

2026-27 Northeast Ohio Edition

FREE

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A Magazine for All Ages in Our Inclusive Community

Opportunities



INCLUSIVE fits

From workplaces &
physical well-being
to everyday
fashion

& Possibilities

 **JWACLE**
Jewish Women in Action Cleveland

**Northeast Ohio
Parent**

Empowering Independence | Sensory-Friendly Fun



There is Something Incredibly Hopeful About Possibility

Possibility means believing tomorrow can be different than yesterday. It means refusing to let assumptions define what comes next and remaining open to new ideas, new technologies, new paths and new dreams — sometimes ones we never imagined.

As I read this year's LiveSpecial.com magazine, I saw that spirit reflected in story after story.

You'll meet people whose lives have been transformed by technology that gives them a voice. You'll discover organizations creating more inclusive opportunities in the arts, recreation and employment. You'll read about breakthroughs in prosthetics, vision technology and support services that are helping people live more independently and confidently than ever before. Together, these stories remind us that while every journey is different, the opportunities — and the possibilities — continue to grow. Perhaps that's why this year's theme, *Opportunities and Possibilities*, feels especially meaningful. It also arrives at a significant moment for our own organization. After more than 130 years of serving our community, the National Council of Jewish Women/Cleveland, the organization behind LiveSpecial.com, is beginning an exciting new chapter as Jewish Women in Action Cleveland (JWA CLE). While our name is changing, our mission remains the same: bringing people together to create meaningful change in our community.

In many ways, this evolution reflects the very spirit of this magazine. Growth doesn't mean leaving our past behind. It means building on it — recognizing where we've been while embracing where we can go next. Just as the stories in these pages celebrate new opportunities for individuals and families, our new name reflects our commitment to meeting the changing needs of Northeast Ohio with compassion, creativity and action.

As you read this issue, I hope you finish it feeling encouraged.

Whether you are a parent searching for resources, an individual navigating your own journey, a professional, a volunteer or simply someone who wants to better understand the experiences of others, I hope you discover something that stays with you — a new resource, a fresh perspective or simply renewed hope. Most of all, I hope you're reminded that possibility is rarely something we find alone. It grows through community — through people who choose to listen, advocate, innovate and believe in one another.

Thank you for allowing us to be part of your journey. We're honored to continue walking beside you — as LiveSpecial.com, and as Jewish Women in Action Cleveland — for many years to come.



A Community of Opportunities and Possibilities

Welcome to the 2026-27 edition of LiveSpecial.com magazine.

Each year, I am reminded that LiveSpecial.com is much more than a magazine, website or resource directory. It represents an amazing community of individuals with special needs, devoted families, compassionate caregivers, dedicated providers and generous community partners who believe in helping every person reach their fullest potential.

This year's theme, *Opportunities and Possibilities*, captures the spirit of that community.

For families, possibilities can begin with discovering a new therapy, educational program, recreational activity or support organization. They can be found in a welcoming school, an inclusive workplace, a trusted professional or a new friendship. Sometimes, one helpful connection or piece of information can open a door that once seemed closed.

For providers and community partners, the opportunity is to listen, collaborate and continue developing programs that recognize each person's individual strengths, needs and dreams. We are grateful for the professionals and organizations that share their expertise, expand access and work every day to make Northeast Ohio a more inclusive and supportive place. We hope the pages ahead introduce you to new ideas, trusted partners and opportunities that make a positive difference in your life or the life of someone you love.

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DIRECTORY OF RESOURCES

Find these advertiser listings of resources, support and more.

TOM GLOBAL HELPS FIND SOLUTIONS TO FIT COMMUNITY NEEDS

By Laura Kuntz



Building workshops to create solutions (left, middle) and Tikkun Olam Makers design (right).

Living life to the fullest is something everyone strives for, but for those with a physical disability, achieving dreams often can be impeded by a lack of adaptive tools. However, there is an organization whose vision "is a world in which technology and innovation allow every person access to affordable solutions for his or her needs."

TOM Global has a worldwide network that creates affordable solutions for the challenges of people living with special needs and then makes them available online for everyone.

For those searching for the right product, device or resource, cost and access often stand between a need and a solution," says Michelle Levy, director of global design strategy for TOM Global. "That's the gap TOM works to close: connecting makers and engineers to people with disabilities, to collaborate on making low-cost or no-cost solutions that meet people where they are."

FINDING A COMMUNITY NEED

TOM Global learns of needs either through community partners such as hospitals, rehabilitation centers and organizations, or through individuals, called "Need Knowers," who have filled out a form on its website.

Once a need has been submitted, TOM Global uses a variety of different avenues to create a solution for the need. This might be accomplished through a Makeathon, an Innovation Challenge or Developer Groups. TOM Global works with universities, non-profits and other organizations to develop the solutions. Volunteers include college students, engineers, designers and developers who create concepts, working models, prototypes and products that meet the need.

CREATE A SOLUTION

All the projects, regardless of the stage of their development, are uploaded to TOM Online Marketplace so they can be easily accessed and downloaded for production, customization or further development by other makers or communities.

The solutions are always open source (meaning plans are available to all at no cost), have meticulously documented designs so that they can be replicated, and most often can be made using basic tools and technologies (such as 3D printers and easily available materials). This allows anyone, regardless of where they live, to access the solutions they need.

There are many products currently available for download, including those for daily living needs such as a 3D toddler mobility trainer, a utensil holder, a book holder and a 3D accessible dishwasher handle. There are

also more specialized leisure, sports and hobby solutions such as a violin prosthesis, a basketball prosthesis and an adaptive surfboard. There are currently over 1,200 items listed in the marketplace ranging from concepts to finished products — and TOM Global is always accepting applications for new needs.

If a solution exists, you have the option of either downloading the plans to make the product or working with a “makerspace” to have the product created. In many cases, the products can be made using 3D printers, which are available and free to use at many public libraries across Ohio (the user may be responsible for purchasing the necessary supplies for the printer).

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INNOVATION

If there isn't a product listed, there is a link to submit a new challenge, in which anyone can ask for assistance from the TOM Global community to create the solution. With new requests, the portfolio of products continues to grow and provides an ever-expanding range of solutions to better the lives of those living with special needs.

In addition to supporting the development of these solutions, TOM Global fosters innovation for the special needs community by running university clubs, workshops, educational programs and a fellowship program to provide opportunities for education and collaboration among students and professionals who are dedicated to improving lives.

“There’s never been a better moment for this work,” Levy says. “Prototyping tools and technologies are more accessible than ever, and we see more engineers, designers and hobbyists looking to apply their skills toward helping real people who face real challenges.”

Visit tomglobal.org and search or browse the marketplace to see if there is a product that fits your needs.



Your Memory Matters

LiveSpecial presented “Your Memory Matters,” an online program to educate and provide a hopeful look at today’s memory care landscape.

Dr. Jagan Pillai, director of the Cleveland Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center and a practicing neurologist at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, and Dr. Brian Appleby, a neuropsychiatrist at University Hospitals, discussed the latest and most promising treatments and research in cognitive disorders. The program covered topics including normal versus concerning memory changes, the importance of early diagnosis, and new medications.

Pillai introduced the audience to the Cleveland Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center and discussed how to volunteer to participate in a research study. The doctors also talked about the U.S. Pointer Study, which supports the importance of lifestyle changes as we age.

“Everything mom told you to do was actually correct,” according to Appleby.



Scan the QR code to listen to the entire program.

LEGACY OF SUPPORT

Lois Davis’ Dedication to JWA CLE and LiveSpecial.com



Larry and Lois Davis
Photo courtesy of Lois Davis

Through their continued support and philanthropic efforts, Lois Davis and her late husband, Larry, ensure that LiveSpecial.com continues to serve as a vital resource for those who need it most, reflecting their strong belief in the power of community and compassion.

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT OHIO BILLS THAT COULD IMPACT PROGRAMS

By Amy Clawson

There are important changes for Ohioans who rely on Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) and Medicaid waiver programs. Several legislative and administrative actions have moved quickly through the Statehouse, raising both opportunities and concerns for family caregivers, people with disabilities and advocates.

A major focus has been **House Bill 795 (HB 795)**, Ohio's Medicaid fraud prevention bill. If passed, the legislation would increase oversight of home care services, expand the use of **Electronic Visit Verification (EVV)**, increase provider requirements, and increase penalties for fraud. The original version of the bill would have eliminated paid family caregivers, but thanks to strong advocacy from families, self-advocates, disability organizations and bipartisan lawmakers, that provision was removed.

Senate Bill 315 (SB 315) began as a SNAP card security bill. Lawmakers later amended the bill to add many of the same Medicaid oversight provisions from HB 795 into SB 315. The bill increases the state's ability to investigate fraud, pause payments to providers with credible fraud allegations, require additional



authorizations for some services, and strengthen program oversight.

SB 315 Is Now Law. Signed by Governor DeWine in July 2026, the law takes effect on Oct. 6, 2026. The Ohio Department of Medicaid (ODM) will now begin developing rules and guidance related to fraud prevention, EVV, prior authorizations and provider oversight. Public comment opportunities have not yet been announced on these new rules, but Ohioans can monitor ODM's Public Notices and Rule-Making website pages for future hearings and comment periods to advocate further.

At the same time, the governor announced a temporary moratorium (a six-month pause) on new Medicaid home care agency providers and independent providers enrolling in the

program. The stated goal is to review oversight gaps and prevent fraudulent providers from entering the system while reforms are considered.

While the moratorium is intended to be temporary, many family caregivers are concerned about its impact right now. For many individuals with disabilities, independent providers are not just a preference — they are often the only people available and qualified to provide complex, specialized, overnight or long-term support. Families report that some needs are so unique

that traditional provider agencies cannot consistently recruit or retain staff to meet them.

Families are concerned that the moratorium may create a large backlog of new provider applications once enrollment resumes. Because the process for becoming a Medicaid provider is already lengthy and complex, additional delays could further worsen workforce shortages and extend waiting times for families seeking qualified caregivers.

Advocates worry that restricting new independent providers could worsen workforce shortages and leave people and families with few options when services cannot be staffed. Too often, the responsibility falls back on family caregivers, many of whom are aging

New Ohio Laws For Safety Alerts And Resources For Individuals With Disabilities

Two Ohio laws were enacted in 2026 to help people with disabilities and their families have a better system in place during emergency situations. Here's a breakdown of what people need to know:

KEITH'S LAW — Ohio House Bill 144 establishes a voluntary statewide database for individuals with special needs to share relevant and vital information with first responders in advance of a crisis. This information will be shared with each county 9-1-1 system, which will be required to provide appropriate information to first responders when dispatched to provide services, ensuring responders are best prepared to provide potentially life-saving assistance to the person in need. Learn more about how to register at ood.ohio.gov/laws-rules-and-policies/laws/hb144

JOSHUA ALERTS — Ohio House Bill 359 establishes a specialized statewide emergency alert system designed to rapidly notify the public when a missing child has autism or another developmental disability. The goal is to reduce response times and alert responders on how best to approach the missing child. For more information, go to legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/136/hb359

parents or relatives already providing extensive care.

While advocates were pleased to preserve paid family caregiving, concerns remain about expanded EVV requirements and additional prior authorization rules that could create delays and barriers to needed services.

ANOTHER IMPORTANT CHANGE

Ohioans with developmental disabilities who receive a “DD Waiver” (Level One, SELF, or Individual Options Waiver) — and their families — also should be aware that the Ohio Department of Disabilities (DODD, dodd.ohio.gov/home) is implementing a new assessment tool called InterRAI, which will replace the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Profile (ODDP). This new assessment will be used to help identify support needs and inform service planning for waiver recipients.

Families who would like to learn when their loved one will receive the new assessment should contact their Service and Support Administrator (SSA) at their local County Board of Developmental

Disabilities. How exactly this assessment may or may not affect the amount and types of services individuals receive is yet to be determined. As more information becomes available, families may want to make sure their loved one’s current needs, goals and services are accurately reflected in their plans and discussed with their SSA before the new assessment is completed.

A CALL TO ACTION FOR OHIO FAMILIES

Stay informed through multiple sources, including DODD Family Forums (dodd.ohio.gov/your-family/advocacy/family-advisory-council); The Arc of Ohio (thearcofohio.org) conferences; Breaking Silences and the Ohio Olmstead Task Force (ohioolmstead.com); and other community meetings, newsletters and town halls.

Contact your legislators. Share your family’s story and explain how or if these proposals could affect your loved one’s care and ability to live safely at home. Personal stories help policymakers understand the real-life

impact of decisions affecting Medicaid and waiver services. Your voice can make a difference. To find your state representative and state senator, visit the Ohio Legislature’s “Find Your Legislator” tool at legislature.ohio.gov.

Families can also seek information and support from the Ohio Family to Family Health Information Center at ohiof2f@cchmc.org.

Most importantly, when families, self-advocates, providers and community organizations come together, their collective voice can make a real difference.

Amy Clawson is the program coordinator for the Ohio Family to Family Health Information Center (ucucedd.org/ohio-family-to-family-f2f). With more than 27 years of experience, she supports families of children and adults with special needs as they navigate Ohio’s disability, community and healthcare systems. As the parent of an adult with a disability, Amy brings both professional expertise and personal perspective to her work. She leads statewide trainings and presentations and is actively involved in local and statewide committees.

BOOKSHELF

THIS LITTLE WONDER: A NO-LIMITS PRIMER

By Joan Holub and illustrated by Daniel Roode

This board book is all about important people whose wonderful talents shine bright from the disability community. It highlights 10 memorable people who paved the way.

UPWARD BOUND

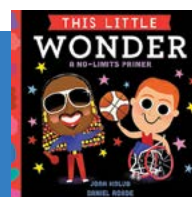
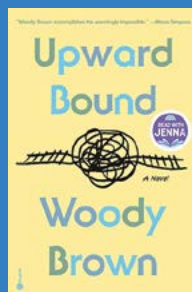
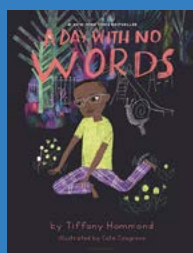
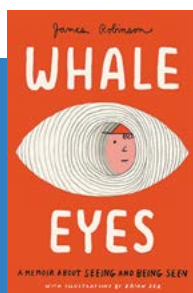
By Woody Brown

Set in an adult day care center in Los Angeles, the book intertwines multiple narratives to create an authentic and profoundly moving group portrait of people with autism and other disabilities.

