

# EXCEPTIONAL

*People*

MAGAZINE

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## **DR. PION-BERLIN**

**Parents Anonymous:  
Helping Families  
Through Difficult  
Times**

**Lorna M.**  
*Johnson*

**WORKING FOR  
HEALTHCARE, FINANCIAL  
INCLUSION, ECONOMIC  
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- › **How to Validate Your  
"Big" Idea is Marketable**
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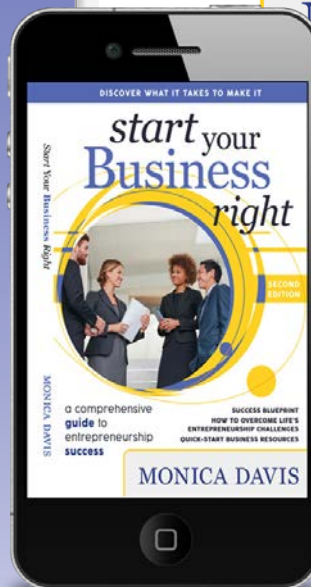
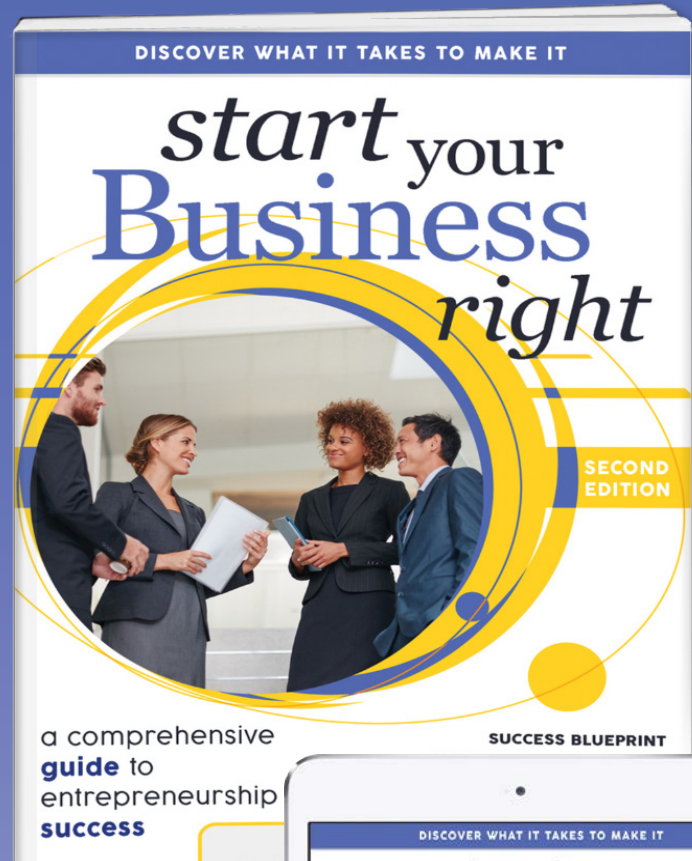
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# **PARENTS ANONYMOUS:**

*Helping Families  
Through Difficult Times*



**DR. LISA  
PION-BERLIN**



There's no doubt about it: Times are stressful.

Between the worldwide outrage sparked by George Floyd's cold-blooded murder, the unprecedented daily restrictions due to COVID-19, and a presidential election destined for the history books, maintaining inner and familial peace has become difficult, to say the least.

During lockdown, many children, youth, and parents are suffering. Living together in close quarters for months on end, tempers can flare. Anger can grow. Mistakes can happen. The pain and shame of abuse can become a vicious cycle.

Even in peaceful households during less stressful times, agonizing questions and problems can crop up for any family. Why is my toddler so clingy? How do I get my tween away from social media? Why won't my son talk to me? When will my daughter stop taking drugs?

Dr. Lisa Pion-Berlin has been helping parents and families with these and many other issues for years. For the past thirty years, "Dr. Lisa" has served as President and Chief Executive Officer of Parents Anonymous®, working tirelessly to improve systems to better meet the needs of families under stress.

