



## A Mother's Creation for Her Special-Needs Kid Launches a Multi-Million Dollar Business



Aviva Weiss, founder of kids' therapeutic toys and tools purveyor Fun and Function, helps children with special needs through research-inspired, parent-approved products.

 By Annie Mapp



Credit: Fun and Function Facebook page.

In 2006, Aviva Weiss was a frustrated mother trying to find products to help her disabled daughter live a normal life. Most of her research yielded unsatisfactory results, and the items she did try were disappointing.

“I was unhappy with what I received in the mail, so I figured other parents must be facing the same problems,” Weiss says.

Weiss, a pediatric therapist, decided to take matters into her own hands, designing for her daughter, whose body and brain struggles to recognize senses like touch and hearing, a vest to wear that provided added pressure and weight. She also wanted the vest to feel like a “deep hug,” she says, that would offer comfort and help improve her daughter’s attention span. And to keep her child from standing out, she worked up a stylish design.

Pleased with the result and suspecting the vest might fill an unmet market need, Weiss sold a few to several other parents she knew who could test it out. Then she worked with them to explore ways to improve it and to brainstorm new ideas. The feedback she received inspired her to not only improve the vest, but to start a business, which she named Fun and Function, that could reach more families and let them know they're not alone.

## **A Family Effort With Impact**

Before becoming an entrepreneur, Weiss worked at several hospitals in Philadelphia as a pediatric occupational therapist, which exposed her to the shortcomings in products for special needs kids. Those experiences, combined with others as a parent, inspired her to design Fun and Function's first products, she says.

For startup funds, she emptied her savings account and maxed out her credit cards. With that money and the help of family and friends, Weiss was eventually able to gather the \$400,000 she needed to launch the company. In the beginning, she sold a small line of items through thick print catalogs. But by 2007, she had expanded Fun and Function's offerings and was selling the lot online.

The company grew quickly, and she constantly reinvested her profits to keep up. Driven by a desire to better manage her business, and heartened by the positive feedback she received about her first products, Weiss sought business mentors and began taking entrepreneurship classes at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. In 2008, she quit her job to work solely on her new company, and she brought on her husband, Haskel Weiss, to serve as chief operating officer.

The company continues to expand. Fun and Function's revenue jumped to nearly \$8 million in 2016 from \$1.8 million in 2010, thanks in part to a 50 percent growth spurt between 2015 and 2016. Moreover, the company is profitable and creating jobs. Fun and Function has nine employees, including the Weisses, all of whom have professional experience as educators and therapists.

## **The Kids They Cater To, The Parents That Help**

Working with her team of experts, Weiss continues to develop new products to help children deal with symptoms related to their disabilities.

Of course, Fun and Function's founding was inspired by a product to help Weiss' daughter, who suffers from a sensory-processing disorder (SPD), which afflicts one in 20 children. Because these children have trouble receiving and responding to signals sent to their brains from their nervous systems, they often struggle with daily activities and can be hypersensitive to the feel of objects and volume of sounds.

But today, Fun and Function has products for kids coping with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and other neurological problems, including chewable necklaces, noise-reduction headphones and calm-down jars.

“Many people think our products are toys, but they are actually tools we make disguised to look like toys that, if used properly, can help the child achieve individual needs,” Weiss says.

A collaborative spirit among the staff at Fun and Function extends to its customer base. By interacting with parents through a well-maintained support forum, the company regularly makes changes to products and introduces new items that address customers’ specific concerns. Its interactions with clients don’t stop there. Through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social media channels, it posts bits of encouragement or advice for parents and helps them stay connected.

Hearing that her work has helped families profoundly is what inspires Weiss to keep reaching out, she says. And their feedback “gives us motivation to continue making more items that are helpful.”

## Possibilities Ahead

Through this steady stream of feedback as well as ongoing research into the impact of Fun and Function’s products, Weiss hopes to extract data that will enable her to help her target audience more effectively in the future.

With that aim, she launched the Active Mind School Partnership, a program that helps teachers support their special needs students with response strategies to reduce academic failure. In 2015, the partnership helped bring on the largest period of company growth to date.

Posted: March 20, 2017

The screenshot shows a comment section for 'The Story Exchange'. At the top, there is a Creative Commons license notice: 'Our work can be licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.' Below this is a call to action: 'Explore our 1,000 Stories project findings, and then help us write the next chapter! Tell us your story by joining the 1,000+ Stories campaign.' The comment section itself shows '0 Comments' and a 'Login' button. There are also 'Recommend' and 'Share' buttons, and a 'Sort by Best' dropdown menu. At the bottom, there is a text input field with a placeholder 'Start the discussion...' and a profile picture icon.

