure that every young Jewish-American has access to testing for diseases such as Tay-Sachs and cystic fibrosis."

Closer to home, the Baltimore Jewish Council (BJC), an agency of The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore and the legislative arm of the community, has not issued a policy statement on genetic screening and testing.



However, the BJC did indicate support for Hadassah: The Women’s Zionist Organization of America, which, in 2011, backed federal legislation prohibiting discrimination in health insurance and employment based on a person’s genetic information.

the Baltimore Jewish Council’s involvement,” she says. “But it has not come up for discussion on a public level.”

Paul Tanenholz is an advocate for genetic testing. The Pikesville resident and his wife Susan have three daughters, one of whom,

about Jewish diseases and their testing options. He places that responsibility on the obstetrician, the couple’s primary contact person.

“They need to go beyond the ACOG’s list of four screening recommendations and talk about the other diseases. They should direct people to genetic counseling,” said Tanenholz, who had not heard of ML 4 until his daughter was born. “Parents have a right to that information so they can determine if they’re carriers before pregnancy.”

Sinai Hospital’s Institute offers genetic counseling and genetic testing. Testing can determine if a person is a carrier. But it does not answer such questions as the likelihood of having an affected child or the disease onset and severity.

Whatever the situation, Dennen emphasizes one point. “It is not necessary to get tested,” she says. “But get informed and then decide among the 19 disorders currently recommended for genetic testing.”

## American Jews of Ashkenazi heritage can be tested for 19 recessive diseases prominent in their genetic composition.

“Genetic testing is a big issue the community is concerned with, but it hasn’t come up at the state level,” says Cailey Locklair Tolle, the council’s deputy executive director.

In the Maryland General Assembly, legislators have not submitted bills that would either mandate or ban genetic testing. “That would trigger

Lily, 13, has mucopolysaccharidosis type 4, known as ML 4 and on the Victor Center’s list of 19 Ashkenazi Jewish-related mutations. Lily is blind, uses a wheelchair, mentally-challenged and has a shortened life expectancy.

Tanenholz believes that not enough is done to inform couples

### What You Should Ask

One in four Jews is a carrier for at least one of the 19 Jewish genetic mutations. If you and your partner are both carriers for the same genetic disease, there is a 25 percent chance with each pregnancy of having an affected child.

Experts advise couples to familiarize themselves with the genetic diseases on the lists and decide if they need to test for each.

**If the test indicates one or both are carriers, they need to ask:**

- Would they have pre-implantation genetic diagnosis if IVF?
- Would they use a sperm or egg donor?
- Would they adopt and not have biological children?
- What would be the quality of the child’s life if affected?
- How well can the degree of severity be predicted?
- Is there any current treatment or a treatment on the horizon?

### Helpful Websites

The following websites provide genetic testing information:

**The Victor Center at Albert Einstein Medical Center**  
victorcenters.org

**Center for Jewish Genetic Disorders**  
jewishgenetics.org

**Mazor Guide to Jewish Genetic Diseases**  
mazornet.com/genetics

**Jewish Genetic Diseases Consortium**  
jewishgeneticdiseases.org



# TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

## Four areas to consider

BY ROCHELLE EISENBERG

As children with disabilities enter their teen years, parents need to begin to plan for the future. Figuring out next steps, from where they might work to where they will live, takes careful planning, due diligence and an understanding of Maryland disability laws.

The Baltimore Jewish Abilities Alliance (BJAA) is an excellent resource, offering various workshops and providing a checklist of what to think about during the transition process.

### EMPLOYMENT

Recognizing that finding the right employment opportunity for a child with a disability takes time, Susan Kaufman, mother of two children with disabilities and a special education teacher, actively began pursuing employment options several years before her children graduated. She visited work sites, talked to professionals and met with service coordinators who scheduled tours for her.

As a mother and a teacher, one of the things she learned during this process is that parents need to be realistic about the kind of job that best suits their child, based on his or her functioning level. “Many individuals with disabilities, no matter how smart, may not be able to handle a lot of responsibility,

which often breeds stress. Realize that’s fine. It’s more important that he or she likes the job and is happy.”

