ISSUE #3

YCS
Embracing All the Possibilities®

NOVEMBER 2026

CAREGIVER CONNECTIONS

A YCS NEWSLETTER THAT BUILDS CONNECTIONS TO SUPPORT OUR LOVED ONES



CAREGIVER CONNECTIONS

LETTER FROM THE PARENT SATISFACTION COMMITTEE CHAIR WILLIAM WALLER

First let me begin with wishing you and your family a Happy and joyous Thanksgiving and Holiday season. We understand that this time of year can represent unique challenges for families who may be for the first time experiencing the season apart from one another. Sometimes things in life do not go as planned, but that doesn't mean that there aren't alternatives or alternative routes to still have at least a moment of joy.

In this edition of Caregiver Connections, we sought wisdom from families who have encountered those circumstances and how they navigated around them to make the most of their situations. We are grateful for their willingness to share that part of their journey with us. It is hoped that you will be able to extract a pearl or two from their ordeals to allow your holiday to be the best it can possibly be.

We are always looking for parents or caregivers who are looking to get involved and assist YCS in delivering the best service to your family member. Our Parent Satisfaction and Human Rights committees are currently looking for volunteers to join the effort. If you are interested, please contact me at wwaller@ycs.org. We hope you enjoy the newsletter and find the material relevant and useful.

Peace & blessings,
Bill Waller
Chair, Parent Satisfaction Committee



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IS PRODUCED BY YCS
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Cover Photo: The Large Family

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IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO JOIN THE PARENT SATISFACTION COMMITTEE, PLEASE CONTACT WILLIAM WALLER AT WWALLER@YCS.ORG





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PARENT SATISFACTION SURVEYS

by Matthew Hopkins, Data Analytics and Privacy Officer





YCS values the feedback we receive from our families. One major pathway for that feedback is the Parent/Caregiver Satisfaction Survey. The survey asks parents and caregivers to rate our performance in a variety of areas. The results of the survey are used by agency leadership to improve services and assist in long-term planning. For example, during the last survey, many respondents asked for more communication from YCS. This newsletter was created to provide that.

The new survey will be administered during January to March 2027. A three-month window is being utilized to ensure all parents and caregivers have an opportunity to respond. The survey will be administered online, accessed through links and QR codes sent to all parents and caregivers. Parents of participants in our youth programs will also receive the link as part of the Treatment Team Meeting invites.

We hope you will invest your time to complete the survey, and we look forward to seeing your responses.

SUPPORTING YOU, TOO: OUTPATIENT MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AT YCS

As parents and caregivers, much of your time and energy is devoted to ensuring your loved one receives the care and support they need. This journey can bring a range of emotions, including worry, stress, uncertainty, and sometimes difficult decisions. At YCS, we recognize that while you are focused on the well-being of your loved one, your own emotional health and personal needs matter, too.

Through our outpatient mental health clinics in East Orange and Union City, YCS offers individual therapy for adults seeking support with their own mental health and personal challenges. Whether you are navigating family relationships, managing anxiety or depression, adjusting to life changes, or simply looking for a space to focus on yourself, our clinicians are here to support you.

You do not have to be in crisis to seek support. Therapy provides a confidential, supportive space to explore your feelings, strengthen coping skills, and prioritize your own well-being.

Our clinics offer in-person and telehealth services, with multilingual clinicians available.

If you are interested in services, please reach out to Institute@ycs.org. Or please fill out this form: YCS Dr. Helen May Strauss Outpatient Clinic Referral Form – Fill out form

FINDING BALANCE THROUGH ACCEPTANCE

by Cathy Tamburello, parent

The holidays have always been a bit of a puzzle for me, whether Michael was still living at home or now at his group home. They always bring to mind those idyllic scenes of families together, delicious food, and presents that look straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting. For our family, it means grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins all coming over, creating quite a stir! Everyone's in high spirits and enjoying the festivities. Michael often feels overwhelmed and pulls away.

It's tough for me to find the right balance between making Michael feel comfortable and wanting him to be part of our family celebrations. My mother would often point out that he seemed uncomfortable because he was being forced to participate for me, not for himself. Now that he lives in a group home, I feel a pang of guilt because if he doesn't come home, the staff will have to work extra. No matter what I do, I feel guilty.

As Michael has gotten older, he's become a bit more accepting of family holidays. He's less agitated and still pulls away from the center of things. I've learned to respect that and let him go where he feels at ease, even if it means retreating to a bedroom and pulling the comforter over his head! He doesn't come home for every holiday. This year, he won't be home for Thanksgiving but will be there for Christmas.

I still feel guilty every year, but I want to be mindful of what Michael wants. If he wants to join in, I'm so happy. It's his decision to make.