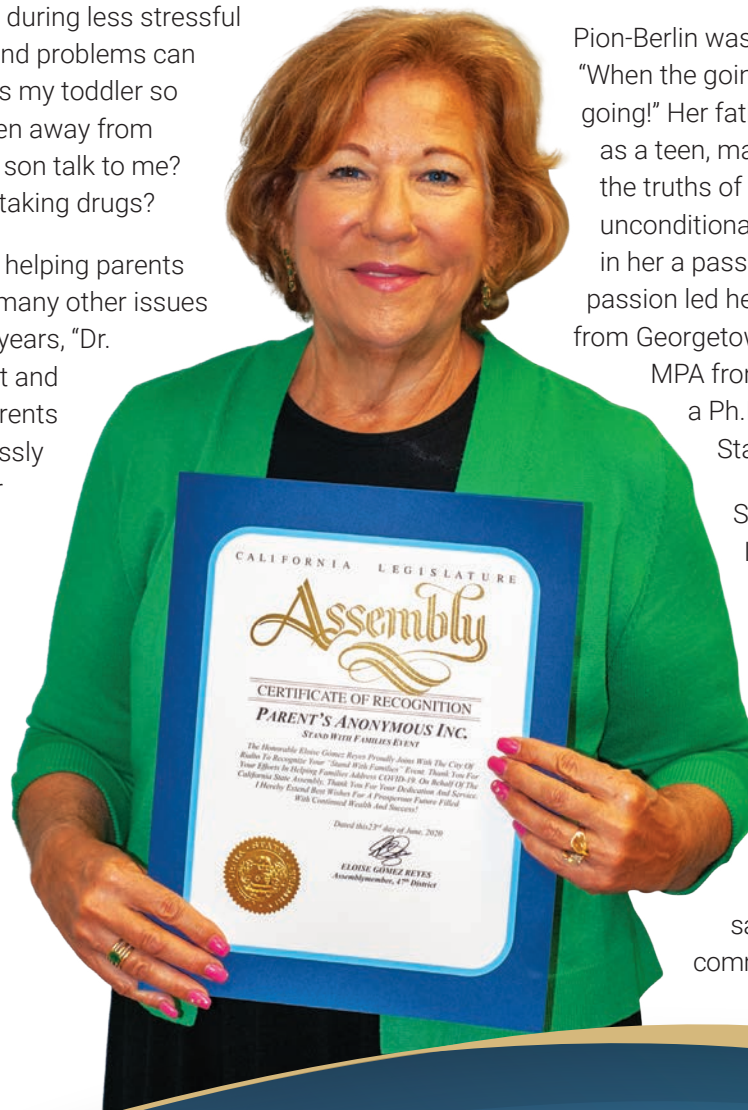
Parents Anonymous' international network has been providing weekly support groups for parents and caregivers, children and youth since 1969. Proven to reduce risk, increase protective factors and prevent child maltreatment, PA's stated

mission is to "ensure better outcomes for families and communities through Parents Anonymous® groups, the National Parent Helpline®, the California Parent & Youth Helpline, Shared Leadership® in Action, and national certification of parent Leaders and staff."

Put more simply, in the words of one parent: "Knowing that you're not a bad parent can set you free. My first meeting at Parents Anonymous® replaced hopelessness with hope. My second meeting replaced helplessness with new ideas." Through training, technical assistance, and published research, Parents Anonymous has a proven record of strengthening families worldwide.

Pion-Berlin was raised with the family slogan: "When the going gets tough, the tough get going!" Her father, who fled from Nazi Europe as a teen, made sure she understood the truths of hardship. He also gave her unconditional love and support and instilled in her a passion for helping others. This passion led her to earn a BS in Psychology from Georgetown University, an MSW and an MPA from University of Denver, and a Ph.D. in Social Work from Ohio State University.

She joined Parents Anonymous® Inc. in 1992. One of her proudest achievement is having launched the first and only National Parent Helpline open 12 hours daily to provide emotional support and referrals for families (1-855-4APARENT). She also created the only National Certification for Parent Leaders to help ensure safe and strong families and communities.