WHALE EYES

By James Robinson and illustrated by Brian Rea

Told through an experimental mix of intimate anecdotes and interactive visuals, this book immerses readers in James’s experiences growing up with strabismus, allowing them to see the world through one eye at a time.



A DAY WITH NO WORDS

By Tiffany Hammond and illustrated by Kate Cosgrove

Aidan doesn’t talk with words. He uses a tablet, tapping buttons with pictures to show what he means. The book invites readers into the life of an autistic family that communicates without spoken language.

IT WASN'T MEANT TO BE PERFECT: A MEMOIR

By Gaelynn Lea

Gaelynn Lea, who was born with Osteogenesis Imperfecta, is a folk musician, Broadway composer, and disability advocate. Lea’s memoir is a love letter to every kind of body, to music, and to making it work — inviting us to embrace all of life’s experiences with heart and determination.

Voting in Ohio is Accessible

LiveSpecial.com has created this resource guide



REQUIRED DOCUMENTATION

IN-PERSON VOTING

You must bring **one valid unexpired ID with your picture.**

The following are acceptable documents:

- Ohio driver's license
- State of Ohio ID card
- Interim ID form issued by the Ohio BMV
- U.S. passport or U.S. passport card
- U.S. military ID card
- Ohio National Guard ID card
- U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs ID card

It's okay if the address on the ID is not current. Digital IDs (such as mobile driver's license) are not accepted.

BY MAIL

Mail-In ballots must be received by your County Board of Elections on Election Day, not simply postmarked by Election Day.

You will need one of the following acceptable documents to complete your mail-in ballot:

- ID number of one of the accepted IDs listed at left. (No photo required.)

OR

- Last four digits of your Social Security number

REMEMBER TO VOTE THE ENTIRE BALLOT

The "down ballot" races and issues have a significant impact on daily life in Ohio.

- Find information for your ballot at vote411.org.
- Judges and courts interpret laws and make decisions affecting families and communities. Research judicial candidates at judge4yourself.com.
- State and local governments make decisions about your services, taxes and community.
- Public Safety offices influence policies affecting public safety and quality of life.

REGISTERING TO VOTE OR UPDATING REGISTRATION

Download a voter registration form or register online. Visit olvr.ohiosos.gov. You will need the following information to register online:

- Ohio driver license or Ohio identification card number
- Address
- Name
- Last four digits of your Social Security number
- Date of Birth

SCAN THE QR CODE TO:

- Check your registration, polling location and absentee ballot status.
- Confirm dates and hours for in-person early voting at your BOE and drop box hours.
- Review your ballot before Election Day.
- Get election Information and answers to your voting questions.



✓ Personal Voting CHECKLIST

- ☐ Confirm valid, unexpired acceptable ID
- ☐ Verify registration on the Ohio Secretary of State website
- ☐ Review sample ballot
- ☐ If voting by mail, request mail-in ballot
(must be requested by mail; you can't request online)
- ☐ Receive your mail-in ballot
- ☐ Return your mail-in ballot
(by postal service or in drop box)
- ☐ If voting early, confirm dates, time + location for voting



scan here to see where you can vote!

- ☐ If voting on Election Day, confirm polling location
- ☐ Encourage at least 5 friends and family to vote

POLLING LOCATION ASSISTANCE

Transportation to the polls is not required in Ohio law. You can mail an absentee ballot or get someone to drive you.

You may bring someone with you to help you vote, except for your employer, your union or a candidate on the ballot.

Curbside voting is your right if you are unable to enter the voting place. Call and plan ahead.

Accessible voting machines should be available in every polling place. You can ask for one.

The machine features include:

- Audio ballots
- Braille and tactile lettering
- Zoom screen/large print text
- Screen/text color contrast
- Screen height or tilt adjustments
- Sip/puff navigation
- Touch screen or push button navigation

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Helping Your Child Create Social Connections



If your child struggles socially, you are not alone — and neither are they. Experts emphasize that social development is a skill that can be strengthened through consistent opportunities, guided interaction and positive reinforcement.

With the right support, encouragement and opportunities, children can build confidence, develop meaningful friendships and experience the joy of belonging.

Parents can help by encouraging shared-interest activities, practicing conversation skills at home, and creating low-pressure opportunities for social interaction.

Structured social programs can be especially beneficial because they provide routine, support and peer engagement in a welcoming environment. Families should seek out welcoming programs to create opportunities for connection so your child grows socially and emotionally in ways that will benefit them for years to come.

For example, organizations like Friendship Circle help create inclusive spaces where children and teens can develop friendships naturally through fun recreational, educational and community-based programs including day camps, plus weekend and after-school activities.

Parents can find peer mentorship or small group activities that allow participants to practice communication, teamwork and confidence while feeling accepted for who they are.

For families, the goal is not simply increasing social interaction, but helping children build genuine connections and a sense of belonging.

With patience, encouragement and the right support systems, children with social needs can develop meaningful relationships that positively impact their emotional well-being, confidence and independence for years to come.

Every child deserves the chance to feel included, valued and connected.



For those with social needs, making friends isn't always easy.

Friendship Circle helps children, teens, and young adults of all abilities build friendships, confidence, and community.



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Now offering full-day ABA therapy at our facility! Visit FriendshipABA.com

Beyond Academics

The Vital Role of Social-Emotional Learning in Early Education

By Leslie Tischler, Intervention Specialist at Julie Billiart Schools

Social-emotional learning and development can be an integral component of early childhood education, especially in K-2 classrooms. Before children can fully understand and engage in academics, they need the skills to manage emotions, build relationships, and navigate classroom expectations. This can look like developing resilience, emotional regulation, self-awareness and conflict resolution.

Students may encounter challenges at school that can impact their development. For example, a child who becomes frustrated by a hard



math problem may struggle to regulate their emotions, leading to behaviors that interrupt learning. Similarly, difficulty reading social cues or controlling impulses may disrupt the classroom, making it harder to stay engaged.

Social-emotional learning goes beyond the classroom. Families play a crucial role in

supporting this growth and development.

Here are some strategies parents/caregivers can help support their child in small but effective ways at home.

- **Use emotion cards** in the moment to teach facial expressions and feelings or use them to prepare for upcoming events and experiences

- **Model healthy coping strategies.** Saying, "I'm feeling frustrated, so I'm going to take deep breaths to calm my body," helps children recognize emotions and learn appropriate ways to cope.

- **Read to your child.** It introduces new words and ideas while being able to draw from the story to identify feelings and emotions.

Families and schools can work together to strengthen children's social-emotional skills. This empowers children to develop confidence, resilience and self-regulation needed for success both academically and beyond the walls of the classroom.

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How to Find Funding for Your Child's Needs

By Lorilynn Wolf, Communications Director, Connecting for Kids



Raising a child with disabilities or concerns can bring amazing moments — and unexpected expenses. Therapies, specialized equipment, camps, adaptive programs and other supports can quickly stretch a family budget to its limit. If you are wondering how to pay for everything your child needs, follow these steps:

STEP 1: CALL YOUR INSURANCE COMPANY

Many insurance plans cover a limited number of therapy visits when there is a qualifying diagnosis. Some plans may include complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) programs that cover therapies such as aquatic therapy. If your current plan does not provide the coverage your child needs, you can explore options, such as through the Affordable Care Act.

STEP 2: CHECK IF YOUR CHILD QUALIFIES FOR THE COMPLEX MEDICAL HELP (CMH) PROGRAM

The CMH Program provides supplemental assistance to help families cover out-of-pocket costs related to the diagnosis and treatment of conditions classified as medical disabilities.

You can learn more about CMH and begin the application process on the Ohio Department of Health website (odh.ohio.gov/home). Families with limited income may also qualify for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), a safety-net program that includes Medicaid coverage (ssa.gov/ssi).

STEP 3: TALK WITH YOUR SCHOOL DISTRICT

Depending on your child's age and disability status, you may be entitled to therapy and support services. For early intervention programs (birth through age 3), call Help Me Grow at 1-800-755-GROW(4769) or complete its online referral (visit.helptmegrow.org). For ages 3 and up, contact your home school district.

STEP 4: EXPLORE COUNTY OR STATE RESOURCES

Depending on your family's income and county of residence, you may qualify for assistance through county or state programs. Call your county's board of developmental disabilities for information on waivers, family support programs and other services. State programs include Learning AID Ohio (learningaidohio.org).

STEP 5: APPLY FOR A SCHOLARSHIP

The state of Ohio offers the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship for students with disabilities who attend private school under an individualized education program (IEP), as well as the Autism Scholarship Program. These scholarships have rolling enrollment periods and require students to "opt out" of their home school district. For information about both scholarships, go to education.ohio.gov.

STEP 6: LOOK INTO GRANTS FROM NONPROFITS AND CHARITABLE FOUNDATIONS

Nonprofit organizations and charitable foundations throughout the area offer grants to help families pay for services and supports. Eligibility requirements vary, so review each program carefully. To see a list of possible grant providers, visit connectingforkids.org/funding_therapy.

STEP 7: CONTACT A LENDING OR PUBLIC LIBRARY

Lending libraries loan adaptive and medical equipment to families for short-term needs (for example, to assess whether an item is useful for your child). In addition to dedicated lending libraries, several public library systems offer adapted toys and other materials to local families.

STEP 8: CONSIDER FUNDRAISING

Many families turn to online fundraising platforms to help cover the cost of therapies, treatments and equipment not paid for by insurance. GoFundMe (gofundme.com) and FundRazr (fundrazr.com) are two of the most popular.

For more information on funding sources and links to the programs referenced in this article, visit connectingforkids.org/funding_therapy or call Connecting for Kids Ask Us! at 440-570-5908.

Got questions?

Our Ask Us team is here to help with questions like:

- How do I choose the right school?
- Who can I talk to about my child's IEP?
- Where can I go for a diagnosis?
- Are there social or rec programs for my child?
- Where can I find therapy?
- and more!



START HERE

Free resources, support and community.



Ask Us

connectingforkids.org/askus

440-570-5908

info@connectingforkids.org

When Your Child Needs a Different Kind of Classroom

A guide to Ohio's scholarship programs and how to find the right fit

For many Northeast Ohio families, the end of a school year brings the same difficult question: Is this really the right place for my child? Maybe the IEP meetings keep ending in frustration. Maybe a recent autism, ADHD or anxiety diagnosis has shifted what your family needs from a school. The good news is that Ohio gives you more options than you may realize, and several of the best are right here in our region.

FIVE SCHOLARSHIPS, ONE GOAL

Ohio currently funds five scholarship programs (formerly called "vouchers") that let families redirect state education dollars to an approved private school or specialized program. Two are designed specifically for students with disabilities: the Autism Scholarship and the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship. The other three — EdChoice, EdChoice Expansion, and the Cleveland Scholarship — are based on income, school performance or geography.

Both the Autism Scholarship and the Jon Peterson Scholarship are available to eligible students from age 3 through high school graduation or their 22nd birthday, whichever comes first, making them accessible from early intervention through transition-age programming.

The numbers matter. The Autism Scholarship currently provides up to \$34,000 per year. The Jon Peterson Scholarship amount varies by disability category. Both scholarships can cover tuition and intervention services such as specially designed instruction as well as speech, occupational, physical and ABA therapies.

WHO QUALIFIES, AND HOW IT WORKS

The Jon Peterson Scholarship and Autism Scholarship require an active IEP. The Autism Scholarship is available to students who either have a clinical



autism diagnosis or have been identified with autism as their disability category through an Evaluation Team Report (ETR). For the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship, students ages 3 and 4 will be eligible for the scholarship if they have a compliant ETR and IEP.

After a family uses the scholarships, the responsibility to ensure your child receives appropriate school services shifts from the school district to the family. Reviewing your child's current IEP and evaluation reports is an important first step.

FINDING A PROVIDER IN NORTHEAST OHIO

Ohio maintains an interactive directory of all approved scholarship providers; it is searchable by county and scholarship type. Families can access it through the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce at education.ohio.gov. Providers range from private therapeutic day schools to individual service providers offering speech, OT or behavioral therapy.

One example of a regional provider is Education Alternatives (EA), which operates eight schools across Northeast Ohio and is approved for all five Ohio scholarship programs. EA specializes in students with autism, learning

disabilities, ADHD, and mental health or behavioral challenges, and integrates therapeutic supports directly into the school day. Families interested in understanding what a specialized day school looks like may find it useful to research providers of this type as part of their decision-making process.

STARTING POINTS

If you suspect your child needs something different for their school experience, here are three steps:

1. Gather your child's current IEP, evaluation reports or autism diagnosis documentation.
2. Visit School Choice Ohio at schoio.org to learn more about eligibility, scholarship amounts and the application process.
3. Use the ODEW provider directory at education.ohio.gov to search for approved providers in your county.

An unsatisfactory school year does not have to repeat itself. Ohio's scholarship programs exist to give families real choices — and the resources above can help you figure out which path is the right one for your child.



Northeast Ohio's trusted partner
for alternative education.

Request a tour at
easchools.org.



EA education
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Stark County
Board of
Developmental

Support for:

- Early Intervention
- School Age Programs
- Residential Living
- Career Exploration
- Advocacy Education
- Case Management



StarkDD.org

Care for Every Journey

Support for individuals with disabilities — and their families — is more widely available than ever.



A site visit is a must, as is getting to know the management staff and understanding if the facility has appropriate nursing staff to meet the needs of the individual.

RESPITE CARE

Respite care provides temporary relief for family members or contracted caregivers. It may be used when a caregiver has a planned absence, such as a vacation, medical procedure or personal obligation. In some circumstances, respite may also help provide emergency housing.

Respite care can take place in a variety of settings, often through an intermediate care facility that maintains dedicated space for short-term stays.

Kristosik advises that families and guardians looking for respite care should gain an understanding of the culture of the respite house. "It's like inviting someone to stay in your home. You want to make sure your loved one will be comfortable in the environment."

SUPPORTED LIVING

Many individuals with disabilities live with their families and may need extra support with daily activities. Licensed Homemaker Personal Care services, along with related transportation and nursing services, can help meet those needs at home. Support may also include physical, dietary or hygiene care needs, depending on what is most useful for the individual and family.