Michael and his sister, Jenna

MAKE IT YOUR OWN

by R. Ruch, parent

R. Ruch shared her experience of having a child in residential care during the holiday season. Her son spent Christmas Day at his program. He received presents, a nice meal, and the staff were very considerate and made him feel welcome. Ms. Ruch said, "The holidays were hard, but they weren't hard." She was close by and never had to be without her son for a long time.

Her advice for parents with children in residential care: "It gets easier. They won't be there forever. Holidays are tough enough. Try to celebrate it on another day. Just because it's the day on the calendar doesn't mean that it's that day. Make it your own."

Ms. Ruch's son was discharged from his program and is back home with his family.

A WONDERFUL AND CHALLENGING TIME

by Dianna Chipkin, parent



Daniel and his parents, Dianna and Steve

Daniel started residing at YCS Lawnridge at 17 3/4 years of age. I remember that 1st Thanksgiving, with him out of our house. He's the youngest of our three children, and the last to leave the nest. I remember Lawnridge staff cooking a turkey. The family members of residents were encouraged to come for a "pre" holiday meal. This was a painful time for my husband Steve and me, but also a wonderful one. Staff made us feel welcome. Yesenia Fulgencio was the House Manager (She's now Regional Director for YCS.) She and her staff made us all feel welcome, and that Thanksgiving is one of my fondest memories.

Holiday time remains challenging for our family. Daniel is such a sweet person, a gentle, empathetic, "almost" 30-year-old. Behaviors can occur, as each time, Daniel is unpredictable. As Thanksgiving approaches, we look forward to new people at our table. A relatively new friend of mine, as well as our son David's girlfriend, will be joining us. The unpredictability we experience each time with Daniel brings tension, but I remain optimistic that our family and friends will bring acceptance and understanding to the holiday table.

MAKING THE HOLIDAYS BRIGHTER: PREPARING FOR A SEASON OF CONNECTION

by Jacqueline Maddi, M.Ed., LBA, BCBA, Vice President of ABA Services

The holiday season can be a time of joy, celebration, and togetherness, but it can also bring changes that feel overwhelming for individuals with behavioral, developmental, or emotional needs. Changes in routines, busy environments, unfamiliar faces, increased expectations, and time away from familiar surroundings can create additional stress. Whether your loved one will be coming home for a holiday visit or celebrating within their YCS residential program, a little preparation can go a long way. Calendars, visual schedules, photos, and social stories can help explain what to expect, who will be there, and what activities are planned. Whenever possible, maintain familiar routines, offer choices, and prepare individuals for transitions.

Being proactive and establishing clear expectations before a home visit can help set everyone up for success. Talk through the details ahead of time: How long will the visit last? Who will be present? Will there be an overnight stay, and if so, for how many nights? What activities are planned, and what will the daily routine look like? Just as important, prepare your loved one for the transition back to their residential program. Clearly communicate when the visit will end, what to expect when returning, and who will be there to welcome them back. Visual calendars, countdowns, reminders, and consistent language can help make these transitions more predictable and reduce anxiety. During visits, watch for signs that your loved one may be becoming overwhelmed. Have a plan for providing breaks, access to a quiet space, familiar comfort items, or preferred activities to help them regulate. If behaviors escalate, remain calm, reduce demands when appropriate, and allow time and space for your loved one to regain composure. Work with residential staff ahead of time to discuss strategies that are effective for your loved one and what steps to take if a visit becomes particularly challenging. Remember, flexibility is important, and sometimes adjusting plans or shortening a visit may be in everyone's best interest.

For individuals who will remain in their residential programs during the holidays, families can still play an important role in making the season meaningful. Partner with YCS staff to share favorite holiday foods, traditions, music, decorations, or activities that can be incorporated into the celebrations at the group home. A favorite meal, a special dessert, a familiar holiday movie, or a phone or video call with family can help maintain important connections and create a sense of belonging. Most importantly, focus on connection rather than perfection. At YCS, we recognize that every individual and every family is different. Our goal is to work together with families and caregivers to celebrate individual strengths, create meaningful experiences, and make the season as positive and comfortable as possible. Sometimes the most memorable holiday moments aren't the biggest celebrations, but the simple moments of feeling loved, supported, and included.



10 TIPS FOR THE HOLIDAYS

by Jacqueline Maddi, M.Ed., LBA, BCBA, Vice President of ABA Services

Here come the holidays!!! For many parents that have a child with autism holiday celebrations may feel more like a burden than a joy. So, we put together

10 TIPS FOR A LESS STRESSFUL – MORE JOYFUL HOLIDAY

Let's face it, the holidays are full of expectations, our own and those of others. But for a child with autism the holidays are a disruption in the structure and routine that they rely on each day. We shouldn't expect our kids to have a higher tolerance just because it is the holiday season. We may not be able to participate in every event or follow every family tradition – but that is ok. Try to keep things simple and allow your child to enjoy the holidays in their own way.

