



Mentorship for autistic youth by autistic adults

Newsletter #3: February 2022

Hello AMP Friends,

I hope this newsletter finds you well. We have lots to report, so I'll jump right in.

Pandemic adaptations a success

We're thrilled to let you know that AMP successfully pivoted to online mentorship beginning in April of 2020; mentee/mentor pairs continued meeting virtually through the 2020-21 school year. While an adjustment from meeting in person, weekly virtual mentorship sessions proved to be a critical source of connection for mentors and mentees alike during a particularly challenging time.

You can watch a KSTP-TV news story about this, featuring the wonderful AMP mentee/mentor team of Alice Peterson and Jenna Olson here:

<https://kstp.com/kstp-news/top-news/autism-mentorship-program-finds-silver-linings-while-adjusting-during-pandemic/>

AMP is expanding!

We're excited to announce that in the fall of 2022, twenty autistic young adults will mentor twenty autistic high school students from the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Because virtual mentorship went so well, sessions will continue to take place online, with AMP staff providing structure and guidance.

If you are, or know of, a Twin Cities high school student who would like a mentor or you're an autistic adult interested in becoming a mentor, please contact us.

For inspiration, hear from one of our amazing mentors, Josie, what participating in AMP means to her:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnRYbmW4IOg>

Stay tuned for updates!

Equity, diversity, and inclusion initiative

As we grow, we want to make sure there are no barriers to program entry and that the AMP experience continues to be a good one for all participants.

We have begun conducting focus groups that will continue through the spring with Somali, Black, and Latino community members to ensure that the program serves autistic individuals in these communities well; if you are a member of one of these communities and would like to participate in a focus group, please let us know! Moving forward, we plan to expand to other cultural/ethnic/identity groups as resources allow.

We have formed a diverse community advisory board to help lead this initiative. Currently, there is space for more autistic people of color to join our board, so if you're interested, please contact us for more information, or apply here:

https://umn.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3BDb6t9iw1jMXzw

Evaluation results are in

AMP's academic partners from the University of Minnesota, Dr. Lindsey Weiler (Department of Family Social Science) and Dr. Rebekah Hudock (Division of Clinical Behavioral Neuroscience), have been providing program evaluation since the initial development phase of AMP to measure the program's effectiveness in improving outcomes for autistic youth and adults.

Program outcomes assessed by the research team focus on well-being and mental health, youth support and enrichment. Data collected thus far by the research team shows:

- High program participant satisfaction
- All mentees felt their mentors made a positive difference for them. One commented: "I was given a new perspective on life with autism (and) what the future could be like".
- AMP helps mentees engage socially, be more self-confident, less uncomfortable about being autistic, and better able to trust and cooperate with others.
- Parents reported better communication at home.

- Though this wasn't being measured, mentees' grades improved significantly.

Mentors demonstrated increased relationship satisfaction and decreased negative feelings. One commented: "(what I liked best about AMP is) just knowing I made a difference in someone's life".

When the 2019-20 program shifted online, all fourteen mentors were willing to support their mentees virtually, twelve mentees chose to participate, and all participants perceived a decrease in feelings of COVID-engendered isolation.

AMP in the spotlight

AMP Program Consultant AJ Hokland was featured on the September 2021 edition of "Autism after 18" podcast. You can hear AJ talk about her experiences as an autistic adult, AMP Steering Committee member, and mentor to our mentors here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7mnS6vFzIE&t=1s> I highly recommend you take a listen; it's a fascinating discussion!

Also in September, AJ presented "*The Autism Mentorship Program From My Perspective*" at the Autism Society of Minnesota's annual Autistic Community Summit.

University of Minnesota graduate research assistant Nathasha Chandrasekharan, Program Manager Jenny Austin, and myself were honored to present (virtually, due to the pandemic) "*Implementation of Mentoring Program for Youth with Autism during the COVID-19 Pandemic*" at the 2022 National Mentoring Summit conference in January.

In the same month, our University of Minnesota partners published their first peer-reviewed article about AMP in the Hammell Institute on Disabilities journal, *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, entitled "Social Validity and Preliminary Outcomes of a Mentoring Intervention for Adolescents and Adults With Autism".

You can access it here:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/10883576211073687>

Way to go, U. of M. team! We hope this article will be the first of many!

New fiscal sponsor

We are proud to be fiscally sponsored by Pillsbury United Communities. PUC co-creates enduring change toward a just society. "Built with and for the people we serve, our united system of programs, neighborhood centers, and social enterprises empowers individuals and families across the region to own their future on their own terms."

Funding update

Recently, our University of Minnesota partners received the following grants, which ensure that the research about the effectiveness of AMP will continue:

- Catalyst Grant from the University of Minnesota Department of Pediatrics (Minnesota Masonic Charities) and the Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences
- Faculty Interactive Research Grant from the University of Minnesota Center for Urban and Regional Affairs
- Hatch Project, USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture

On the program side, we've got our fingers crossed that a couple of the grants we recently applied for will be awarded to us in June.

We're always working on finding new sources of funding to keep AMP going and growing; if you know any person or organization that you think might be interested in helping to support AMP financially, please let us know, or direct them to www.autismmentorshipprogram.org, where there's a link to make tax deductible donations via GiveMN.org: <https://www.givemn.org/story/Autismmentorship>. All donations of any amount are greatly appreciated!

Special thanks

AMP would not be where it is today without the hard work and dedication of our friends at the following organizations:

- The Autism Society of Minnesota
- Minnesota Independence College and Community
- Bloomington Public Schools
- The University of Minnesota
- MENTOR Minnesota
- Pillsbury United Communities

Nor would the program be possible without the many passionate individuals, from within the autism community and without, who have volunteered their time and energy to help AMP thrive. We are very grateful for your support!

Thank you for your continued interest in AMP. (If you'd like to be removed from our mailing list, please let us know.)

All the best from the AMP team,

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AMP logo original design by Johnny Jimenez Lezama, 2018-2020 AMP mentee.