

SENSATIONAL KIDS

HELPS CHILDREN OF ALL ABILITIES

REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL

"My little son JC was diagnosed with autism just before Christmas in 2014," explains Laura. "When he first started here in Sensational Kids he had 5 words, but he only used three: 'Mama, Dada' and 'NO'. But mostly, it was just 'NO'.

Before we came here it was tantrums. I'd never understand what he wanted. We came to Sensational Kids and they started working with him using the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) which allowed him to communicate using pictures. He practically flew at it when he realized he could convey not only what he wanted, he could actually express his preferences and choices. It gave him the initiative to communicate. The tantrums went to practically zero. Then the vocabulary started to come."

Today, thanks to Sensational Kids, JC is up to nearly 100 words.

Sensational Kids benefits the 1 in 4 children in Ireland who have special educational needs, such as autism, Down Syndrome, dyslexia and dyspraxia. By providing a range of clinical and educational services, it benefits children of all ages and all abilities to enable them to develop to their full potential.

"I always say to people I never set out to be a social entrepreneur, it was never in my mind to do this," says Karen Leigh, the founder of Sensational Kids. "But

really it started when my own child. Connor, who's now 14, was born with no ear on one side and no ear canal. I quickly found out that the help that he needed wasn't available in Ireland and that we needed to go to America. So we found ourselves at The Children's Hospital in Los Angeles."

While in Los Angeles, Connor was given an assessment by an organization called Can Do Kids. "We went into this lovely big occupational playful center in Los Angeles and he just loved going. They assessed him and it actually turned out he has dyspraxia, which is a very common condition that affects coordination and handwriting and low muscle tone. It is a common condition that affects children in many classrooms across Ireland. We came back to Ireland naïvely thinking that we could just find our local version of Can Do Kids in Ireland but it didn't exist. There was nowhere to bring him to."

Karen soon found that they were on a government waiting list that was years-long for services and therapies Connor needed immediately to help him get ahead. Private therapies were available but costly and out of reach to most families. Some people might feel stuck, but Karen decided to set up Sensational Kids to fill a need for families like hers.

"We fundraised for two very long, hard years to get €100,000 to get Sensational Kids off the ground. We employed our first occupational therapist and we were really wondering if we have enough money to keep it going. But it snowballed. We're sitting here six

years later and over 3,000 children have come through our doors." Today, Sensational Kids has saved Irish families over €500,000 in therapy fees by employing a high-quality but low-cost model of services. No government funding is received and all work is reliant on corporate and public partners along with the proceeds of an on-site store that offers skill-building toys and products. Within their colorful space children receive occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, educational psychological assessment and support. Play therapists work with children who are experiencing stress and anxiety to develop coping and self-calming strategies. Parents have support groups and children who once had no options for affordable therapies are getting the help they need.

A grant from The Ireland Funds supported the Transition to Secondary School Program for 20 children with special educational needs who are in mainstream education. Through practical strategies and skills, specialists at Sensational Kids helped children address the challenges of this important transition, setting them up for success and better learning. Successful outcomes are now being seen across the board.

The Ireland Funds are proud to support this innovative program that is serving JC's family and thousands of other families. 100 words and counting.



Karen Leigh
founder of Sensational Kids

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