TIP #1

Be Prepared

Getting your child ready for the holidays can occur in many different ways.

a. Use a calendar – mark the dates that special events are happening.
b. Make a social story – specific to your child describing the expectations
c. Short video – can even be done on your phone.
d. Photo album of past holidays.

TIP#2

Decorating

We may not realize but changing the arrangement of the furniture or removing it to make room for a tree or a larger table can be very unsettling. Even just replacing everyday items with unfamiliar ones can have an effect on your child's behavior – especially if they like things the same all the time.

a. Try to involve your child in the process – take out the decorations and label them – to get your child more familiar. Allow them to handle the items that aren't breakable.
b. Decorate gradually – a few items each day instead of everything at once.
c. Try splitting up the room – allowing adult things on one side and kid things on another.
d. Allow them to decorate however they'd like – encouraging their creativity rather than placing additional demands

TIP#3

Holiday shopping

Shopping with a child with autism can be challenging & even more so when the stores are crowded and noisy.

a. Make a list rather than roaming the store trying to find the perfect gift or sale item
b. Keep the trip short
c. Have snacks & other detractors available
d. Use First – Then language – FIRST we are going to buy gifts for Grandma & Grandpa THEN we are going to the park/McDonald's

10 TIPS FOR THE HOLIDAYS

by Jacqueline Maddi, M.Ed., LBA, BCBA, Vice President of ABA Services

TIP#4

Attending Holiday Services –

Places of worship can be intimidating – even more so when they are very crowded & loud

a. Visit during the week – when the building is quiet. Practice sitting quietly, kneeling and walking in the aisles.

b. Locate the bathroom in case you need it and see if there is a quiet space where they can take a break if needed.

c. Take a picture of them in the different places – if they are going to a children's service away from their parents. Use the photos to review with your child

d. Choose the time of Service that might be less crowded or one that has a children's program

e. Practice religious rituals at home – prayers or songs that may engage your child

f. If there is going to be loud music or singing & your child is sensitive to noise – have noise cancelling headphones or earmuffs to help block out some of the noise

TIP#5

Quiet Area

Visiting or having company to your home can be overwhelming with noisy crowded rooms.

a. One way to make this easier is to prepare a quiet area for your child. If you are visiting family or friends you should arrange this before you go.

b. Bring items that your child is familiar with – special blanket, toy, music or books

c. Show your child where this room is soon after you arrive so they are aware there is a place they can go if the environment becomes too stressful.

d. Practice doing calming activities with them – play soft music, turn the lights down

e. Be proactive – watch your child for cues that they may need a break. Suggest to them it may be a good idea to relax for a while.

TIP#6

Visiting Others

Prepare them – this can be done through a pre-visit note, email or text.

a. Let them know if your child does or doesn't like hugs & kisses

b. They may not want to take coat off – or wear uncomfortable dress clothes

c. Some kids take more time to warm up to others – this is a good time to seek out the quiet area

d. They may prefer familiar foods rather than holiday specialties – best if you bring these items – my son knew the difference between Tyson & Purdue chicken nuggets

e. Recruit help – ask a friend or family member to watch or interact with your child so you have time visit with family or attend to your other children.

Staying over night ?

f. Explain this to your child & show them pictures of where they will be sleeping and for how many nights. Who else will be staying at the house. What the routine will be while you're there. Can they eat on the couch or is it table only – things like that

g. Again, familiar items like pillows, blankets, toys or music from home may be comforting.

10 TIPS FOR THE HOLIDAYS

by Jacqueline Maddi, M.Ed., LBA, BCBA, Vice President of ABA Services

TIP#7

Food

Many children with autism are very selective in what they will eat.

a. If you child has a limited food repertoire bring food from home. The holiday table is not the place to require your child to eat unfamiliar or less preferred food. Pick your battles

b. You can help prepare your child for the holiday meal by preparing & trying some of the specialties at home in the weeks before

c. Practice saying "no thank-you" or "I don't care for that" instead of YUK or EWW

d. You can allow your child to smell different spices that may be used in holiday cooking such as pumpkin, cinnamon or peppermint to get them used to scents that are less familiar

TIP#8

Having a big family dinner?

a. Set the table a few days ahead and put the picture of each person where they will be sitting. Practice their names or who goes with who Aunt Sue goes with… – so when it comes time to sit down & eat they are familiar with who is at the table.

TIP#9

Gifts

Often a child with autism doesn't understand or like surprises. They may not be looking forward to the big parties and presents like your other children or extended family. People may become disappointed when they don't open a present or just leave it on the floor and walk away.

