

Local mom brings fun, functional products to special needs community

By Mindy Toran

When Aviva Weiss noticed that her young daughter was not meeting her developmental milestones, she was concerned. As an occupational therapist, she dealt with these issues everyday with her patients, but as a new mother, she was worried.

Her daughter was eventually diagnosed with hypotonia, or low muscle tone, which can result in delays in

the only way to find the products she was looking for was to make them herself. In March 2007, she put together a catalog and later launched an online store called Fun and Function Inc. (www.funandfunction.com), aimed at kids with special needs such as autism, Asperger's syndrome, cerebral palsy, sensory processing disorders, and other developmental disabilities.

"As a parent and a professional, I realized how sorely these products

were needed, and how other parents like me would appreciate these items," says Weiss.

Early products included a line of weighted garments, including vests and t-shirts that were affordable, fashionable and functional, in addition to therapeutic toys and equipment ideal for occupational therapy activities for children with special needs. In addition, the website offers interactive fea-

tures and resources for parents and therapists including an email newsletter, blogs, videos, informative articles and links to outside organizations.

Just three years after launching the company, Fun and Function was named one of the fastest growing privately held companies in Greater Philadelphia by the Entrepreneurs' Forum of Greater Philadelphia, Philadelphia Business Journal and Wharton Small Business Development Center as part of the Philadelphia 1000 list. In November, the company was named this year's 32nd fastest growing company in the Philadelphia region on the 2011 Philadelphia 1000 list.

"We are thrilled to once again be listed among Philadelphia's most innovative growth leaders," says Weiss. "It is a privilege to have a

business that can truly make a difference in the lives of children with special needs and their families. We look forward to continued growth and the opportunity to provide therapeutic products that help kids fit in, while also reaching their potential."

Wendy Ross, MD, a developmental pediatrician with a private practice in Montgomery County, had been using Weiss' products for about five years now.

"I heard about Fun and Function from a parent of a patient, who was also a teacher," says Ross. "I was impressed by how creative her products were and with their reasonable pricing. At the time, I was working at an inner city hospital, where we often needed affordable solutions for our patients. Aviva's products are innovative, accessible, affordable and have broad applications."

Ross, who runs a nonprofit group to help kids with special needs to be included in community settings, often uses Fun and Function's products in her toolkits.

"One of the most popular products among the kids we work with is costumes. The company offers costumes that can be weighted or just worn as is, and can be adapted for kids with varying needs."

"The hallmark of a really great item is that it is suitable to kids with a variety of needs," says Ross. "I believe Aviva's products are particularly successful because she really appreciates input from others and solicits feedback from parents and therapists that she then incorporates into her product design. She really cares about what she does and the children she's helping. She is truly the best asset her company has."

Weiss uses social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to solicit feedback from people using her products in order to create new items or improve products that are currently available.

"We recruit feedback from our customers on Facebook and via other means of social media to develop new products in a collaborative manner," says Weiss. "For example, our Social (e) Motion™ game, a new-age charades game that helps build social awareness and self-expression, was created in partnership with families across the country. We are also introducing a weighted blanket in our

product line that was designed with input from our clients, with features such as breathable mesh and comforting deep sea graphics."

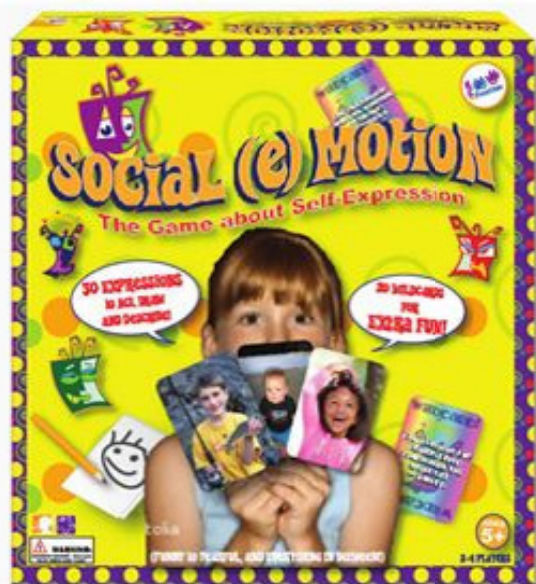
Weiss is also communicating with



parents of children with special needs via a new weekly Podcast airing on Special Needs Talk Radio (www.specialneedstalkradiol.com). The broadcasts touch on issues such as how to use movement as therapy at home or school; identifying fun activities that develop social skills with the least amount of stress; and which sensory equipment had an immediate effect on calming a child down. The radio network is an outgrowth of the Special Needs Coffee Klatch Ltd., founded by talk radio host Marianne Russo, in an effort to offer parents support, information and inspiration in supporting their children with special needs.

"It's important to let parents know we understand what they're going through, and that they're not alone," says Weiss. There is real passion behind what I'm doing. It's more than just a business. Fun and Function is something I created because I really care about what I'm doing and the families we are helping. My goal is to create more exclusive products that don't currently exist in the marketplace and help as many children as I can."

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Fun and Function Inc. is an online store aimed at kids with special needs. The store carries products made for kids with special needs and offers additional features and resources for parents

fine and gross motor skills, in addition to a sensory processing disorder, which causes her to become easily overwhelmed in crowded or noisy situations.

When a therapist recommended a weighted vest, designed to calm and soothe her hypersensitive child, she was less than impressed with the offerings in the marketplace for kids with special needs.

"The products were expensive, often poor quality and not kid-friendly," says Weiss. "I didn't want my kid wearing something that made her uncomfortable or made her stand out even more. I felt these products should look good and be functional - something kids wouldn't mind wearing and would hold up over the long term."

Weiss came to the conclusion that