When care at home is right for the individual, caregivers need to be supported. For that reason, in addition to traditional supported living services, Kristosik explains "Blossom Hill's Family Caregiver Certification Program helps family members navigate the web of regulations and can help them receive compensation for caring for loved ones at home."

When choosing a supported living partner, families must rely heavily on reputation. Kristosik says to look for deep roots in the community and a long service record. "Read reviews and evaluate how collaborative and communicative they are from the start."

DAY PROGRAMS

Day programs provide away-from-home environments where individuals participate in organized activities while their care needs are met by on-site staff.

For decades, many programs focused largely on work-related activities. "In recent years, there has been a shift as more facilities are switching to a therapeutic and enrichment model," Kristosik says. "On any given day, individuals might participate in music, pet or physical therapy. Light physical exercise, games or even tending a garden are all activities designed to be fun, stimulating and therapeutic."

Whether they're looking for a program focused on work or recreation, Kristosik says the guiding principle should be ongoing engagement. "You want to make sure the individual is receiving the care and attention they need, that what they're doing is enriching and helping to fulfill their goals. The program needs to match what the individual is looking to accomplish."

With the right mix of support, families can choose what fits now and adapt as needs change — supporting independence, dignity and meaningful engagement.

The care ecosystem for individuals with disabilities is always evolving. Today, families, guardians and caregivers have more options than ever to help loved ones access the support they need. Whether through in-home care, a day program, an intermediate care facility or temporary respite, this idea of "care everywhere" gives families tools, support and relief while helping individuals explore new possibilities in safe, nurturing environments.

INTERMEDIATE CARE FACILITIES (ICFs)

ICFs are residential homes staffed 24/7 for individuals with significant physical, developmental, medical or behavioral needs.

"These homes are licensed and certified, and constructed to be fully accessible," says Lisa Kristosik, president and CEO of Blossom Hill, an organization founded in 1968 that serves individuals with developmental disabilities.

ICFs provide highly personalized care in safe, clean and nurturing living environments. Beyond meeting daily medical and personal needs, quality ICFs have staff and resources to help individuals remain connected to the world around them through social activities and community outings.

When choosing an ICF, Kristosik recommends finding out what types of daily and weekly activities are offered to make sure they match the interests of the loved one. Meal quality is another important consideration. "Are they healthy and balanced?" she adds. "Is a dietitian on staff to help with dietary restrictions; is a speech therapist available to assist with swallowing issues?"

Life. Well lived.



For every stage of life and every type of care assistance – residential, day program, in-home, and temporary respite – we’re there when and where you need us.

We began nearly 60 years ago with a school and summer camp for children with disabilities. Then we opened the first group home in Cuyahoga County. We’ve grown into a full-service provider of loving, personalized care.

Learn more about us at blossom-hill.org  



Navigating Puberty and Development in Youth with DD

By Lynn B. Johnson, MFA, APR



The best way to prepare for puberty and development in a child with developmental disabilities (DD) is to communicate both openly and early, says Behavioral Health Specialist Katherine Antall, of the Cuyahoga County Board of Developmental Disabilities (Cuyahoga DD).

"Long before puberty is on the horizon, parents and caregivers can incorporate consent discussions into everyday tasks, like hygiene and dressing — any situation where they can ask for permission and respect their child's answer," Antall says.

These foundational subjects open the door to upcoming "sex-ed" talks.

LINE UP HELP, EARLY

Puberty is not delayed in youth with DD. Parents and caregivers should be prepared, not only with information but with supportive people.

"Get ready to teach them about anatomy and the changes that are about to happen in their body, because most likely, they will not receive the same level of education as other students at school," Antall says.

"Your pediatrician is a great place to start," she adds

about how parents can gather information about these topics. "Your county board of DD has resources, too."

It's also important to review the information before you start teaching your child.

"We don't think about this much — 'the day-to-day,'" Antall says. "Brushing up on the topic yourself before sharing about it will increase your confidence. Your resulting comfort with the material will extend to your child and the learning experience."

BROACHING THE SUBJECT

When you do talk with your child about puberty and development, don't think it will be one and done.

Ask your child open-ended questions that can't be answered with a yes or no.

"Think about it like you're baking a cake... add the ingredients one by one," Antall says. "Smaller conversations can open the door: in the car, if you're strolling around the neighborhood. Something that isn't face-to-face. You don't want your child to feel like they are at the principal's office. For most kids, if they can do something parallel during the conversation, it tends to go better."

Continued on page 20

Established in **1967**, the Cuyahoga County Board of Developmental Disabilities serves more than **15,000** county residents and their families.

Our Mission is to support and empower people with developmental disabilities to live, learn, work and play in the community.

We are here to help people of all ages succeed in school, work and life!

Cuyahoga DD is primarily supported by a property tax levy last approved by voters in 2005.

If you or someone you know need services, apply for eligibility on our website, or call 216-736-2673.



LIVE LEARN WORK PLAY



CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR YOUR CHILD

"How can you tell if someone is being a good friend?"

"What are you looking for in a partner?"

"What does a healthy relationship look like to you?"

"I heard this word, 'catfishing'. Have you ever heard of that? Can you tell me what it means?"

"What have you heard about scams online?"

"How do you decide who to give your location or address to?"

"Has anyone ever shown you anything that made you feel uncomfortable?"

EARLY CHANGES TO LOOK FOR

Parents and caregivers may notice emotional changes before physical changes appear.

"The emotions become more intense, and interest in friends — social interests vs. familial ties — start to be more pulling," Antall says.

With everything else necessary to support a child through this time, don't ignore the relationship-building skills.

"Look for social-skills groups: weekly opportunities after school or on the weekends," Antall says.

Your board of DD should have provider referrals that might work for your child.

"Parents are so exhausted and so worried about if their child can sit through the day, will the teacher call me, can he master this skill... Often, parents think 'If we just get through puberty, it will be okay,'" Antall adds.

"But on the back end of puberty is an adult who needs to have the social skills and the understanding of their own and other people's bodies to function in the world: jobs, relationships, education. These interpersonal skills are important."

MONITOR INTERNET ACCESS AND RED FLAGS

It's important to keep track of what your child can access online.

"Porn and social media are the biggest risks to sexual health safety," Antall says.

She only lets her eldest watch YouTube when she is in the room. Once, after watching an adult YouTuber pretend to be a nine-year-old, Antall asked her son, "Why would an adult pretend to be a child, why would an adult do this?"

"My kid had no answer for it," she recalls. "I still must be there to monitor, because the way this was presented was normalizing it and that is one way grooming happens online: when adults pretend to be children."

Other grooming signs include talking to unknown people or anyone your child has not physically met face-to-face. It can't simply be a friend's friend, because then you're trusting that someone else knows them. Anyone who requests photos or personal information is a red flag. Parents should also be aware anytime strong emotional language comes into play, such as "I love you," "I've never met anyone like you," or "You're so special." Anything that is highly emotionally charged is something to watch for.

LOOKING AHEAD

Antall suggests that families need to focus on the little things now to build a good future:

- talks about consent and privacy discussion
- anatomically correct naming of body parts
- encouraging social interaction with people in their peer group

"No parent is ever done parenting," Antall says.

"Leaning on resources to help, and speaking openly with your child are great ways to usher them through puberty into adulthood."

WEBSITE RESOURCES THAT CAN HELP

- [plannedparenthood.org/planned-parenthood-southwest-ohio/learn-with-us/idd-programs](https://plannedparenthood-southwest-ohio/learn-with-us/idd-programs)
- missingkids.org/netsmartz/home
- amaze.org



**We offer
these services
in your area:**

- Behavioural Health and Psychiatry for all ages.
- After school for kids.
- Day Programs for Adults (Medina and Independence).
- Buy bulk baked goods from Confection Connections.

If you are interested in learning more about Boundless, please call: **1-800-409-2729** or email us at : **info@iamboundless.org**

Work Therapy Goals Into Your Child's Daily Routine



Focus on one or two goals at a time and build them into your day. Small, repeated successes lead to lasting progress.

You don't have to figure this out alone. Partnering with your therapy team ensures you're using strategies that fit naturally into your home and daily routines. Your therapist can show you exactly how to use these strategies in real time, so you feel confident continuing them between sessions.

For example, at LLA Therapy, therapists don't just work with children — they coach families by modeling strategies in real time and providing simple, practical ways to carry skills into everyday routines at home.

LLA Therapy offers speech, occupational, physical, music, reading and ABA services at multiple locations. Learn more at llatherapy.org or follow on social media sites for practical tips and strategies.

Therapy progress doesn't stop when a session ends. In fact, some of the most meaningful growth happens during everyday routines at home.

The key is connecting therapy goals to moments you already have. Mealtime, play, bath time and car rides all create natural opportunities to build skills. For example, you can model simple language during play, practice fine motor skills like using utensils or buttons during

daily routines, or build gross motor skills through activities like climbing, balancing or jumping in the backyard.

Consistency matters more than time. Just five to 10 minutes a day of intentional practice can make a meaningful difference. Keeping routines predictable helps children participate, build confidence and develop independence.

It's also important to keep it simple.

Helping Children Shine Their Brightest ACROSS NE OHIO AND BEYOND!

LLA Therapy is a therapist-owned pediatric practice providing speech, occupational, physical, music, reading intervention, and behavioral therapy services across 5 clinic locations. Our mission is to improve the lives of children and their families through compassionate, individualized care while fostering a nurturing and supportive environment where every child can thrive. We proudly serve families through our locations in Alliance, Fairlawn, Hudson, Medina, and Mentor, as well as through partnerships with school districts and educational facilities across the region.



Why Families Choose LLA Therapy

- Speech, Occupational, Physical, Music, Reading Intervention, and Behavioral Therapy Services

- Clinic-Based and School-Based Services
- Individualized, Family-Centered Care
- Experienced and Compassionate Therapists
- Support for Communication, Feeding, Sensory, Motor, and Developmental Needs

- Multiple Convenient Locations Across Northeast Ohio
- Most Major Insurance Plans Accepted
- Accepts Jon Peterson Special Needs and Autism Scholarships



330-867-2240 | www.llatherapy.org | info@llatherapy.org

Good Intentions, Unintended Consequences

By Molly Murphy Berry, Esq., Community Fund Ohio

A financial gift can be a meaningful way to show care and support. But when the recipient is a person with a disability, even the best-intentioned gift may create unexpected obstacles.

Many individuals with disabilities rely on government benefits, such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Medicaid. These programs have strict financial limits. Receiving cash, an inheritance, or even certain types of in-kind support can push someone over those limits, potentially causing a loss of benefits. In most cases, restoring eligibility can be time-consuming and stressful.

Common pitfalls include naming the individual directly in a will, giving cash gifts, or adding them as a joint owner on a bank account. While these actions are generous in spirit, they can unintentionally disrupt critical support systems.

One of the most effective ways to avoid these issues is through a special needs trust. Instead of giving assets



directly to the individual, funds are placed in the trust and managed by a trustee for the person's benefit. Properly structured, a special needs trust allows the individual to maintain eligibility for essential benefits while still enjoying an enhanced quality of life.

For families seeking a simpler option, a pooled special needs trust may be worth considering. These trusts are managed by nonprofit organizations, such as Community

Fund Ohio, and combine the resources of many beneficiaries for investment purposes, while maintaining separate sub-accounts for each individual. This allows for expert-level, cost-effective administration.

Before making a gift, it is wise to consult with an attorney familiar with special needs planning. A little planning can ensure your generosity truly helps, without unintended consequences.

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UNDERSTANDING MIDDLE SCHOOL CHALLENGES

Middle school presents new academic, social and emotional issues for students of all abilities, including those with special needs. *By Ginny McCabe*

NAVIGATING ACADEMICS

Often, academics become more of a focus for students in middle school. Tweens may move to bigger schools, and switch classrooms as they juggle multiple subjects and teachers.

"Common examples of a student struggling might be forgetting homework at school or forgetting to turn in homework once they get to school, and not being able to break down larger projects and getting frustrated, leaving everything to the last second and staying up all night — we get a lot of those phone calls," says Sarah Rintamaki, executive director of Connecting for Kids.

Rintamaki says some of the biggest needs or concerns middle schoolers have are executive functioning and social skills.

According to Julie Billiart Schools, you can focus on creating good habits and taking small steps to help them with those skills, including:

Organization: Developing a simple, reliable system for lockers, school supplies and digital files so they don't lose their hard work.

Visual Anchors: Use checklists or micro-schedules on a desk or whiteboard. These act as an "external brain," taking the pressure off their working memory.

Daily Rhythms: Build in time each day to get ready for the tasks ahead. Start each morning with two minutes to check their backpack for completed assignments, school supplies, and even their lunch or snack. When this becomes a habit, it stops feeling like a chore.

Low-Stakes Practice: Give kids the chance to try new things in a safe, supportive environment where it's okay to

make a mistake. This builds the muscle memory they'll need for high school.

PEERS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Social dynamics is another major area of concern for parents, Rintamaki says.

"Everybody thinks about it as being the kid who is excluded because they are awkward, but we also get phone calls from parents where the kid, maybe, is being labeled a bully, because they're either not reading the social cues correctly, or they wait until they get so frustrated that they say something impulsive that might be a little bit mean," she says.

Julie Billiart Schools provides some practical advice on how to navigate peer interactions:

Practice: Role-play simple moments, such as how to ask a teacher for a quiet place to work or how to join a group at lunch.

Find Their Tribe: Encourage participation in clubs, sports, or local social groups where they can practice social skills while doing something they enjoy.

Validate the Effort: Acknowledge how much energy it takes for them to stay organized and regulated. A little bit of encouragement goes a long way in building their self-advocacy.

Rintamaki says that as kids learn social media, they sometimes make mistakes that can get them into trouble. "We hear a lot of those stories, and your kid is not the only one who made a mistake on social media, or reacted in a way that was unkind," she says.

"Your job is not to make it so they don't struggle," Rintamaki adds. "Your job is to say, this is what they are struggling with, and how do I give them some resources to help them to continue to make progress."

EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

Middle schoolers can face mental health challenges including anxiety, depression and issues with their self-esteem. Youth with poor mental health may struggle with school and grades, decision-making, and their health.