If possible, build the skills needed to succeed while they are in school. Her daughter gained invaluable experience through a work study program with ARC of Baltimore.

Parents of young adults with disabilities should also explore community college programs which often offer separate tracks for students with disabilities.

And other programs, such as the one at BWI Marshall Airport, offer individuals with disabilities a chance to work in a variety of settings so they can discover where they are best suited.



## HOUSING



Many adults with disabilities can live on their own, with accommodations, and parents should begin looking into options when children are in their teens. Jewish Community Services (JCS) can provide assistance

### LOOK INTO HOUSING OPTIONS WHEN CHILDREN ARE IN THEIR TEENS.

with independent living skills, including shopping, driving to appointments, paying bills and using transportation services.

When considering living arrangements for an adult child with a disability, know that CHAI: Comprehensive Housing Assistance Inc. will subsidize the cost of safety equipment, such as grab bars, accessibility modifications, including ramps, and assistive devices in area homes (see briefs, page 6.)

In addition, buying or renting a house on the MTA Mobility Line makes getting to work easier.

“I was a nervous wreck at first,” recalls Susan Kaufman, when her daughter started using MTA Mobility. “But we preprogrammed phone numbers in her phone in case of an emergency, and I was reassured by my case manager that she has the tools to know what to do.”

Another housing option is public housing, which often has a long waiting list and an extensive application process. JCS case managers can help adults with disabilities apply and can also assist in finding the right building in the right area for them.

For those who cannot live on their own, there are residential housing units, although in limited supply. Jewish Community Services provides residential living in nine professionally staffed homes, Alternative Living Units (ALUs), in northwest Baltimore City and Baltimore County communities. Each is home to three adults with developmental disabilities.



## GUARDIANSHIP

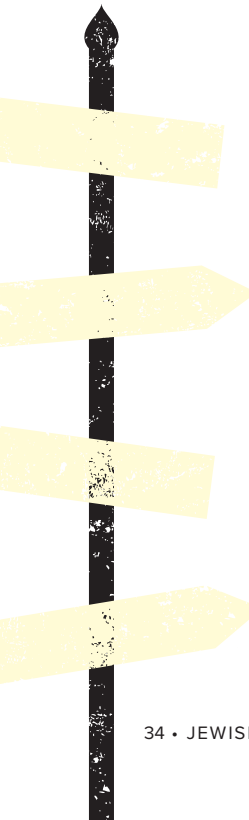
According to Maryland law, adults with disabilities — even those with developmental or cognitive challenges — have the right to make as many decisions as they have the capacity to make. According to Attorney Sharon Krevor Weisbaum, who recently held a workshop for the BJAA, state law allows family members to make health care decisions for individuals who do not have decision-making capacity without establishing guardianship. State regulations provide room for parental and other family member involvement within a team decision making process for other areas of concern.

If decisions cannot be made without guardianship authority, Krevor Weisbaum suggests considering a limited guardianship for a specific purpose. There are three types of guardianship arrangements.

A limited guardianship authorizes a guardian to make decisions for a specific, time limited purpose; a general guardianship authorizes the guardian to virtually step into the shoes of the

disabled family member and make decisions on his or her behalf; a guardian of the property authorizes the guardian to make decisions relating to financial matters on behalf of the disabled family member. In most circumstances obtaining representative payee status through the Social Security Administration will provide sufficient authority for what is needed to take care of SSI-related financial matters without resorting to a guardianship proceeding.

If a guardianship arrangement is established, parents, while they are still healthy, should think about who they would want the Court to select as a successor guardian when they become unable to continue in this role. This should always be a conversation, if possible, with the individual with a disability, who should have input. If considering a sibling without a disability, they too, should be consulted. Never try to force someone to take on guardianship if they he or she is not comfortable doing so.



## FINANCIAL

Parents and/or guardians should create a financial plan for children with disabilities so that they have the financial support when parents are gone. According to the BJAA website and the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council's document, *Planning Now*, parents should begin by asking these questions:

- What supports will there need to be for your child to help him/her have the life you envision?
- How will he/she receive needed support?
- How will the cost for support be covered?
- Do you have other children, and if so, what are their current and future needs?
- What assets do you want to leave to your child with a disability and/or to your other children?