Dr. Pion-Berlin has appeared on The Today Show, Good Morning America, ABC Nightly News, New York Times, Washington Post, and LA Times. An experienced clinician and Clinical Hypnotherapist, she clearly believes in PA's slogan: Asking for Help is a Sign of Strength.

We recently spoke with Dr. Lisa. We hope you're as inspired by her as we were.

**Monica:** What is the guiding principle behind Parents Anonymous?

**Dr. Pion-Berlin:** Our vision is about a just society where everyone thrives in resilient families and communities. Parents Anonymous was started 51 years ago by a mom who was struggling. Child welfare came knocking, put her child in foster care, and then said, "You get her back." Nobody helped her so she took it upon herself to walk into a mental health clinic in Los Angeles County. She said, "I need help. I react to this kid. I overreact to this kid. This

kid pushes every button. She's got these issues. I have this history. Help me."

She went to see a social worker to go through traditional therapy, but after a while she said, "This isn't helping." She came up with the idea to start a weekly support group for parents, grandparents – anybody in the caregiver role – to allow people to build a sense of community, belonging, and trust, and to break down barriers of racism, prejudice, and all the blame and shame that parents feel when they don't respond well to their kids.

They started a group around her kitchen table, and then they decided to start Parents Anonymous shortly after. It was the first and only family-strengthening organization in the U.S.

A few years later, in 1969, U.S. Senator Walter Mondale and Representative Pat Schroeder wanted to write a child abuse prevention and treatment act. They came to the Parents Anonymous Group and asked them to testify in Congress.

Parents Anonymous is the gift that keeps on giving. People come who are struggling, and the ethos is all about mutual support, the giving and getting of help. People want to help other people. They go out into the community, they improve neighborhoods, the schools, the health care system. They go to court, become advocates, and work with police departments.

I went into social work to help people. I'm a PHC social worker and I'm an ACSW. I'm not here to judge or blame people. I'm here to help people on their empowerment journey. That's the entire philosophy of Parents Anonymous.

**Monica:** The organization tries to assist with any issues that a family or parent is having. So, it's more of a holistic view?

**Dr. Pion-Berlin:** Exactly, and age, role, and family structure don't matter. We have grandparents, adoptive parents, foster parents. All those people are welcome. We don't have any limits on who can come to Parents Anonymous. We have a complete children and youth group. Now they come online and then their children and youth are put into children and youth groups that are separated by developmental ages.

**Monica:** Does offering your services online help you reach more people?

**Dr. Pion-Berlin:** Yes, and we run a parent helpline. In California it's called the California Parent & Youth Helpline. It was launched in the middle of April after the COVID crisis occurred. We approached the governor's office and said there needs to be a first responders system for parents who are now at home with all their children.

We had shelter-in-place orders like many other states did by March 19. Parents were not only dealing with homework but with every behavior issue. A lot of different pressures came bearing down on families and the government said, "We're going to do a special initiative with Parent Anonymous because we have had the National Parent Helpline since 1974.

So, we've drilled down for Californians but we are very much interested in whether DC, New York, Montana, or other states want to do the same. We provide emotional support 12 hours a day, 7 days a week. People need to vent. They need to look at solutions. They feel alone — like they're the only one struggling with this issue. Youth can call us too.

It's a family strengthening program. We talk in any language, even sign language. We have live helpline

advocates who are bilingual. If people call and they speak Russian, we have language services so we can speak to them in Russian. They can chat with us. They can text us. It's the same number. We are very nimble in terms of responding to people now.

**Monica:** How is the organization funded?

**Dr. Pion-Berlin:** We have some county money. We have very little foundation money. We are trying to get major



## EXTRAORDINARY PROFILES

partners like the Gates Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson, and Ford Foundation. It is very important that there is a message out there that we're here to support you in whatever's going on. We can take emergency calls of any kind. Everybody is trained and registered.