Ali Trotter, deputy executive director at Bellefaire JCB, notes that anxiety in youth has been on the rise, in addition to school functioning, such as youth who have school refusal.

"I would say we have had a very high increase in referrals for individuals on the autism spectrum and depression," Trotter says. "We've also had a number of families come to us concerned about their kids' risky behaviors. The one thing I would always say to a parent is to look for significant changes in their kids, such as a drop in academic performance, sleep issues, isolation, seemingly sad, or anything that looks out of the ordinary for their child."

Trotter advises parents to "check in with their kids, and do their best to link them to services. Start with the schools. Many schools in our communities have mental health professionals available."

She adds, depending on where they live, they should connect to their local community mental health organizations or reach out to their local mental health boards.

"What's important is for families to not see mental health services as a stigma, but to see them as positive resource," Trotter says. "I think families sometimes feel like diagnosing their kids or identifying weaknesses in their kids is a negative thing, but truthfully, identifying and getting help for the kids is really beneficial and positive."

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Bellefaire JCB
(bellefairejcb.org)

Connecting for Kids
(connectingforkids.org)

Dr. Jay Berk (jayberkphd.com)

Julie Billiart Schools
(juliellbilliartschool.org)

LifeAct (lifeact.org)

OhioGuidestone
(ohioguidestone.org)

Peak Potential Therapy
(peakpotentialtherapy.com)



Therapy and Wellness Connection
(therapyandwellnessconnection.com)

SENSORY PLAY

By Elena Epstein, Director of the
National Parenting Product Awards

Whether you're shopping for home, the classroom or therapy settings, these products can help create positive, supportive sensory experiences.

1. Hape x The Met Tree of Life Playmat

Designed to give little ones an eye-catching way to build early developmental skills as they explore colors, textures and sounds. Inspired by The Tree of Life, a British tapestry dating to the first half of the 17th century, now in The Met collection, this soft, sensory-rich mat helps stimulate vision, touch and movement. \$32.99, ages birth+, toys.hape.com



2. Spring Play Kit

Designed to encourage curiosity and exploration. Each activity supports key developmental skills, logical thinking and creativity through open-ended play. \$75, ages 3-4, goodevas.com



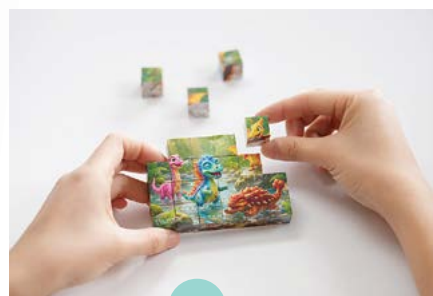
3. ThinkFun MazePop

Use the magnetic wand to POP metal beads to the surface and build a path to the goal. With each satisfying "pop," the puzzle comes to life — no batteries, no screens — just smart, sensory fun. Includes 60 mazes ranging from beginner to brain-busting. Perfect for on-the-go fun. \$14.99, ages 8+, various retailers.



4. TOSY's Picture Cube

A 6-in-1 magnetic collectible puzzle. Available in 48-, 61-, and 80-piece sets with various themes and collections, each cube features six faces that can be flipped and rearranged to form six unique images. \$19.99-\$24.99, ages 6+, various retailers.



5. The Comfort Cub

A weighted therapeutic teddy bear created to comfort. Its gentle weight is designed to deliver deep touch pressure, which has been shown to release the "feel good" hormones, offering a sense of comfort, connection and calm. \$59, ages 3+, thecomfortcub.com

6. Strawberry Shortcake Slime Charms

This soft, buttery pink slime is filled with character-themed charms and shiny bingsu beads for extra sparkle and crunch. Stretch, squish and mix your way into sweet fun. \$12, ages 3+, crazyaaron.com

7. Lite-Brite x Toy Story 5 ColorPop! Edition

Bring your favorite characters to life with vibrant, high-definition designs. With 650 Mini-Pegs, specially designed to be smaller and slimmer, you can craft ultra-detailed, high-definition masterpieces that POP with flair. \$19.99, ages 6+, various retailers.

8. Roll With It

Each roll of the dice set provides coping strategies based on specific emotions: anger, anxiety, sadness and boredom. The game includes feeling identification cards, a mindful mat, write & draw board, stress ball, boredom busters cards and a comprehensive parent guide. \$29.99, ages 5-12 years, thinkpsych.com

9. Jelly Blox Princess Castle Set

Soft building blocks kids can squeeze, stretch and squish. This 45-piece set is a magical adventure filled with sensory textures like stars and super sand. Perfect for building castles, fairytale scenes and endless imaginative stories. \$49.99, ages 2+, various retailers.

10. MAGNA-TILES Coral Reef 25-Piece Set

Using magnetic tiles in reef-inspired colors, little ones build arches, rock formations and swim-through tunnels, then populate the world with playful animals like dolphins, turtles and more. The reconfigurable design encourages kids to experiment with new layouts every time they play. \$39.99, ages 3+, magnatiles.com

11. Ravensburger Play + Rattle Teether: Pineapple Teether is made of 100% food grade silicone, is BPA-free and has an easy-grip body that is perfect for little ones to grasp and squish as they explore the different textures. \$14.99, ages birth+, ravensburger.us

12. Lunix LX15 14-Piece Modular Kids Couch

A versatile 14-piece play sofa designed to inspire creativity and imaginative play. Made with CertiPUR-US and OEKO-TEX certified foam, it transforms into forts, slides, reading nooks, obstacle courses and more. \$179.97, ages 12 months+, lunixinc.com

NAPPA Awards has been celebrating the best in family products for 36 years. For more product reviews and gift ideas, visit nappaawards.com.



Find Activities and Toys Through a Lending Library

Many libraries across the region offer toy lending. Willoughby-Eastlake Public Library provides toy collections as well as Tonies that bring stories and songs through an audio system (we247.org). Cuyahoga County Public Library has a Toy Library that includes adapted toys for children and families to borrow (cuyahogalibrary.org). Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council has a guide to assistive technology lending libraries in Ohio that also includes adaptive toys (ddc.ohio.gov) such as United Disability Services' toy lending library (udsakron.org) and Wayne County Public Library in Wooster has "The Library of Things" that offers games, toys and more (wcpl.info).





BUILDING INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES ACROSS NORTHEAST OHIO

FROM MAJOR EMPLOYERS TO NEIGHBORHOOD BUSINESSES,
THESE ORGANIZATIONS ARE MAKING WORKPLACE
INCLUSION A PRIORITY FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES.

By Denise Koeth

Across Northeast Ohio, businesses are demonstrating that inclusion isn't just the right thing to do — it's also good for employees, customers and the community. Some have built comprehensive workplace cultures that welcome employees of all abilities through accessible hiring, accommodations and supportive employment practices. Others have made disability employment their mission, creating businesses where individuals with intellectual, developmental and other disabilities gain valuable job skills, meaningful work and opportunities to thrive. The following lists highlight some of the organizations that are helping make Northeast Ohio a more inclusive place to work.





At HELP Harvest Greenhouse in Euclid (right), individuals with disabilities learn agriculture, production and workplace skills. At HELP Harvest Kitchen in Lakewood (above), they are trained in a commercial kitchen to prepare, package and label produce grown at the greenhouse.

EMPLOYERS LEADING THE WAY IN DISABILITY INCLUSION

These employers have earned a reputation for creating inclusive workplaces through accessible hiring practices, workplace accommodations, partnerships with vocational rehabilitation and supported employment organizations, or initiatives that help employees with disabilities build long-term careers.

Aultman Health, Canton - Aultman has partnered with vocational providers and supported employment agencies to create opportunities for individuals with disabilities across several departments. The health system provides structured internships, job coaching and competitive employment pathways for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. aultman.org

Cleveland Clinic - As one of Northeast Ohio's leading disability-inclusive employers, the Clinic combines accessible hiring with comprehensive workplace accommodations. It is a longtime Project SEARCH partner and has been consistently recognized by Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD) as being an Employer Partner of Inclusion. my.clevelandclinic.org

Dave's Supermarket, multiple locations - Dave's partners with organizations such as the HELP Foundation and the Employment Collaborative of Cuyahoga County to create community-integrated employment opportunities. The company is known for supportive supervisors, natural workplace supports and flexible job placements that help employees with disabilities succeed. davesmarkets.com

Discount Drug Mart, multiple locations - Discount Drug Mart hires individuals with disabilities through partnerships with OOD and county boards of DD. The company is known for flexible scheduling, highly tailored workplace accommodations and structured job responsibilities that promote long-term success. discount-drugmart.com

Giant Eagle, multiple locations - The grocery store chain has long partnered with county boards of DD and supported employment agencies to hire individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Giant Eagle offers structured training, works closely with job coaches and adapts job duties to help employees find success. gianteagle.com

GOJO Industries, Akron - GOJO is recognized for its people-first culture and commitment to creating an accessible workplace for employees of all abilities. It collaborates with National Industries for the Blind (NIB) and organizations like Austin Lighthouse, which provides skill development and manufacturing jobs for individuals who are blind or visually impaired. gojo.com

Heinen's Grocery Store, multiple locations - Heinen's partners with area boards of DD and vocational agencies to provide meaningful, community-integrated employment. It strives to place individuals with disabilities into structured, reliable store operations, such as front-end service, stock placement and culinary prep, where clear routines and close-knit store team models help them achieve long-term independence and career growth. heinens.com

Continued on page 28



Susanna's Cafe by HELP Harvest offers a stepping-stone for individuals who are eager to learn front of the house hospitality services.

Jewish Women in Action Cleveland (JWA CLE) - JWA CLE has long been committed to creating meaningful opportunities for people with disabilities both within its organization and throughout the community. It employs those with disabilities and has partnered with local agencies and schools to provide job training, work experience and volunteer opportunities that help individuals build skills and gain greater independence. JWA CLE also works to ensure its programs and community initiatives are inclusive of people of all abilities. LiveSpecial.com, a project of JWA CLE, connects individuals with disabilities and their families with resources, services and opportunities throughout Northeast Ohio. jwacleveland.org

KeyBank, Cleveland - KeyBank is consistently recognized as a "National Organization on Disability Leading Disability Employer" on the Disability Equality Index. Through its "Champions of People with Disabilities" employee resource group, the bank promotes accessible hiring, individualized accommodations and greater workplace accessibility. key.com

Marc's, multiple locations - Marc's has developed a longstanding reputation for employing individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities through partnerships with OOD and county DD boards. The company is known for consistent routines, supportive managers and long-term employment opportunities across its stores. marcs.com

Progressive Insurance, Mayfield Village - Progressive is recognized for its commitment to disability inclusion through its employee resource groups and comprehensive accommodations process. The company emphasizes accessible recruiting, digital accessibility and individualized support for employees in both on-site and remote roles. progressive.com

Sherwin-Williams, Cleveland - The company provides disability inclusion through accessible hiring practices, workplace accommodations and employee resource groups. It partners with workforce organizations and continually invests in accessible facilities, technology and career development opportunities. sherwin-williams.com

Summa Health, Akron - It launched its official Project SEARCH program in 2005 to prepare individuals with disabilities for careers in healthcare. Through structured internships, job coaching and workplace accommodations, many participants transition into competitive employment. summahealth.org

University Hospitals - UH has been a partner with Project SEARCH, school-to-work transition program through OakLeaf Partners Transition Services. It has provided multi-week, immersive on-site internships in departments like environmental services, dietary, and administrative support. uhhospitals.org

MISSION-DRIVEN BUSINESSES CREATING EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

These local businesses and social enterprises were founded with a mission to provide meaningful employment, job training or vocational opportunities for individuals with disabilities. By supporting these organizations, customers are also helping create pathways to greater independence and inclusion throughout the community.

Boundless Confection Connection, Brunswick - Operated by Boundless Social Enterprises, this wholesale bakery specializes in made-from-scratch popular classic baked goods while being dedicated to creating an accessible and inclusive work environment for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. bakery.iamboundless.org

Creative Living Coffee, Medina - Coffee is roasted, packaged and distributed by individuals with disabilities as part of a workforce development program operated by Creative Living Unlimited. creativelivingcoffee.org

Creative Living Pet Play, Medina - Operated by Creative Living Unlimited, this full-service doggy daycare and boarding facility provides individuals with disabilities opportunities for vocational training and meaningful employment. cl-unlimited.org/creative-living-pet-play

Creative Living Produce, Medina - Operated by Creative Living Unlimited, this hydroponic greenhouse provides hands-on vocational training and supportive employment for individuals with disabilities, helping them develop valuable skills in cultivating, harvesting and marketing locally-grown food. cl-unlimited.org

Creative Living Therapy Ranch, Medina - In addition to offering therapeutic riding and equine psychotherapy, this ranch operated by Creative Living Unlimited provides training opportunities in farm and horse management, empowering individuals with disabilities to develop essential skills and pursue meaningful employment. cl-unlimited.org

Dancing Wheels Cleveland - Dancing Wheels demonstrates disability inclusion by employing dancers, instructors and staff members with and without disabilities in integrated roles. The organization promotes equal employment opportunities while challenging perceptions about disability through the performing arts. dancingwheels.org

Grande Café & Roastery, Medina This farm-to-table coffee house is operated by Creative Living Unlimited and uses produce from Creative Living Produce and coffee from Creative Living Coffee. The Café also provides paid vocational training and employment for individuals with developmental disabilities. grandecafe.org

HELP Harvest Greenhouse, Euclid - At this 4,000-square-foot hydroponic greenhouse and classroom space, individuals with disabilities learn skills that are critical to navigating employment, including agriculture, production and workplace skills. helpfoundationinc.org

HELP Harvest Kitchen, Lakewood - Operated by HELP Foundation, this commercial kitchen serves as a training facility to prepare, package and label produce grown at HELP Harvest Greenhouse. The kitchen serves as a hands-on training kitchen that produces all varieties of food choices and focuses on healthy options. helpfoundationinc.org

Joyful Cafe, Wooster - Joyful Cafe was born from the hearts of two moms determined to change the world for their children and others like them. Its three locations offer adults with disabilities meaningful work, support and a sense of belonging. joyfulcafe.org