It may be a good idea to

a. Practice gift giving – waiting their turn & responding appropriately

b. One way to do this is to wrap some of your child's current toys & practice opening them up.

c. Practice opening the gift – all year long we tell our children not to rip things up and not to damage pretty items & now we expect them to be able to do just that. So, a little practice can go a long way.

d. You can have a sibling or friend open the gift – take it out and respond appropriately. "Black Panther DVD – just what I wanted – thank you!" Or give a hug or a quick thumbs up.

TIP#10

Preparing Siblings

The holidays are a time for the whole family – its important to make siblings aware of how stressful this season may be for their brother or sister with autism.

a. Before the holiday season begins – take the time to remind children of their sibling's communication difficulties, sensory issues, low frustration tolerance along with their likes or dislikes

b. Talk about how we plan to handle these issues and what we will do if & when a meltdown happens.

We often put pressure on ourselves to make the holidays perfect – which just isn't realistic. In the end the most important thing to remember is that the holidays are a time to cherish one another and the joy of being together.

Whether you are scaling back or starting new traditions remember to celebrate in a way that makes sense for YOUR family!

Happy holidays to you from all of us here at YCS.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO SAFEGUARD YOUR LOVED ONE'S RIGHTS

by Cathy Tamburello, parent

Have you received an email inviting you to a meeting with the Human Rights Committee? This meeting is an important opportunity to review your loved one's Behavior Support Plan.

Each month, the YCS Human Rights Committee (HRC) meets to assess behavior support plans for individuals in YCS' youth and adult I/DD and DD homes. Typically, every participant's plan is reviewed annually, but the committee may conduct more frequent reviews if any changes are necessary.

HRC's Mission:

The committee is dedicated to providing an impartial perspective, ensuring that participants involved with YCS have their civil and human rights safeguarded. This is particularly crucial if your loved one's Behavior Support Plan includes elements such as personal controls, restrictions on specific items, or technological safeguards like doorbell alarms.

What can you expect at the time of your Human Rights Review?

These meetings are conducted virtually. Members of the YCS Behavior Support Committee will present the target behaviors and their frequency. This will be followed by strategies to prevent or reduce target behaviors. Finally, procedures for addressing the behavior are reviewed.

Most importantly, committee members and the family will have the opportunity to ask questions and express concerns. The committee will then vote to approve the plan, request changes, or additional information.

Why is your participation in the HRC Committee review for your loved one important?

The Division of Developmental Disabilities values the involvement of everyone, including your family, when a behavior plan might restrict their rights. Family input is invaluable because they offer firsthand experience that professionals might not possess. Individuals with behavioral challenges often struggle to articulate themselves, so they may resort to behavior as a means of communication. Family input can assist the team in understanding why your loved one is acting as they are and how to guide them toward a positive path.

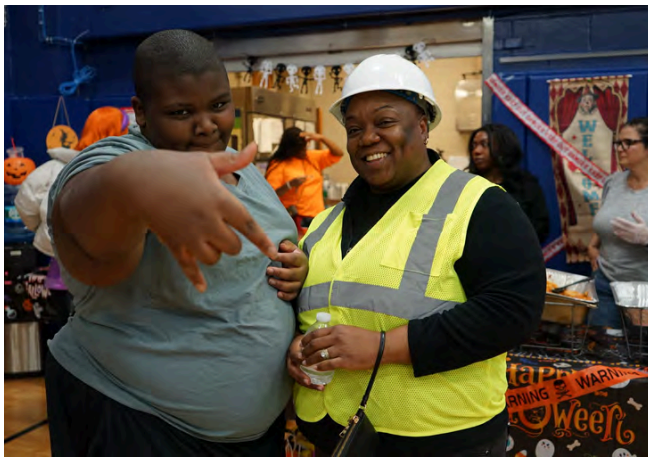
When it's time to review your loved one's plan, Jaime Fox, YCS Chief Quality and Compliance Officer, will invite you to attend the meeting.

FAMILY MEMBERS ARE VALUED MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE. YCS NOT ONLY WANTS FAMILY INVOLVEMENT BUT WELCOMES IT! FAMILY VOICE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT VOICE. THE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE IS LOOKING FOR ADDITIONAL MEMBERS. PLEASE CONSIDER BECOMING A HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE MEMBER. CONTACT JAIME FOX AT JFOX@YCS.ORG.

HIGHLIGHTS




Northern Region Halloween Party




Northern Region Halloween Party




Southern Region Trunk or Treat

HIGHLIGHTS





Southern Region Thanksgiving





Southern Region Thanksgiving





CREW's Northern Region Bingo Night