

Collections

## A special biz for special-needs kids



Aviva Weiss, of Merion Station, Pa., is a trained occupational therapist and founder of Fun and Function a web based business that sells merchandise for kids with developmental disabilities. She is holding Herbert the company mascot. This doll according to Aviva is weighted and has Aspergers Syndrome. ((Alejandro A. Alvarez /Staff Photographer))



**GALLERY: Aviva Weiss, of Merion Station, Pa., is a trained occupational...**  
((Alejandro...))

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AVIVA WEISS, 33, of Merion Station, is president of Fun and Function, which designs and sells clothing, equipment and games for kids with developmental disabilities.

An occupational therapist with a daughter who had a hard time crawling and walking, Weiss launched the \$2 million company in 2007. Aviva handles the creative and marketing end, and her husband, Haskel, 36, oversees the operations and finances. I spoke with Aviva about the business.

**Q:** How did you come up with the idea for the business?

**A:** I worked at CHOP and St. Christopher's and recognized a need for more affordable, kid-friendly products. Just because you have a disability doesn't mean you should be stigmatized.

**Q:** How did the business evolve?

**A:** We created samples, did research and some legal work. We pulled together \$400,000 from savings and family, and eventually got a bank loan. We made mistakes, but the reason we became successful is because this is more than about making a lot of money. It's really about making the lives of special-needs kids better.

**Q:** What's the business model?

**A:** We design, manufacture and sell products, mostly from our catalog. The products must help children achieve something meaningful or help them learn. The catalog is also sent to schools. The Web and stores is probably the smallest piece of the retail end.

**Q:** What are the top sellers?

**A:** One is a weighted compression vest. It's made out of a soft mesh material and feels like a deep hug. It's designed to calm so kids can focus and learn. A lot of children with autism can benefit from our game "Guess How I Feel?" It teaches them how to recognize an emotion, express feelings and show empathy. We also have chewable nonfood items.

**Q:** How many employees?

**A:** We have four employees - two full time and two part time - and a lot of independent contractors.

**Q:** How big is the market for special-needs kids?

**A:** We know that at least one in 90 children is on the autism spectrum. That doesn't include children with physical disabilities. We're talking about several million U.S. special-needs children.

**Q:** What separates Fun and Function from its competitors?

A: We have our own line of products, and every year we come out with new products. Our company culture - we have 21,000 friends on Facebook - is highly interactive. We're a company with a heart. We take customer feedback seriously and have refined product lines because of it.

Q: How many of your own products do you have on the market?

A: We have about 60 proprietary products in our catalog.

Q: Where do you see Fun and Function in five years?

A: We have a small market share, but we can grow that by marketing and educating consumers. I think we can grow revenues 35 percent per year.

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