M.O.R.E. Cafe, Hiram - At this donut shop, differently-abled individuals are at the front and center of the business, completing a wide variety of tasks such as manning a cash register, packing donuts, making coffee, preparing smoothies, creating breakfast sandwiches and paninis, and interacting with customers. themorecafe.com

Pegasus Farm Country Store & Gardens, Hartville - Operated by individuals in the Wings Adult Day Services program, staff at this country store handles every aspect of retail operations, selling bulk foods, fresh baked goods, and all-natural produce harvested from the on-site five-acre wellness garden. pegasusfarm.org/countrystore

Planet Joy Art Studio, Medina - This collaborative studio encourages adults with developmental differences to explore their imagination and creativity through the arts. With the teachings and direction of other professional artists, Planet Joy artists improve their skills, knowledge and ability to express themselves with various mediums, including painting, drawing, sewing, silk screening, art installation and more. peaceworksteam.com/planet-joy

Spokes Cafe, Medina - This community coffee shop provides vocational training and paid employment for adults with developmental disabilities through Peaceworks. Employees receive vocational training on cash registers, drink preparation and baking, tracking & inventory supply, bike rental, customer service and proper café upkeep. peaceworksteam.com/spokes-cafe

Sunburst Enterprises, Independence - Part of Down Syndrome Association of Northeast Ohio's Adult Employment Initiative, Sunburst Enterprises is designed to prepare, connect and employ adults with Down syndrome across Northeast Ohio. This paid position, offered in 14 week sessions, provides employees the opportunity to develop essential skills for the workplace through the operation of a small snack-box business. employees plan, purchase, assemble and deliver curated boxes in a variety of flavors and gain experience in marketing, sales, networking and communications. dsaneo.org/programs/sunburst-enterprises

Susanna's Café by HELP Harvest, Cleveland - The cafe offers a stepping-stone for individuals who are eager to learn front of the house hospitality services and for people who are ready to graduate into community employment. helpfoundationinc.org

Two & Company, Chagrin Falls - Two & Company is an overarching name that includes the nonprofit Two Foundation, the Two Café, and the Shops at Two & Company. The inclusive retail positions are held by individuals of all abilities, allowing them to gain real life work experiences. A portion of proceeds go to support charitable causes. twoandcompany.org

Weaver Industries, Akron - Works with county boards of DD to provide program services to adults with disabilities who require assistance to obtain and maintain employment. It operates four business divisions — Weaver EarthCare, Weaver ProPak, Weaver SecurShred and Weaver TruClean — in several locations throughout Summit, Stark, Medina and Portage counties. weaverindustries.org

Whole Latte Love Café, North Canton - This non-profit coffee shop is designed specifically to provide supportive customer service training, independent soft skills, and resume building for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. wholelattelovecafe.org

YPS Inclusive, Akron - The company provides reliable fulfillment, mailbox rentals, notary services and more — all while creating meaningful employment opportunities for adults with disabilities. Its team is dedicated to accuracy, care and community impact. ypsinclusive.com

Z's Cream & Bean, Hinckley - Serving handmade ice cream and offering gourmet coffee, this store provides the next stepping stone for individuals with disabilities into community employment with supports, job coaching and individual goal setting. It is operated by Creative Living Unlimited. zscreamandbean.com



OPPORTUNITIES & POSSIBILITIES

By Angela Gartner • Photography by Kim Stahnke

We highlight individuals and families who are inspiring others by sharing their experiences in the workplace, participating in fun and meaningful activities, and demonstrating how advocacy can create a more inclusive community for everyone.

Making a Big Change

— David Rabinsky

After 27 years, David Rabinsky, director of social catering, retired from The Ritz-Carlton, Cleveland. That wasn't the only change he made as he moved out of his downtown Cleveland apartment to the eastern suburb neighborhood of Orange. For Rabinsky, who is totally blind after being diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, this was an exciting challenge.

"It was something I knew that I wanted to do, but very different from anything I had done in the past," he says. "When I started my job at The Ritz-Carlton, I still had a good bit of vision. I had the memory of what things were, and that was a guide for me. Now that I'm totally blind, finding a new location, going to different buildings to check out where I'd like to live and trying to get a gauge of what the space is and how I would learn to navigate it — it was a whole different experience. It was a very big transition."

He adds that he has quite a few friends and a good support system in the new neighborhood, as well as access to transportation and shopping. He also has his guide dog Harry, an 8-year-old yellow labrador, who he goes on daily walks with.

Technology has also helped Rabinsky gain even more independence including using a color sensor and Meta glasses. "The greatest addition that I've had now are my Meta glasses and I can't get over how they've incorporated AI into these glasses," he says, adding it allows him to send messages; read books, mail or signs; make phone calls; and get walking directions through voice commands. "It gives me a little bit more independence and has allowed blind people to move ahead more independently. All of these tools have allowed me the ability to make a move like this and have really assisted me."

So far, he's enjoying retirement and his new environment and notes there's a sense of relief and achievement after you've gone through the process. He advises that eventually it'll get easier, you just have to prepare yourself both physically and mentally. "I was happy that I made that change (to move) and I did it."



Taking Advantage of Activities in the Region

— Kelly Mozena, sons Cason and Kurt, and their family

Kelly Mozena is a mom of three, with two boys, Cason, 11, and Kurt, 9, who both attend Julie Billiard Schools.



"They love playing in the dirt and construction toys, monster trucks and going to Monster Jam," Mozena says of Cason and Kurt. "They love to wrestle, be rough, ride their bikes and tumble outside. They're very loving, sweet and kind boys who definitely have overcome lots of challenges and struggles."

She says for the boys, who were diagnosed with autism, their family is grateful to live in an area

where there are so many opportunities for inclusion.

"You see more and more places doing sensory-friendly things or hours," Mozena says. "There are more private therapy locations opening up and there are schools available that specialize in children with differing needs, like how Julie Billiard Schools has increased the number of locations and has continued to make improvements on services and their summer camp."

The family has also taken advantage of services from the Autism Society of Akron and We Rock the Spectrum. For the boys' love of trucks, local touch-a-truck events offer sensory-friendly hours. "They are not honking or turning on their sirens, and there's less of a crowd," Mozena says. "It's really beneficial to my boys. They are sensitive (to sound and crowds) and really enjoy activities like that."

Her advice for new parents is not to be afraid to step out of your comfort zone. "Find that circle for you and for your child, so that you have that support system, even if you feel like you don't need it or already have family surrounding you," Mozena says. "You can never have enough in your corner."



Awareness and Celebrating Little Victories Together — Tasha Wilburn and her Daughter, Rayne

Tasha Wilburn's youngest daughter, Rayne, was diagnosed with Erb's palsy, in which her right arm was paralyzed at birth. Rayne, 3, has been through multiple surgeries and therapies. When one of Rayne's siblings started referring to her arm as the "broken arm," Tasha wanted to find a better way to help the children understand about how to think of it in a more positive light. So she wrote a children's book, "Rayne Climbs Up," based on a real-life experience where Rayne

was climbing at the playground.

"In many ways, the book isn't just about Rayne climbing up; it's about our whole family learning to climb together," Wilburn says.

Also, since Rayne's favorite color is what she calls rainbow, the family started calling for Rayne to use her "rainbow power" or "rainbow arm" (and her siblings, too, adopted using their own rainbow power). Wilburn thought rainbows was a good symbol to include in the book as it represents "inner strength and children with disabilities having to navigate things differently."

"It helped her siblings understand her journey in a different way," Wilburn says. "They cheer her on, celebrate her accomplishments, and see her strength. As a mom, that's something I'm incredibly proud of."

"Writing 'Rayne Climbs Up' gave our family a chance to stop and reflect on just how far Rayne has come," she adds. "When you're living it every day with doctor's appointments, therapy and everyday life, you don't always realize how much progress is being made until you look back."

Learn more about "Rayne Climbs Up" at tashawilburn.com or find the book on Amazon.



Trying Something New Leads to Big Things — Olivia DePiere

Olivia DePiere, 29, of Twinsburg, has been modeling for the past 10 years. It all started when she was shopping for a dress for homecoming and a woman from the boutique asked her if she was interested in modeling. DePiere, who had never modeled before, walked in a fashion show — which became the start of many shows, photoshoots and competitions. She has traveled to fashion capitals around the world, including walking in Paris Fashion Week. For DePiere, each time she walks a runway, appears in a magazine and makes a personal appearance, she is showing the world that we should include all people, and break the norms and barriers.

"I have seen her blossom and grow much more than the directives/explanations we were given when she was born and with society," says Vicky DePiere, Olivia's mom. "I truly believe you need to give any individual opportunities...just like anyone else."

Since Olivia has been modeling, Vicky DePiere has seen more possibilities for inclusion of people with disabilities. "We get called on an average of at least three times a week from all over the world," she says. "Some are parents who want me to 'teach' them how to do it. Some are other individuals like her who want to know her better or talk with her about her modeling and confidence. Olivia has been asked to judge fashion shows, which takes her efforts to a whole new level."

Olivia DePiere's advice for those who may be hesitant to start something new is to try something that just stretches you a little bit and then make it a little bigger the next time. She adds that she understands that this might be scary, but you'll get over it and it won't hurt. "Be brave and be bold," she adds.

Continued on page 32



Planning to Live Life to the Fullest — Jacob Lorenzen, 30

Jacob Lorenzen, 30, who has Down syndrome, lives on his own in Solon and has worked at Cafe Honeycomb in Woodmere for the past seven years. He also participates in a lot of activities after work from Broadway Buddies, an adaptive musical theatre program, to walking to the community center, hanging out with friends or just relaxing at home watching his favorite shows.

Ted Lorenzen says he's seen a positive change since Jacob moved into Solon Community Living, a supportive community where his son can be a lot more independent.

For Jacob, this means he has access to independent providers who work with him throughout his daily routine, as well as having a monitoring system in place.

This isn't unfamiliar to the family, as Jacob lived with two others who have developmental disabilities in a house the families purchased in Lyndhurst.

Lorenzen says he can't see this current situation being any better.

"He can live his life to the fullest," he says, adding these living arrangements also helps for a wider circle of the family, providing a safety net for Jacob's other siblings.

"Every family is different," Lorenzen notes, explaining that the care planning as kids get older depends on the children's level of needs and how the family wants to handle living arrangements — or that maybe they are just not ready.

"Get all your legal affairs in order, special needs trust," he advises and acknowledges that some families might have financial barriers "It's work, but once it's all set, like any good financial or estate plan, (afterward) you can live your life."

And that's what Jacob has been doing, to the joy of his family.

"He has a social life, has friends, plays sports and does everything he wants to do," Lorenzen says. "He has it so good."

OPPORTUNITIES & POSSIBILITIES

Continued from page 31

Finding Your Community – Alana Gohn

Alana Gohn, 17, of Solon, was initially diagnosed with microcephaly as an infant, but there were still missing pieces of Alana's development that didn't match completely. It wasn't until 2024 that she was diagnosed with a rare neurodevelopmental disorder called HUWE1. For the first time, her parents Scott Gohn and Elaine Eisner, who helped to create LiveSpecial.com because they wanted to pull together resources since their daughter Alana was so unique, were able to connect to parents with children who had this diagnosis.

Due to the rarity of HUWE1, the support group, which has families from the U.S. to the U.K., is still a small community.

"The scientific community finally caught up," Gohn says. "We were the early adopters in the group. We saw the website initially, and then we found the Facebook group and started interacting there. At the time when we joined the Facebook group, she was the oldest one." He notes that since then, more have joined and they have been able to see adults with HUWE1, which gives Gohn and Eisner hope for Alana's future. He notes in a community group, you see the challenges, but also the goals achieved.



"Finding a community is great, as you will no longer feel that you are going at this alone," he says. "However, what we have found is that everyone is unique and no two HUWE1 kiddos are the same. It's a spectrum, some individuals are high functioning and presenting as typical individuals while others are low functioning and requiring great assistance with all aspects of life. We see and understand that there are individuals that may be similar to Alana and who achieve goals."

Gohn says as families who have children who are newly diagnosed come to the group looking for answers, he's one of the first to respond.

"I respond simply because it's comforting — to say hey, it's OK, you're going to be OK," he says. "From that standpoint, I am the one getting the most out of it because I am able to interact with individuals to say here's what the road may look like. So, maybe that is giving me a little bit of therapy."

For Gohn and Eisner, while the support group provides a community aspect, it doesn't change how they will advocate for Alana.

"She is living her best life," Gohn says. "She had a great summer with camp. She enjoys school so much and it provides a structure. She also gets the opportunity to interact with her peers, which is fantastic for her." Alana doesn't just go to school, but she is involved in swimming, skiing and riding bikes.

"There's a lot she continues to do and accelerate at," Gohn says. "Her accomplishments are at her own pace. She gets what she needs, because Elaine and I advocate for her at every single turn."

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ACCESSIBILITY DONE RIGHT

Playhouse Square support offerings and barrier-free ways for everyone to enjoy the theater and arts.

By Lindsey Geiss

At Playhouse Square, accessibility is a comprehensive, organization-wide effort and ongoing part of the culture. Its complex of 12 venues, including five restored historic theaters, has integrated modern ADA compliance without compromising the opulent 1920s architecture.

Over the years, thoughtful assessments and recommendations have driven gradual and steady accommodations.

Also, through support services and accommodations, sensory-friendly programming, and the Arts & Minds initiative — which provides experiences for people with neurological disorders — Cleveland's world-class performing arts center (the nation's largest outside New York City!) fosters inclusion alongside community education and connection.

ACCESSIBILITY

Looking for an activity the whole family can enjoy together? Playhouse Square strives to offer barrier-free access to performances and events for all ages, starting with listening devices and the coordination of hearing supports in all theaters.

Accessibility features include:

- Assisted listening devices and large print programs available in each theater's House Manager office
- Audio described performances and sign language interpreters available by request at contactus@playhousesquare.org or 216-640-8871 at least three weeks in advance
- Designated wheelchair accessible seats in each theater and wheelchair accessible restrooms on the main floor of each theater. Also, four of the historic theaters do not have elevator access to the upstairs mezzanine or balcony: Connor Palace, Hanna, KeyBank State, and Mimi Ohio. Wheelchair accommodations vary from program to program, so each program will have specific information as to what accommodations are available and how to arrange for them.
- Accessible parking spaces in the garage at 1450 Chester Ave., drop-off areas and valet available on Euclid Ave. and on E. 14th St.

