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News

Combining therapy with play

Demand remains strong after 20 years for Theraplay services

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By SARAH E. MORAN, Special to the Local News



WEST GOSHEN — Lisa Mackell has seen a welter of changes in the pediatric therapeutic intervention business since she founded Theraplay Inc. 20 years ago.

Among them:

Strides in medical technology mean that babies who once died soon after birth now live and need substantial and sometimes enormous amounts of physical, occupational, speech and socialization therapy as they grow.

Today's parents are less afraid than their forbears — and, in fact, much more assertive — about seeking therapy to help their children.

“The philosophy is no longer wait-and-see,” said Mackell, Theraplay president and a pediatric physical therapist with a master's degree from the former Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science, now University of the Sciences. She owns the company with her husband, Steve, its chief operating officer.

Health insurance covers fewer and fewer intervention services, often limited by time or number of visits while co-pays continue to mushroom.

From the beginning, Mackell, who lives in Phoenixville with her husband and two teenagers, wanted Theraplay outpatient centers to be the sorts of places where children cried when they had to leave, rather than when they arrived.

Take Griffin Ritchie, an energetic 8-year-old clad in a striped shirt and blue pants during a visit last week to Theraplay's West Goshen outpatient center, where company headquarters are also located.

Griffin, who has brown hair and expressive chestnut eyes, lives with his parents in Upper Uwchlan. He has sensory and motor planning disorders, in addition to apraxia — a condition whereby he knows what he wants to say but has difficulty saying it, according to his mother Susan Ritchie.

Griffin was also born a “boy in a bubble” — without a workable immune system — though, since a stem-cell transplant from his mother, he is growing stronger and more resilient.

Using an interactive computerized metronome to increase his motor planning and attention span, Griffin works with occupational therapist Lori Glancey, who also manages the West Goshen center. He visits Glancey three days a week and “loves coming here,” said his mother. “I have to be careful, telling him right before we need to leave the house



that he has a Theraplay appointment. Otherwise, he'd be in the car for an hour, waiting."

He's a student at the Pennsylvania Leadership Charter School, a cyber school he attends from home, in part to protect him from other people's germs.

At Theraplay he has his own Play-Doh and Glancey uses "tons of hand sanitizer" before, during and after his visits to further shield him from potentially dangerous microbes.

His mother credits Theraplay staffers who help her fill out insurance paperwork and medical assistance forms. For now, Griffin's therapy, which in a typical year can cost \$36,000 and was once entirely out-of-pocket, is completely covered by insurance.

Visits to Theraplay's five outpatient centers comprise 60 percent of annual sales, with home visits through the state's early intervention program and contracts with school districts each claiming 20 percent.

Typically, a therapeutic hour at Theraplay, where colorful toys and art are ubiquitous, costs \$180 to \$225. Mackell noted that the company makes financial arrangements for families with little or no health insurance coverage for such services.

Combined, the company's outpatient centers — West Goshen, Broomall, Horsham, Quakertown and Trappe — rack up 2,500 visits a month. Some kids come once a week; others, like Griffin, are there three times a week.

As for the recession, "We've seen nothing but growth during it," Mackell said.

She and her husband are considering where Theraplay's next centers should be: Probably somewhere in Berks County and perhaps between Horsham and Quakertown for easier access by New Jersey residents.

The bulk of Theraplay's patients are developmentally delayed but some are injured, have had surgery or are dealing with other, more constant issues such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and autism.

Children must have a pediatrician's prescription to be evaluated and treated at Theraplay. Two full-time marketing employees drum up referrals and repeat business through constant contact with doctors' offices.

Home-based early intervention is covered by the state and is free for children from birth to 3 years, no matter their parents' income. Whereas five years ago, the state once provided three or four therapeutic home visits per week, budget cuts have forced slimming down visits to once a week. (Based on a series of standardized tests, children must be at least 25 percent developmentally delayed to receive free treatment via the state.)

School districts in Montgomery County are among those where Theraplay provides services. About 900 3- to 5-year olds receive help from Theraplay through the county's Intermediate Unit.

The company employs 200, a number that includes the contractors largely responsible for the early intervention and school-based components of the business. An enduring challenge, Mackell said, is finding qualified therapists, in part solved through the company's clinical affiliation program.

She enjoys the business part of her job more than the therapeutic. "When I treated patients all the time, I looked forward to patients canceling so I could get back to my paperwork," she acknowledged.

Even so, she still fills in when a therapist is out sick or on maternity leave.

Husband Steve handles the real estate, human resources, benefits and payroll sides of the business.

“All the stuff I hate, he does, and does well,” his wife said with a laugh.

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