

A mom with solutions

Aviva Weiss, founder of Fun and Function, helps special needs kids

BY CANDI SPARKS

I recently had the pleasure of speaking with Aviva Weiss, a pediatric occupational therapist and the head of Fun and Function, a company she founded in 2005 that creates unique toys and helpful items for special-needs kids.

Weiss is a loving and energetic mother of six, including a special-needs child, with a spectrum of opinions about children, parenting, and personal growth. The Pennsylvanian who lives and works just outside Philadelphia, has a multifaceted and complex personal and professional life. There is not much she does not do. We started out discussing the subject we have in common: motherhood. Being the mother of six children, as well as a successful entrepreneur, I knew she had valuable advice to share.

Candi Sparks: How is it raising six children?

Aviva Weiss: Busy. You need balance and lots and lots of rest. But mostly it is fun.

CS: Is it hard to leave your professional hat in the office, then come home and be a mom with your own children?

AW: Not really. Whether I'm at work or at home, I try to approach things in the same way. I can't be one person here, and another one there. Whether I am dealing with the parents or the children, every single person is different. I respect that both parents and children mutually want respect.

CS: What it is like when a parent discovers that a child has developmental chal-

lenges? How is this discovered?

AW: Sometimes certain milestones are not being met on time. For example, when a child does not roll over, walk, or speak by a certain age, it is a sign, and generally, when a child has motor skills that appear to be like a floppy doll.

CS: Is there any advice that you have for a person who is just discovering that her child has a special need or developmental challenge?

AW: Everyone is different, and I respect whatever way a family wants to deal with it, whether it is my way or not. There is no right or wrong way to go, but I personally do not think that giving anyone a label or treating them as a diagnosis is the way to go — especially in dealing with young people.

CS: Why not?

AW: If you give a child a label, they may live up to it.

We then talked about different types of special needs. In the case of a diagnosis such as autism (which encompasses an array of difficulties, which are a complex blend of medical, emotional, and educational developmental challenges), Weiss is committed to the philosophy of treating the symptoms, not labeling the person as a diagnosis.

CS: Can you give an example of what you mean by treating the symptoms, not the diagnosis?

AW: I do not believe in labeling a child as "learning disabled." Rather, I believe that finding the tools to help the child read and write is a more positive way to help them. Yes, there are different styles of parenting, but if anyone would like a sug-

Aviva's approach

Here are Weiss's tips for parents and teachers of a special-needs child:

Balance. Try to keep balance in your life by seeding energy to different areas: "My creative talents make me a better mom, being a mom makes me more creative." When you feel good about yourself and what you are doing, it feeds different areas of your life.

Everything is a process. Most people want to solve the problem now. Life is a process, and things take time. Certain things may be not right for now. But the challenge is an opportunity for growth.

Business is a good outlet for creativity. The Fun and Function business is run in partnership with Weiss's spouse, Haskel. He runs the business side, leaving Weiss

time to focus on creative pursuits, thus keeping the line fun and appealing.

Children need discipline, regardless of their challenges. "The rules are the rules." It is important to establish boundaries, although the protocol may be different for special-needs children.

Every child has to be viewed individually. Weiss says even her own children sometimes fall into sibling rivalry, complaining: "He is getting more attention," or, "She gets to go to school late." Her answer is that you are not equal and are not the same. We are all unique and your needs and his are different. Entitlement is not the issue.

gestion, it is to focus on the solution more than on the name.

CS: Is this a lot more work for the parent?

AW: When an issue surfaces, intervention can be fun.

Fun interventions are at the intersection of Weiss's life as a mom, a therapist, and businesswoman. She told me about her encounter with the weighted vest — a contraption designed to help soothe and calm those with a sensory condition, in which a person does not like to touch certain textures and is

Top
Tips



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Aviva Weiss and her family.

feared of movement or trying anything new. Her loved one needed a weighted vest, but it had strings hanging and a negative appearance. To Weiss, the product appeared unfinished. So, she designed something better looking that would hopefully achieve the same result. She developed a compression garment. She tested it out and asked for feed-

back, then made a few tweaks and ultimately put it on the market. These garments, unlike the weighted vest, have few seams, no tags, and are imprinted with dolphins and motorcycles for boys and with polka dots, bows, and ribbons for girls.

CS: What is it like wearing the garment instead of the vest?

AW: It is like wearing a deep hug, and it gives a fun alternative to the weighted vest. It also helps a child who has trouble transitioning to turn the chore of leaving the house into something fun.

Children who have been diagnosed with special needs, like autism, can become easily overstimulated in everyday situations. This can be a nightmare for those having to deal with them. When a child falls apart and doesn't want to go anywhere but has to, getting in and out of the car, being in crowded places, and certain sounds or a particular environment can result in a tremendous amount of frustration.

The child and caregiver can wind up crying all day and the quality of their lives is diminished greatly.

She told me about a parent who was weary from the child screaming all day (due to over stimulation). The parent would go into another room and turn up the music very loud, so that it was louder than the crying child and was an escape from the frustration of the day for just a few minutes.

CS: What advice did you have for the frustrated parent?

AW: Fortunately, the parent found a turning point. Children are easy, because they know when you love them and care about them. What is frustrating is treating their symptoms. People who have to deal with special-needs children may find that there is a turning point in the child that comes with acceptance. If the parent can say inside, 'I can accept this [child] and embrace them. This is just who they are,' they can reach the turning point.

CS: What have you learned about yourself both through your work and your life as a parent?

AW: We can overcome a lot and become better and stronger than we think that we are.

For more about Fun and Function, visit www.funandfunction.com or call (800) 231-6329.

Candi Sparks is a speaker, trainer, and author of the "Can I Have Some Money?" book series. Titles include "Max Gets It," "Nacho Money," and the soon to be released "Sold Out." She is a Brooklyn mom of two and you can find her on Amazon.com, Facebook (Candi Sparks. Author) and on Twitter (@Candi_Sparks).