- Automatic doors located at all front door theater exterior entrances and between the Playhouse Square parking garage and walkway leading to the theaters.
- Escorts with wheelchairs available at all theaters
- Service animals welcome
- House Manager on duty at all performances in all theaters, with RedCoat volunteers available for additional assistance

For more information about Playhouse Square accessibility services, visit the Accessibility Information page on the website (playhousesquare.org/plan-your-visit-main/accessibility-information) or email contactus@playhousesquare.org or call 216-241-6000.

SENSORY-FRIENDLY PROGRAMMING

Traditional theater experiences can be overwhelming for people with autism, sensory challenges or other social, learning or cognitive disabilities. Playhouse Square's sensory-friendly initiative is dedicated to increasing access and inclusion.

Sensory-friendly performances offer a comfortable, judgement-free environment with lower sound levels, especially for startling or loud sounds, and designated calming areas staffed by volunteer specialists. Guests are free to bring and use their electronic devices and extra support items, as well as talk, leave their seats and move freely during the performance, while house lights in the theater remain on at a low level throughout the performance.

One sensory-friendly performance is presented each Broadway Series season.

"Even outside of the sensory-friendly performances, there is always a layer of accommodation in our programming," explains Katelyn Merold, outreach programs supervisor in Playhouse Square's Education Department. "We have available noise cancelling headphones, sunglasses, fidgets and multiple sensory spaces, including a layout of accessible tents and crash pads, beanbags, toys and tiles on the floor, so during school shows we can accommodate student needs."

Tools are available to plan your visit:

Social story for schools and families, relaxation strategy videos: playhousesquare.org/sensoryresources, theater photos and seating and maps: playhousesquare.org/venues.

"The Cuyahoga County Board of Developmental Disabilities (Cuyahoga DD) has been instrumental," Merold says. "We are always learning and growing through our strong relationship with the board and [guiding principle] 'nothing about us without us.' We speak to the people we are serving first to learn from them. On show days, the board's Good Life Ambassadors from the disability community speak on their own behalf and conduct training with our front of house staff and managers, including RedCoat volunteers to talk about best practices and dos and don'ts. During shows, you can see our volunteers walk around greeting guests in the most welcoming way possible."

The performing arts are made even more accessible through Playhouse Square's Disney Musicals in Schools program, which provides four schools each year a 19-week musical theater residency culminating in a 30-minute Disney KIDS musical at the school site. Any Cuyahoga, Lake and Lorain County public elementary school, including public charter school, with a student poverty level of 50% or higher (according to the Ohio Department of Education's 2013 Typology Report) is eligible to apply.

"Our professional Teaching Artists who help facilitate the program in the schools receive training to work with all students, including those on the spectrum and with other special needs," Merold shares. "One of our favorite pictures from the Disney showcase features a young actor who played Tigger in Winnie the Pooh and wore a headset as part of his costume hoodie to accommodate auditory needs."

In addition, Playhouse Square partners with Gigi's Playhouse Cleveland for its Drama Troupe program, which provides a supportive environment where everyone can shine on stage. A Teaching Artist creates tailored lesson plans and brings adapted in-person programming to the Down syndrome achievement center in Lakewood.

Playhouse Square is committed to arts education, providing a variety of free and low-cost programs dedicated to inspiring and invigorating people of all ages, perspectives and abilities. For more information on Playhouse Square's education programs. (playhousesquare.org/education-engagement).

ARTS & MINDS INITIATIVE

The Arts & Minds initiative, launched in July 2025 in collaboration with the Cleveland Clinic, creates programming

for people with neurological disorders within Northeast Ohio. The flagship program Dance for Parkinson's gives individuals with Parkinson's Disease and their care partners the opportunity to engage in meaningful arts experiences that support health and well-being.

Studies show dance improves motor skills and control, supports cognitive health and enhances mood. Free weekly Dance for Parkinson's classes encourage participants to explore movement possibilities and cultivate joy while also

providing beneficial connection and encouragement from the community. The 60-minute, social-oriented classes include vivid imagery, flowing movement, and rhythmic steps combined with live music to address balance, coordination and flexibility.

All levels of ability and mobility are welcome, and no dance experience is required. Spaces are limited, so advanced registration is encouraged.

Classes are led by veteran dance educator Joan Meggitt, Playhouse Square's senior manager

of neurological programs. As a Dance for PD® certified teacher, Meggitt designs and implements the programming. Playhouse Square is one of only 23 worldwide licensed affiliates and the only organization in the region with a certified teacher.

"The class is open to people of all ages and stages of the disease, from early onset of symptoms to those utilizing a cane, walker or scooter," Meggitt says. "Participants are very self-aware and can choose to sit, stand or take breaks as needed. Two professional dance demonstrators work with me to support them with their personal challenges and goals."

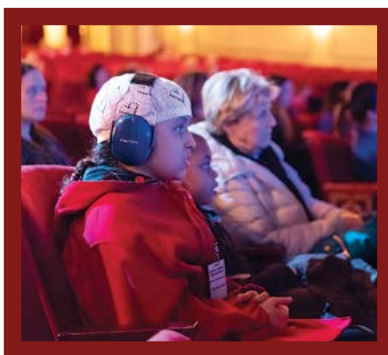
Meggitt is especially proud of the welcoming, compassionate studio culture established in the class. "There is a lot of trust among us," she says. "It is humbling and encouraging. We have cultivated an environment of playful dance exploration without worries or judgement. I really follow the lead of the dancers and feel immensely fortunate... to share in their accomplishments and celebrate successes. It is about meeting

people where they are and discovering possibilities together — cultivating connections through dance."

Special events are also offered throughout the year for participants to experience performances and conversations with artists seen on the Playhouse Square stages along with a Dance for Parkinson's activity.

"Special events enrich the class experience with exposure to a variety of dance forms," Meggitt says.

Additional Arts & Minds programming is in the works through Playhouse Square's collaboration with the Cleveland Clinic Neurological Institute. There are plans to serve individuals living with Alzheimer's disease, dementia and other neurological conditions (playhousesquare.org/arts-minds).



Sensory-friendly performances and (middle) Dance for Parkinson's program.

Life-Changing New Tech

Prosthetics & Orthotics Q&A With Jonathan Naft, CPO



Jonathan Naft, a nationally-recognized leader in the field and Certified Prosthetist Orthotist, founder and president of Geauga Rehabilitation Engineering (GRE), shares his unique perspective as an electrical and biomedical engineer and clinician with decades of experience in product innovation, patient care, and national reimbursement and coding initiatives.

By Lindsey Geiss

"It's an exciting time for patients working to improve function and mobility," Jonathan Naft, CPO, shares. "Advancements in computer-controlled technology and material science for prosthetics and orthotics (O&P) — including powered braces and exoskeletons — are removing limitations and improving health in ways never before thought possible."

Navigating the world of O&P can be overwhelming, and it is easy to get swept up in Hollywood's depiction of magical bionic limbs and suits. However, new innovations are quickly bridging the gap between sci-fi and reality. The one-size-fits-all approach of the past has given way to personalized solutions, with modern devices like Hero Arm promising to "turn limb differences into superpowers" and MyoPro®, the only wearable myoelectric device, restoring function to paralyzed arms and hands.

Naft spoke with LiveSpecial.com to demystify the technology and outline real-world possibilities.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Why is this an exciting time for the prosthetics and orthotics industry?

Naft: The acceleration in the last two to three years with powered braces is remarkable. There is such opportunity to make a difference with new technologies. It's amazing how the programmability and movement keeps improving. We are really running with AI to advance not only manufacturing and 3D printing, but also personalized rehabilitation. Devices can now sense and adapt to the individual's movements and gait patterns.

To get a sense of how much growth is taking place in the field, I helped lead the development of the world's first powered arm brace, MyoPro, starting in 2012, and the upgraded MyoPro 2 launched in 2017. Today, powered braces for the arms and legs are covered by major insurance companies across the United States, and the growth is happening in countries outside



GRE patient wearing MyoPro

the U.S., too. It's remarkable to see how patients now have options of different technologies for improving the function of their arms and legs.

Who can benefit from O&P?

Prosthetics and orthotics can address musculoskeletal and neurological conditions ranging from limb loss or limb differences to spinal cord injuries, multiple sclerosis and muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, post-polio syndrome, ALS or stroke. Full exoskeleton suits, which hold patients up and act as entire robotic legs and hips to walk for them, are growing beyond spinal cord injury patients with little to no muscle function. The rigid framework is worn over clothing. A wearable bilateral single-leg system, for example, has broader application, providing additional strength and stamina for functioning legs.

The majority of power brace and exoskeleton technology is for adults. However, the Agilik™ mobility device, for example, can be used by children. This power-assisted smart orthosis is designed

to be attached to a custom-fabricated Knee-Ankle-Foot Orthosis (KAFO). It uses advanced sensors and joint motors but does not initiate movement. The manufacturer hopes to help patients with disorders like cerebral palsy and spina bifida "stand taller and walk stronger" — even "stop or reverse" the deterioration in strength and endurance that patients often experience over time.

Beyond the medical field, power braces and exoskeletons in the industrial and commercial sector make up close to a billion-dollar industry, for use in assembly lines, for example. The military also uses them to enhance capability.

How can I find a device that is right for me or my loved one?

Certified Prosthetist Orthotists (CPOs) are highly trained healthcare professionals and clinical experts who specialize in designing and fitting artificial limbs (prosthetics) and custom braces (orthotics and exoskeletons). We collaborate with physicians — who diagnose the condition and write the prescription for the device, as well as physical therapists (PT for



legs and large body movements/balance) and occupational therapists (OTs for arms and daily life tasks) to help patients regain mobility, independence and confidence. Always talk to your primary care doctor first. They can refer you to a local specialist, including PT or OT.

How do these advanced devices work?

Prosthetics can be passive, body-powered or electric. Myoelectric limbs, powered braces and exoskeletons are controlled by muscle signals. The technology is less like "Iron Man" and more like "Avatar." However, to be clear, they do not have magical powers or endless energy. You have to make them work, so they require intense therapy and training, as well as a battery power source.

Similar to how Siri listens to a sound wave for a computer chip to process an algorithm and give you the weather forecast, for example, these devices listen to electromyographic (EMG) waves from muscles. Just as some people speak softly, a disabled person has more faint and garbled waves. However, they can be amplified, read and interpreted to make them usable. If my able-bodied arm is a 10 out of 10 threshold, the muscle of someone who has MS, a spinal cord injury or a stroke might be a 2 out of 10 output, which gets amplified to 10 to signal to the motor. The patient decides when to move and varies the intensity of their own EMG to control how fast or slow the arms or legs go. Sensors read the signals on the surface of the skin. Microprocessors and the arrays of sensors, including tilt, force and pressure sensors, combined with gyroscopes, allow patients to sit, stand or walk when they're ready. Same for bending arm joints such as elbows, wrists, hands and fingers.

How are the devices made?

In the 1960s and 70s when people got braces, like in the movie "Forrest Gump," a craftsman would sew leather and use heavy metal. Materials now include carbon fiber and lightweight plastics. Today we use high-tech 3D scanners to create a full

digital body image and computer model, then each product is custom 3D printed for the individual patient. The 3D printer builds them with composite plastics, one dot at a time, to form a solid brace from millions of points. New software even enables 3D shape scanning technology on mobile devices. MyoPro fabrication, for example, takes about two weeks, following an evaluation, measurements and molds. Finally, there is a fitting and OT to meet goals we set with you.

What are the downsides or limitations?

These technologies can be big, bulky and heavy, sometimes requiring help to get them on. However, they are still usable and each new generation gets smaller and smarter. They are also expensive, ranging in price (or Medicare/insurance allowance) from \$30,000 to \$100,000. It is worth noting that price does not equate to better quality or outcomes, just more motors and complex functionality based on severity and need. They also have to fit like a glove. Statistics show people are less apt to use them if they're not comfortable.

Is O&P covered by insurance?

A big reason for excitement and growth in R&D is that for the first time insurance will cover these devices, including powered braces. Medicare has led the way, with the VA and Workers' Compensation also covering them, and some private insurers have as well. It is important to ask your insurer and check whether a specific plan does or does not cover these technologies. Original Medicare from the government will pay if you meet the need, while some Medicare Advantage plans will deny coverage.

The FDA classifies these as Class II medical devices, which require a prescription. When patients come to GRE for a custom fitting for a MyoPro, for example following a stroke, we help you obtain clinical records and complete a thorough evaluation. The MyoPro is covered by most major payors under your durable medical equipment coverage for prosthetics and orthotics.

How have you seen this technology heal patients and change lives?

Patients are told, "You may never use your arm or walk again," then devices help them do just that. In my practice and while working with Paralympic athletes, I've seen what is truly classified as the triumph of the human spirit. If I had to make a prediction, in the immediate near future, the Paralympic games will be as equally televised and exciting as watching able-bodied athletes compete. We are already seeing amputee patients run as fast, if not faster, than pro athletes. And I'm excited to watch those with injuries such as stroke or spinal cord equally compete by use of powered exoskeletal devices.

How can we learn more?

Always talk to your physician, OT or PT. For specific questions about devices, reach out to local O&P providers, like GRE (greop.com). ExoskeletonReport.com is a resource for news and information on wearable robotics, exoskeletons and exosuits. It offers a catalog of all devices on the market and companies across the consumer, industrial, medical and military spaces. The American Orthotic & Prosthetic Association trade group offers a locator tool at AOPAnet.org. More information on MyoPro can be found at myomo.com and Hero Arm at openbionics.com

SHOPPING SPREE

FINDING ADAPTIVE CLOTHING THAT WORKS FOR YOU.

By Erin Sernoffsky



Fashion is a unique blend of function, comfort and self-expression — something at once practical and deeply personal. Yet for many people with disabilities, finding clothing that meets the demands of daily life can be challenging, leaving limited options for expressing individual style and preference. We've rounded up some of our favorite brands, from major retailers to independent designers, that are helping make fashion more accessible for our community.



THE BIG BRANDS

Major retailers still have room to grow when it comes to accessibility and inclusive design. However, more brands than ever are recognizing both the importance of adaptive fashion and the demand for clothing that works for a wider range of people.