**Monica:** Will going online lessen the impact of your services?

**Dr. Pion-Berlin:** We're starting a research study on online Parents Anonymous. The many studies of face-to-face Parents Anonymous have found that when people are in a crisis situation or they're feeling they need help now, they attend very frequently. National research has shown that people improve and risk factors go down even in the first 30 days of attending Parents Anonymous.

So far, in our own surveys we see no difference. But we are going to dig down deep to study that with the National Council on Crime & Delinquency on the evaluators we've hired. This is from our own internal data.

The parents are very happy. They're happy about the convenience. That's a silver lining. They're happy about

the access because many feel very isolated right now with COVID. We're getting all kinds of calls asking, "Should I even venture out? What do the surging numbers mean for me?"

For example, in California, Spectrum said they would give low income parents free internet. But how do you get free internet? They have to come to your house.

Parents said, "We don't want any stranger coming into our house. I have four children at home. I don't know where this person has been. I don't feel safe." So now the state has said they're going to make hot spots which means nobody has to come to your house.

People need to realize that low income people do not have internet. You can give them a tablet from school, but have you considered how many people in Appalachia have very poor internet service, or they can't afford it? Many people have to choose between diapers, food, or the internet.

To be in a Parents Anonymous Group you need internet access because you have to use a camera so everybody can see each other.

In some areas we're calling people regularly to stay in touch because they do not have internet. We're following up with people. We call people who have been in the live group before but who are now isolated without internet.

**Monica:** You've also made it a key focus to find positive ways to deal with the civil unrest that is taking place in America. What does Parents Anonymous intend to do to try to help alleviate some of this pain?

**Dr. Pion-Berlin:** Parents in the online group and on the helplines talk about their feelings. The group is a trusting place where people can express their rage, their fear, their





**ASKING FOR HELP IS A SIGN OF STRENGTH. WE CELEBRATE PEOPLE WHO REACH OUT AND ASK FOR HELP. CONTINUE TO REACH OUT UNTIL YOU GET THE HELP YOU NEED. YOU DESERVE IT. AND THIS WILL BUILD YOUR PERSONAL RESILIENCE, YOUR FAMILY'S RESILIENCE, AND YOUR COMMUNITY'S RESILIENCE FOREVER.**

anxiousness. We've had antiracist institutions in this country forever. It is not new to talk about the courts, the police, the educational system, the healthcare system, the social service system, the color of your skin, your lifestyle, and other things. Prejudice is rampant. Parents Anonymous has never run from this issue and encourages parents to talk about it in group.

You need to deal with your own feelings about this issue first -- anger, disappointment, and fear. I can't imagine any parent who is black or brown who doesn't worry every time their child walks out the door.

I've experienced prejudice as a woman. I've experienced prejudice as a Jew. But it's not the same. When a policeman drives by me, am I likely to be stopped? Absolutely not.

The darker your skin, the more likely you'll be suspected. Whether people have a beat-up car or really nice car, they get stopped based on these prejudices. Parents Anonymous is trying to address what people are feeling so they can get support from other parenting groups. The helpline advocates about how to talk about this with your child. But the first thing we always say is that you need to figure out what you're really feeling, and you need to find a healthy way to release that.

**Monica:** From an emotional, mental, and even physical standpoint, how does racism impact the lives of those who experience it directly?

**Dr. Pion-Berlin:** Incredible toxic stress. It is actually reshaping their DNA. On a biological level we talk about the toxic stress response in the brain of people who live in constant fear. It's like living in a war zone when you're afraid how people are going to respond to you.

I could talk differently to people. I can keep my head down. I can walk differently. But I can't wash off the color of my skin. What I can change in my behavior may or may not change somebody's response to me. That's very frightening.

Fear is the most powerful deep-seated feeling that people run from. They don't want to talk about fear or sadness. When you dig down deep -- and we do these techniques in Parents Anonymous -- it's about releasing those feelings.

**Monica:** How can parents talk to their sons and daughters about what to do and how to present themselves when they leave home?

**Dr. Pion-Berlin:** The first thing we talk about is that you can control your behavior even if you can't control others. We teach people to use their eyes. You need to scan that



entire situation and make a choice, based on what time of day it is, where you're going, and who you're going with.