It's important for families to consult with an attorney who has expertise in special needs planning.

The law is complicated. For example, says Attorney Jason Frank, there are seven legally distinct special needs trusts in Maryland. Two are designated for a disabled individual's money and one of those can only be created by a parent, grandparent or court, not the disabled person.

The other five trusts include: one specific to the parent of a disabled child, one used most often for a disabled grandchild, one created by a will and the remaining two have consequences if a parent becomes ill.

Frank is also past president and incorporator of the First Maryland Disability Trust, Inc. which was created several years ago to protect individual's assets and income from being counted in determining eligibility for certain public benefits, such as SSI or medical assistance. Funds from this pooled asset special needs trust can be used for items not covered by benefits, including travel, education and dental care. Currently, there are two trusts within the Maryland Disability Trust, one for the disabled person's money and the other for parent or grandparent to fund the disabled person.

"It's a really valuable tool that can be used both by people with disabilities and relatives of people with disabilities to ensure qualify public benefits and have funds to supplement those benefits while receiving professional trustee services," he says.

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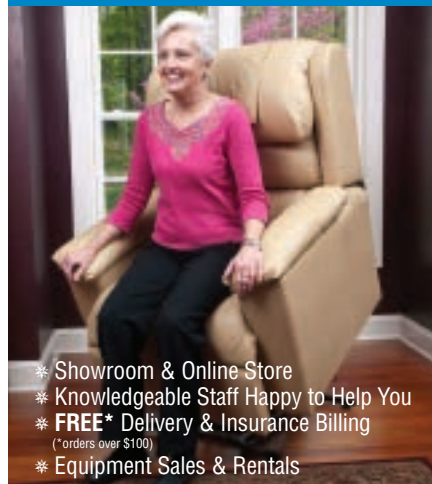


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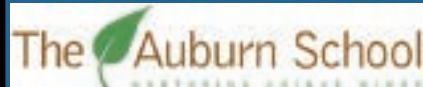
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# Malka Waldman Talks About Her Son, Benyamin

It was only two young adults sharing a joke. But for Malka Waldman, it was a defining moment.

One of the things she had hoped for when she started her son, Benyamin, now 23, at Gesher LaTorah, a community-based Jewish special education program for students with significant special needs, was that one day he would develop a friendship with a peer.

Growing up, because of his disability, Benyamin attended a public school to get the services he needed. But the Waldmans wanted their son to have a Jewish education and to learn about Jewish concepts, Torah and the holidays. Just as important, they wanted him to make friends who shared the same Jewish experiences. So they enrolled him in Gesher LaTorah, a program of the Macks Center for Jewish Education (CJE), when he was in elementary school.

Malka Waldman speaks about the experience.

**I always wanted him to feel like he was part of a social network.** I wanted him to find friends with disabilities that he could relate to. This year, he made this friend at Gesher LaTorah whom he can laugh and relate to. I hear them wish each other good Shabbos. It's incredibly special. I recently drove carpool and heard them sharing jokes their teacher told them and laughing about it. It was truly inspiring.

**Because Benyamin can't see,** the teachers make special accommodations for him. They use puffy paint to trace words (such as holiday-related vocabulary). Rachel Turniansky (CJE's Coordinator for Special Needs Programming) will Braille out words for him. He uses a Braille Chumash. Mr. Dov's operatic voice is a real plus when Benyamin chants prayers.

**Morah Zalka knows my son plays keyboard** and she tells him to bring it to school. She incorporates it into music class and they sing Jewish songs. She utilizes his skills in the classroom and that makes him feel special.

**The teachers want him to feel that learning** is important so they give him "homework." He just does it in school with them.

**Not only do they learn about the Jewish holidays** but they let the students experience them. There will often be festive food for Rosh Hashanah, a trip to the Sukkah, a mock Seder for Passover and *Megilla* readings for Purim.

**As he gets older,** we expect he will continue with the adult learning through CJE's TAG (Torah, Avodah and Gimilit Chasadim) program.

— Rochelle Eisenberg

Benyamin Waldman has thrived at Gesher LaTorah.



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