Zappos

[zappos.com](https://www.zappos.com)

Zappos is a globally recognized retailer that has become a valuable resource for people seeking shoes that are comfortable, supportive, and simple to put on and remove. From AFO-friendly footwear to easy-on, easy-off sneakers for adults and children, the company offers a broad selection across a variety of price points. Zappos is also known for excellent customer service and a generous return policy if the fit isn't quite right.

Target

[target.com](https://www.target.com)

Parents, rejoice: Target has developed adaptive clothing lines for babies and children that combine comfort, accessibility and playful style. Many pieces are created with sensory sensitivities in mind and include features that simplify dressing. There are bright colors, fun prints, soft fabrics, and comfortable options for both everyday wear and special occasions.



Tommy Hilfiger Adaptive

usa.tommy.com

Tommy Hilfiger is an iconic American brand, and its adaptive collection makes those classic styles accessible to a broader audience. With options for both children and adults, the line incorporates features such as one-handed zippers, magnetic closures, and accommodations for prosthetics and mobility devices. Find the seated-wear collection, which includes pants with a higher rise in the back for improved comfort and a smoother fit while seated.

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FINDING ACCESSIBLE FITS

Adaptive fashions are growing, but people and families are still navigating the landscape to get clothes for their specific needs.

"The issue of adaptive clothing is so important because it directly impacts a patient's ability to be independent with their daily routine," says Julianne Toates, an occupational therapist with Baylor Scott & White Institute for Rehabilitation.

She has seen firsthand how a lack of access to adaptive clothing impacts a person's quality of life.

"Patients express feeling a loss of dignity with having to be reliant on a family member or caregiver to complete pants or clothing management for them," Toates says.

For her patients and their caregivers, clothing that provides easy access to catheters while seated in a wheelchair or incorporates user-friendly fasteners for people with limited dexterity can make a world of difference. Toates finds that her patients often don't know where to find these garments, anticipate how they will fit, or afford them.

"Adaptive clothing can be very pricey for patients to self-purchase and so that can be a limiting factor," says Toates. "There are several good resources online for some easy DIY projects to add loops or snaps to clothing that patients already have. I think that most often, I will help patients or family members add or modify their clothing with some low-tech adaptations that are geared toward their specific needs or challenges."

Toates also finds that many people simply do not know where to start shopping. Fortunately, the fashion industry is beginning to evolve. Major brands are expanding their adaptive collections, while independent designers and specialty retailers are creating stylish, thoughtfully crafted pieces that address a wide range of needs and lifestyles.

ADAPTIVE DESIGNERS & RETAILERS

IZ Adaptive

izadaptive.com

After years of creating custom clothing for a wheelchair user, designer Izzy Camilleri recognized the need for more thoughtfully developed adaptive fashion. She spent years listening to disabled clients and creating pieces that blend style, comfort and functionality. Her patented "Seamless Back Pant" was specifically created to improve comfort and help reduce pressure for wheelchair users.

Unhidden

unhidden.com

UK designer Victoria Jenkins has become a leading voice in disability-inclusive fashion. Her brand, Unhidden, features sleek, professional pieces tailored to accommodate a variety of accessibility needs. From elegant dresses with discreet access for medical ports and tubes to wrap pants with a runway-ready look, the collection beautifully balances fashion-forward design with everyday practicality.

MagnaReady

magnaready.com

MagnaReady pioneered magnetic-closure technology for men's and women's clothing. Inspired by the founder's husband's experience with Parkinson's disease, the brand specializes in stylish apparel for people with limited dexterity, making everyday dressing easier without sacrificing appearance or quality.

Patti + Ricky

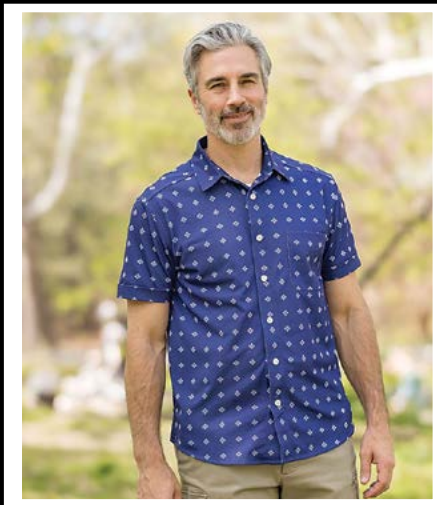
pattiandricky.com

Patti + Ricky is an online marketplace created specifically for disabled adults and children, as well as their caregivers. In addition to adaptive clothing, the site offers a wide range of thoughtfully curated accessories and lifestyle products, including weighted vests, wheelchair accessories such as the LapSnap basket, easy-to-wear jewelry, and adaptive belts.

Joe & Bella

joeandbella.com

Joe & Bella creates clothing specifically designed to simplify dressing. The founders, who bring experience from brands including Lululemon, Juicy Couture and Kenneth Cole, collaborated with medical professionals, caregivers and people with disabilities to develop garments that remove barriers to getting dressed and feeling confident.



Lady Fines

ladyfines.com

Simply put, Lady Fines clothes are cool. The styles would look right at home at a concert, festival, or party and serve as a powerful reminder that disabled people belong everywhere. The brand offers a wide range of adaptive features, from removable sleeves to full-length dual-direction zippers. The fashion-forward designs are fun, energetic and empowering.

Koolway Sports

koolwaysports.com

Koolway Sports is a Canadian company specializing in custom outdoor gear for wheelchair users and people who are medically fragile. Every piece is tailored to the customer's specific needs and measurements, and is built for warmth, durability and long-term use.



Silverts Adapted Clothing and Footwear

silverts.com

Silverts offers adapted clothing and footwear for men and women who are independent and those who need caregiver assistive dressing or post-surgical care wear. It features back functionality in tops, magnetic snaps, easy closure footwear and side open designs. They have collaborated with popular ALS advocate Brooke Eby for a trendy adapted Be Cozy, Be You collection with proceeds benefiting Team Gleason, a foundation that improves the lives of people living with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).

EMPOWERING INDEPENDENCE



SMART TECHNOLOGY FOR THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED.

By Susan H. Kahn



Assistive technology for people who are blind or visually impaired is evolving rapidly and artificial intelligence (AI), integrated into so many aspects of everyday life, has been a core driver of innovation.

New systems couple computer vision with generative AI to interpret the world in real time, allowing visually impaired people to gain more independence and to better compete with sighted peers in the workforce.

SMART GLASSES LEAD THE WAY

The biggest advance has been in the development of wearable technology and accessibility features built into mainstream devices.

For those with low vision, glasses like **eSight Go** (esighteyewear.com/esight-go) digitally enhance remaining vision using cameras, zoom, contrast and image processing.

Ray-Ban Meta (ray-ban.com) glasses look like conventional eyewear but have a tiny camera, speaker and microphone built into the frame. Working in conjunction with the wearer's smart phone, these can describe surroundings, answer questions about what the camera sees, provide audio navigation help, and make hands-free calls. They can be used by a person who is blind or can be outfitted with prescription lenses for a user with low vision.

"I use the Meta glasses to read text on signs or on my computer screen, to describe a photo and to help me navigate," says Shelby Craig, assistive technology specialist at the Cleveland Sight Center, who has been blind since birth. "They are widely popular and I find them extremely helpful."

The cost of smart glasses currently available can vary, but **RayBan Meta**, ranging from \$284-\$499, as well as Rokid AI (global.rokid.com) glasses powered by ChatGPT and Gemini, and **Agiga EchoVision Smart Glasses**, (agiga.ai) both starting at \$599, are among the most affordable.

THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT

Apart from wearable tech, there are numerous smartphone applications that utilize the camera feature to assist the visually impaired.



Be My Eyes (bemyeyes.com) is a free app that instantly connects the user with a sighted volunteer who can provide real-time descriptions of photos or videos and supply assistance with everyday tasks. Another option, **Be My AI**, utilizes artificial intelligence in place of human help to supply image and scene descriptions, along with in-depth, context-specific information.



OOrion (oorion.fr/en) is a free smartphone app that uses the phone's camera and GPS to overlay information in the user's field of view. It allows a visually impaired user to identify, locate and be guided to objects and text in their environment.



Microsoft Seeing AI (seeingai.com) is a free mobile app available in 33 languages for both iOS and Android phones that can read short text or full documents, describe faces and expressions, identify currency and detect color. It can even read handwriting and can be used to scan a bar code to identify product information when shopping. Other similar apps are **Lookout By Google** for Android and **VoiceVista** for iOS.



ACCESSIBILITY TECH FOR PUBLIC SPACES

Designed to help visually impaired people navigate unfamiliar spaces independently, **Navilens** (navilens.com) is a color matrix barcode, similar to a simplified QR code. The Navilens code is printed on a tag that can be mounted on signage throughout public transportation systems or within buildings. With the Navilens app, a user can scan these codes (without needing to know exactly where they are) to instantaneously get the information on the printed sign. It is available in 34 languages and is currently in use throughout public transit systems in New York City and Barcelona, Spain.

ReBokeh (rebokeh.com) is a free augmented reality app designed to allow people with low vision to make the most of their functional sight. With the app on a personal device, the user can enhance what they need to view by adjusting the zoom, contrast, brightness and color in whatever way best suits their vision. An AI feature allows the user to get further verbal descriptions of the scene. It has already been adopted for use by a number of airports, museums, libraries and sports venues.



Training and Resources

At the Cleveland Sight Center, tech specialists like Craig evaluate clients to determine their needs, then draft individual training plans at no cost. While some new tech can be costly, funding assistance is often available through the state agency Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (ood.ohio.gov). The Sight Center (clevelandsightcenter.org) also offers financial assistance when deemed clinically necessary.



HearSee Mobility



Navilens



WeWalk

CANE TRAVEL GETS SMARTER

Advances in cane travel for the blind have also incorporated various technologies and innovations aimed at enhancing mobility, safety and independence.

The **WeWALK II Smart Cane** (\$1,250, wewalk.io/en) can connect to smartphones via Bluetooth to relay information and aid in navigation using GPS. It has built-in speakers and a touchpad so the user can leave his phone in his pocket. An ultrasonic sensor on the front of the handle can detect obstacles from the chest level up at a distance of 3-4 feet.

HearSee Mobility (hearseemobility.org) is a company that builds navigation infrastructure for complex public environments. Partnering with institutions to support independent movement for the visually impaired, it has developed a system of RFID (radio frequency identification) tags that can be embedded along walkways inside buildings. Employing a smart cane designed to communicate with the tags, the user can receive step-by-step audio directions to specific places as well as descriptions of their surroundings.

WHERE FITNESS MEETS INCLUSION

LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS ARE CREATING WELCOMING SPACES WHERE CHILDREN AND ADULTS OF ALL ABILITIES CAN THRIVE THROUGH MOVEMENT.

By Ginny McCabe

Exercise and physical activity play a key role for all ages and abilities in maintaining health, physical and mental well-being, and quality of life.

Those with disabilities who want to make physical activity part of their daily lives can choose a variety of options to stay active and healthy, such as working out and doing activities at home, or participating in a program at a local gym or exercise class.

Led by owner and pediatric occupational therapist, Alexandra Pletz, We Rock the Spectrum Kid's Gym Cleveland (werockthespectrumcleveland.com) helps to build confidence, independence, school-readiness skills, emotional regulation and meaningful friendships — all while having fun.

She says the gym was founded to provide a place for children of all ability levels to play and grow together. It offers an inclusive philosophy and believes that all

children can benefit from its uniquely designed sensory equipment, which was specifically designed to aid children with sensory processing disorders.

"We have things like a zipline, a rock wall, different climbing structures and slides, crash pads and swings," Pletz says. "We have a lot of different equipment that provides input versus the traditional movement-based class."

Kids can learn social skills, work on gross motor and fine motor skills, and grow at their own pace. Also, families can meet, set play dates, and talk to each other about their own experiences and what they are going through. Often, they share what is working well for them and offer helpful resources.

"I saw the need for inclusion in general," Pletz says. "It is a population that is not as widely served, and we find here that so many friendships are being made, and so many families are sharing contact information. I feel like

it is a spot where people can relate to each other on a completely different level.

"From my standpoint, I wanted to create the ability to have what you have in a structured therapy, but it is open to the public," she adds. "We are open seven days a week, and we have open play, so kids can come in and get that input."

The gym is run by therapists, and since the equipment is for the purpose of sensory processing, We Rock the Spectrum Kid's Gym Cleveland does offer one-on-one therapy sessions for occupational, speech and physical therapy.

We Rock the Spectrum Kid's Gym Cleveland opened in April 2023. Many kids have been coming since the gym opened and they've continued to experience growth. The input kids receive at the gym also allows them to stay regulated throughout the day and reach their own optimal level.

"It's been so amazing to see kids' development from a gross motor



These are only some of the activities available at Jacob's Ladder Fitness.

standpoint with things like climbing, trusting themselves, and gaining that confidence," Pletz says. "The kids that were initially afraid to go on the zipline, or so scared to climb up the rope, are now doing all those things and more. Their confidence has grown in so many areas. Then, they go off to new playgrounds, and they are able to do those things as well."

Pletz recommends that parents come in with their children for open play. During that time, families can learn more and ask questions of speech and occupational therapists.

Additionally, parents can find out about the classes that are available.

"We answer a lot of questions from a developmental standpoint," she says. "We do provide services, but we can also point you in the right direction; if there's a certain skill that a family is looking to work on, we can recommend different pieces of equipment that might be helpful for that skill. Then, we can talk about the programs or a class that might be a good fit. It's always good to see a child in action before

we make recommendations. We also offer a resource guide that includes resources from all over the Cleveland and Northeast Ohio area. We also participate in resource fairs, and those are a good place for families to get information regarding the different programs that are available."

Also, We Rock the Spectrum Gym has multiple franchises with locations across the Northeast Ohio region, including programs in Lake County, Medina and Stow (*check for the website links in the sidebar on pg. 47.*)

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EXERCISE WITHOUT LIMITS

According to the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2nd edition, regular physical activity can help to control weight, improve mental health, and lower the risk for early death, cancer and certain diseases, such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease. Staying active can also improve mental health by reducing anxiety, stress and depression.