Don't go into a situation where you don't know what's going to happen. Even if you're going with some friends to a place where you think you know what's going to happen, you still need to be very aware. Not in a frightened way, but in a heightened way that you're not going to ignore. You need to protect yourself.

**Monica:** What do you love most about being the president and CEO of Parents Anonymous?

**Dr. Pion-Berlin:** The parents are extraordinary people. They're the only reason I've done this for almost 30 years. What inspires me is the resilience and the strength of these parents, children, and youth. That if people feel supported and not judged or blamed, they can soar from wherever they are, no matter what the circumstances.

I've seen people pick themselves up after getting knocked down. Whether it's racism, poverty, an educational opportunity, a bad relationship, they get knocked down in life. But it's not just about getting up and brushing yourself off because you can get up and be frozen in time and not know where to go.

How you move forward comes from the groups, from the helplines, and from people feeling listened to and not judged. This is why what we do is social justice and relates so much to racism. Prejudice and racism is all about prejudging.

**Monica:** Would you mind closing the interview with your last word?

**Dr. Pion-Berlin:** We have a slogan in Parents Anonymous: Asking for help is a sign of strength. We celebrate people who reach out and ask for help. Continue to reach out until you get the help you need.

You deserve it. And this will build your personal resilience, your family's resilience, and your community's resilience forever.

**Monica:** How can people connect with Parents Anonymous?

**Dr. Pion-Berlin:** They can call 855-4A-PARENT, which is 855-427-2736. This helpline is open 12 hours a day, Monday through Sunday. You can also text us at that number. You can go to our website: [caparentyouthhelpline.org](https://caparentyouthhelpline.org) and do live chat if you live in California, or if you're concerned about a parent, child, or youth in California.

You can also go to the [nationalparenthelpline.org](https://nationalparenthelpline.org) website where there are many resources. If you live in California you can email us if you're interested in joining an online weekly support group for you and your kids. ■



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**Dr. George C. Fraser, CEO,**  
*FraserNet, Inc.*

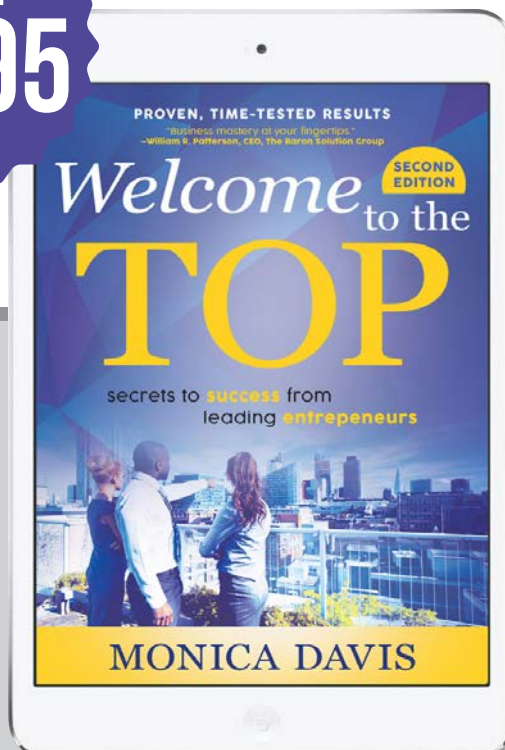
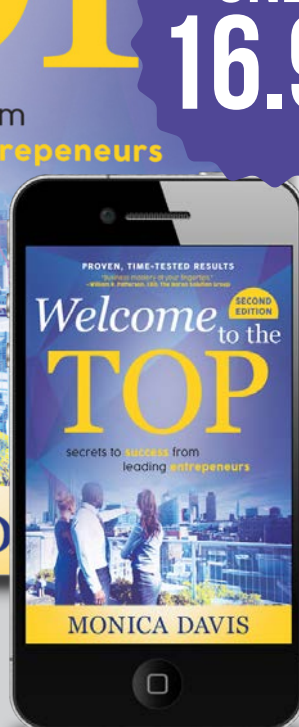
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