

"Doing Amazing Things"

One Mom's Appreciation for the Value of OT for Addressing Sensory Issues

Laura Liatis, who runs a small business consulting firm, recently shared her experiences with the work that occupational therapist **Sarah Swafford Fain**, MOT, OTR/L, at Outpatient Rehab at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, did in helping address the sensory challenges faced by Liatis' son, Michael.

Sarah is amazing. I owe her a million more thank yous than I can ever give her. She is the reason Michael is functioning in the world today basically. I adore her. This lady did amazing things with Michael.

The story is:

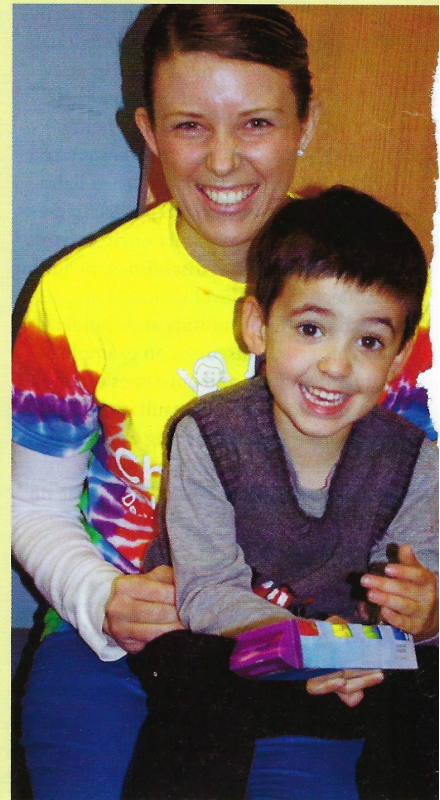
Almost immediately after Michael was born, it was obvious something wasn't right, but it was so difficult to pinpoint what exactly seemed to be hurting him. He met some developmental milestones, missed others, and was overall inconsistent. No one had any answers. At 18 months, he started speech therapy for expressive language disorder, and I was so hopeful that this would resolve some of the challenges we were facing in daily life. By 2 years old, he was still struggling daily—crying often, unable to calm, trouble playing, etc., and he was asked to leave the childcare program, as they couldn't handle his behavioral issues. Our pediatrician then realized that this was a much bigger issue than just a nervous, first-time mother. He suggested an occupational therapy evaluation at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. I called our speech therapist to ask her for a recommendation as to who we should see, as she knew Michael well, and she reported that she would suggest we wait to get on the schedule of Sarah Swafford Fain.

And I am so glad that we did, as it profoundly impacted our lives. Michael was diagnosed with a significant speech processing disorder and fine motor delays/weakness, so we started seeing Ms. Sarah weekly at outpatient rehab. During our time in occupational therapy, Sarah referred us to physical therapy for congenital hypotonia, so we started working on gross motor function concurrently.

I cannot express fully how transformative this early intervention was for Michael and truly for our entire family. More than 200 outpatient visits later, at 5 years old, Michael finally "graduated" from therapy. He is able to self-regulate so much better than ever expected; he has friends; he attends public school successfully; he rides a bike "like a regular boy!" as he says; he even ran a 5k last year. Michael is able to find great joy in being alive in the world, which for the first few years of his life was much too overwhelming of a sensory experience for him to handle. Michael's story is a success story of the power of early intervention.

But I think the real success story here is Sarah's story. Anyone who works with children has got to be a patient person, but to work successfully with children with special needs requires exceptional skill and heart. She provided Michael and me with unwavering, consistent support as we navigated his diagnosis and moved forward with outpatient and home therapies. There are not many people who Michael was comfortable being around or would even speak with at that time, but he grew to love and to trust Ms. Sarah. It is because of her intuitive kindness, consistent patience, and dedicated professionalism and skill that Michael is the young man he is today.

I truly do not think we could have achieved this outcome with just any occupational therapist. Not only did Sarah work incredibly well with us in our therapy sessions, but I am aware that there had to be a lot of invisible work behind the scenes that I did not see—to help arrange schedules so that we could attend occupational therapy and physical therapy on the same day (a near impossible scheduling feat!), to arrange for us to borrow the therapeutic listening from the hospital when needed, to provide countless updates to the insurance



company to ensure that Michael could continue therapy. Even to this day, Sarah still provides me with referrals to other professionals she recommends when I ask her, even though we haven't been her client for several years now.

Michael's success is Sarah's success story—and certainly just one of many. Although Michael has graduated from occupational therapy for now, I feel like our relationship with Sarah will always continue, as I recognize that she is a person who profoundly, deeply changed the course of my son's life, and there will never be a time when I am not grateful to her. 🙏

—Laura Liatis

Have other success stories about occupational therapy practitioners helping clients with sensory or other challenges? Share and discuss on CommunOT (communOT.aota.org)!