The guidelines recommend that all adults, with or without disabilities, get at least 150 minutes or 2.5 hours of physical activity per week. Examples of physical activity can include seated strength training using resistance bands or weights, wheelchair basketball, hand cycling, or dance classes designed for individuals with mobility challenges.

"We mainly serve people in the disability community with all kinds of disabilities," says Tony D'Orazio, founder and CEO of Jacob's Ladder Fitness (jacobladderfitness.com).

Jacob's Ladder Fitness is inspired by his son, Jake, who has Down syndrome.

"He grew up in a family with guys who were athletes and they pushed him, and teased him like big brothers would, and it really worked out well," D'Orazio says. "Then, he started watching 'Rocky' movies, and when he was about 11, I said, 'We should be helping other people,' and that's how we started. We wanted to assist other people in the disability community."

He says the obesity rates are higher in this community, the level of fitness is lower.

"We try to show respect by coaching, having expectations, and we work with them so they can get better at their skills and become more fit," D'Orazio says. "People that are fitter are healthier and more mentally healthy. Exercise is great for mental health. So we want to promote that."

Tony and Jake both became certified fitness instructors. In working with kids, they do "battle ropes" and "adaptive versions of planks and squats."

"We will have the athletes do battle



We Rock The Spectrum gyms provides uniquely designed sensory equipment for a safe place to play for children of all levels and abilities.

Opportunities for physical activity, through a variety of exercises and programs, can help individuals meet their individual fitness goals.

ropes, and then we will do planking. Planking is our signature exercise," D'Orazio says. "A lot of people, especially in the disability community, can't plank on the floor. So we allow them to do an adaptive plank. You can do an adaptive plank on the coffee table, on the wall, or on the island in the kitchen."

For squats, you can use a chair, he says.

With ball tosses, using soft balls, athletes can use weighted balls from 2 lbs. to 8-10 lbs. to develop core strength.

"When you bend down and throw a ball to someone who is five feet away from you, you are strengthening your

core. We like that," D'Orazio says.

"We also work with resistance bands. They are like stretchy bands, and you can adapt how they work by having the bands harder or easier. Resistance bands are easy to use and they are lightweight."

Opportunities for physical activity, through a variety of exercises and programs, can help individuals meet their individual fitness goals.

"We also teach boxing classes to people in the disability community," D'Orazio says. "Our son, Jake, is a certified boxing instructor for people with disabilities. We don't do any sparring, we just teach the basic

Adaptive Fitness & Activity Resources

Special Strong — specialstrong.com

MaxStrength Fitness — maxstrengthfitness.com

Youth Challenge — youthchallengesports.com

Adapted Fitness & Yoga Plus facebook.com/adaptedfyp

Adaptive Sports Ohio — adaptivesportsohio.org

Diamond Strength Fitness, diamondstrong.us or facebook.com/diamondfitnessparma

Jacobs Ladder — jacobsladderfitness.com

Empower Sports — empowersports.org

The Turn — jointheturn.org

Buddy Strong Academy — buddystrongacademy.com

Special Olympics Ohio — sooh.org

We Rock the Spectrum —

Cleveland: werockthespectrumcleveland.com

Lake County: werockthespectrumlakecounty.com

Medina: werockthespectrummedina.com

Stow: werockthespectrumstow.com



HELPS WITH DAILY ROUTINES

For individuals with disabilities, regular exercise can support a person's daily living routine and independence. It could be exercise like going for a jog, or an activity such as walking the dog.

Michelle Kitchen, owner and creator of Diamond Strength Fitness (facebook.com/diamondfitnessparma) in Parma Heights has added an inclusive children's class for kids with and without disabilities.

"I thought if I put both of them together, some kids will learn more, find out it's a normal part of life, meet kids with disabilities, and not be so mean to kids with disabilities," she said.

"When we get into the fitness business, we just naturally assume that every walk of life would come into the gym or call the gym, and say they want training, but apparently that's not inherently true," says Kitchen. "With so few gyms thinking of offering classes specifically for those with disabilities, I thought that could be my niche, and I could help the people around me with whatever their needs are."

She has added an inclusive children's class for kids with and without disabilities. Diamond Strength Fitness also provides personalized attention and is able to work with clients one-on-one.

One of Kitchen's clients wants to participate in a chair race, so she is working with her to train for that race.

"I'm sure there are more kids like her, and I want to help them, too," Kitchen says. "Kids should be as active as we all are, with or without disabilities."

"You need to move throughout the day. Even if someone is limited in their ability, I'd like to help them see there are other things they can do, and there's other people around them that they can work out with," she adds.

"There's a whole wide world out there, and they need to know they are capable of doing anything and everything that everybody is capable of doing."

punches, and it's good for hand-eye coordination."

Other adaptive sports, such as yoga, swimming and equine assisted horseback riding, can also be tailored to those with varying ability levels.

Choosing an adaptive sport may depend on a person's individual preferences, physical ability and comfort level. Many communities throughout Northeast Ohio offer programs designed for those of all abilities, making it easier to find a sport that aligns with one's interests and personal fitness goals.

People can also choose to walk or work out from home, D'Orazio says.

"One of the things I stress is your house is a gym; you just don't know it. You can do exercise and activities on your own: you can do planks on the steps, or you can walk up and down the steps," D'Orazio says. "You can go for walks outside. We try to teach people to mow the lawn, or take out the garbage, and do those kinds of activities."

BENEFITS BEYOND FITNESS

There are immediate and long-term benefits of physical activity. Those

engaged in regular physical activity can improve their overall health and fitness, as well as prevent or reduce adverse health conditions.

"We focus on strength and flexibility," D'Orazio says. "When we exercise with people, we don't say, 'You can do this,' or 'You can't do this,' and we usually keep the same routine. The students like it, and they know what to expect. Where the variety comes in is we might have one student planking for two minutes, and another student planking on their knees for 10 seconds. We work with them and let them know, you can still do this."

The benefits of physical exercise include staying fit, improving balance and strength, and boosting confidence and social connections.

"What you want to do is make it part of your own personal culture," D'Orazio says. "Let's say your culture is you go to a Jacob's Ladder class on Tuesday nights and you do some of the various activities. Then, for your variety and choice, you can pick three or four exercises to do at home. One day, you may not work out as long, but you're going to do something."



DEALING WITH FOOD AVOIDANCE

By Angela Gartner

Tasting and eating certain dishes can be seen as a joyful experience. However, for people who struggle with textures, smells, how the food looks or feels in their mouths, or those who have trouble swallowing, it can be a stressful event.

Typical picky eating is a normal developmental stage for many children, but food avoidance is different, says Esther Verbovsky, M.A., CCC-SLP, owner of Cleveland Feeding & Swallowing Center, and founder and CEO of Star Center Foundation.

"The individual may eat an extremely limited number of foods, refuse entire food groups, become distressed by certain textures, smells, temperatures or appearances, and the restriction begins to affect nutrition, health, daily life or family life," says Verbovsky, who has more than 30 years of experience in helping infants, children and adults overcome feeding, swallowing, voice and oral-motor challenges.

She says that food avoidance for people with special needs is much more common than people realize.

"Research tells us that about one in four children experience some type of

feeding difficulty during development," Verbovsky says. "Among children with autism, studies have found feeding challenges in approximately 46% to nearly 90% of children, depending on the population studied."

She adds that feeding challenges are also common in individuals with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, developmental delays, genetic conditions, neurological disorders, gastrointestinal disorders, and adults recovering from stroke, head and neck cancer, Parkinson's disease and other medical conditions.

Verbovsky says the important thing to remember is that these challenges don't magically disappear when someone turns 18. Many adults continue struggling with sensory issues around food throughout their lifetimes.

Verbovsky provides us with some answers to common questions about how to help individuals and their caregivers when dealing with food avoidances.

What are the most common causes of food avoidance in individuals with special needs?

Verbovsky: There usually isn't just one reason. I often tell families that food

avoidance is like peeling an onion. As you uncover one layer, you often discover another.

Sometimes it's sensory processing. Sometimes it's reflux, constipation, allergies, oral pain or swallowing difficulties. Other times it's oral-motor weakness, anxiety after choking, difficulty chewing, developmental delays, or simply years of stressful mealtimes.

That's why I never assume someone is "just refusing." I assume there's a reason, and my job is to find it.

What role do sensory processing differences play in food avoidance?

Eating is one of the most sensory experiences we have. Before food ever reaches our stomach, we've already looked at it, smelled it, touched it, heard it crunch, felt its texture in our mouth, and tasted it.

For someone with sensory processing differences, those experiences can be completely overwhelming. What looks like refusal to us may actually be their nervous system saying, "This doesn't feel safe."

Some individuals are sensitive to

textures, others to temperature, smell, color, sound or even how food is presented on the plate. Something as simple as changing brands can completely change how that food feels to them.

Instead of asking why they're refusing, I encourage families to ask, "What about this food is difficult?" That one question changes everything.

How do you determine whether food avoidance is sensory-based, behavioral, medical or a combination?

I spend far more time asking questions than giving answers in the beginning. When did this start? Has the child ever choked? Do they have reflux or constipation? What foods do they accept? What textures are difficult? Do they cough? Gag? Get congested? Does it happen at every meal or only with certain foods? Can they chew? Can they move food around in their mouth? What changed?

Every behavior has a reason. What many people call "behavior" is often the result of an underlying medical issue, sensory difference, or feeding-skill challenge. Sometimes a child begins avoiding food because eating hurts. The medical issue improves, but the fear remains.

If meals are stressful every day, if your child is eating fewer and fewer foods, if they gag, choke, cough, vomit, cry around meals, eliminate entire food groups, or you're making multiple separate meals every day just to get through dinner, it's worth having an evaluation.

Nutrition isn't the only concern. Feeding affects development, social participation, school, family relationships and quality of life.

The earlier we identify the problem, the easier it is to help.

As a practical guideline, I become especially concerned when someone consistently eats around 12 foods or fewer, particularly if they continue losing foods instead of gaining them. That tells me we need to look much deeper at what is driving the avoidance. I tell families not to wait until their child loses weight.

How can families help ensure nutritional needs are met while respecting sensory sensitivities?

The goal isn't to remove every preferred food. The goal is to build from what feels safe.

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Dealing with Food Allergies and Intolerance

According to the Cleveland Clinic, nine foods in particular account for more than 90% of serious allergic reactions like anaphylaxis. The list includes milk, eggs, fish, shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, soybean and sesame. Celiac disease, which is different from a food allergy, is an autoimmune disease triggered by gluten. It can cause gastrointestinal issues including, bloating, abdominal pain, diarrhea or constipation, as well as fatigue and other symptoms.

These are not new challenges, as families across the region are dealing with how to stay safe and spread awareness on food allergies and sensitivities.

Jay Leitson, co-owner of the 56 Restaurant Group, which includes 56 Kitchen and Catering, Elle Restaurant and Lounge, and Birdigo Chicken and Custard, has been in the industry for 40 years.

He says that, over the years, it seems like food sensitivities have become more prevalent. He became more aware when he was catering, as he would receive lists of sensitivities for guests.

His restaurant, 56 Kitchen, has a dedicated fryer and offers a menu with gluten-free and vegan options.

While he thinks the restaurant industry is doing better, everyone — restaurants and customers — has to do their part.

"You have a lot of customers that love us because we have a gluten-free, vegan fryer — they come back to us," he says.

He suggests if you have a food allergy or sensitivity to call the restaurant and ask questions like if they have another fryer dedicated for people with allergies, or how the service staff is trained in relying or knowing all the ingredients on the menu's dishes.

"I get so many people that are allergic to different things, so you have to be careful and so that's why we're careful at the restaurant, as well," he says.



RESOURCES FOR FEEDING ISSUES AND FOOD ALLERGIES IN THE REGION

- **Allison Rose Foundation**, allisonrosefoundation.org
- **Cleveland Feeding & Swallowing Center**, cleveswallowingcenter.org
- **Cleveland Clinic Food Allergy Center**, clevelandclinic.org
- **The Food Challenge Clinic, University Hospitals Rainbow Babies & Children's Hospital**, uhhospitals.org

Here are just a few restaurants in the region that offer gluten-free, vegan-friendly and/or nut-free options. *

56 Kitchen

Solon and Mayfield Heights,
56kitchen.com

Avo Modern Mexican

Ohio City, avo-ohiocity.com

Brick and Vine

Brecksville, brickandvinerestaurant.com

BOSS ChickNBeer

Berea, Bay Village, Seven Hills, and
Cuyahoga Falls,
bosschicknbeer.com

Cordelia

Cleveland, cordeliacle.com

Fahrenheit Cleveland

fahrenheitrestaurants.com

Lizzie's Bakery

lizziesbakerynutfree.com

Tavern Six

Kirtland and Chagrin Falls,
tavernsix.com

TownHall

Cleveland, townhallornowhere.com

Note Menus, ingredients and preparation practices can change. Please review current menus and contact each restaurant directly for specific ingredients, allergen information and whether dedicated fryers or other equipment are used before ordering.*

Families should continue offering accepted foods while gradually introducing similar foods, work closely with their medical team and dietitian when nutrition is a concern, and remember that progress happens one step at a time.

Respecting sensory differences doesn't mean giving up. It means creating a bridge instead of forcing someone to jump across the gap.

What are the biggest misconceptions about food avoidance and sensory issues?

One of the biggest misconceptions is that people will eat if they get hungry enough. Many won't. Their fear, pain, sensory discomfort or swallowing difficulty can become stronger than hunger itself.

Another misconception is that food avoidance is caused by poor parenting. Families are usually doing the very best they can with the information they have. I believe parents deserve support, not blame.

How do you help someone gradually expand the variety of foods they eat?

I believe in creating curiosity, not compliance.

We might start by looking at a food, touching it, smelling it, playing with it, kissing it, licking it, or exploring it with our hands before anyone ever asks for a bite.

Food doesn't have to be scary.

In my therapy sessions we paint with pudding, dig through brown sugar for hidden treasures, build with vegetables, make silly faces with fruit, and celebrate every tiny success.

Learning should be enjoyable. When people feel safe, they're much more willing to try something new.

How can families make mealtimes less stressful?

Pressure almost always creates more pressure. Force-feeding, bribing, threatening, insisting on a clean plate, hiding foods without someone's knowledge, or turning every meal into a

battle usually increases anxiety rather than improving eating.

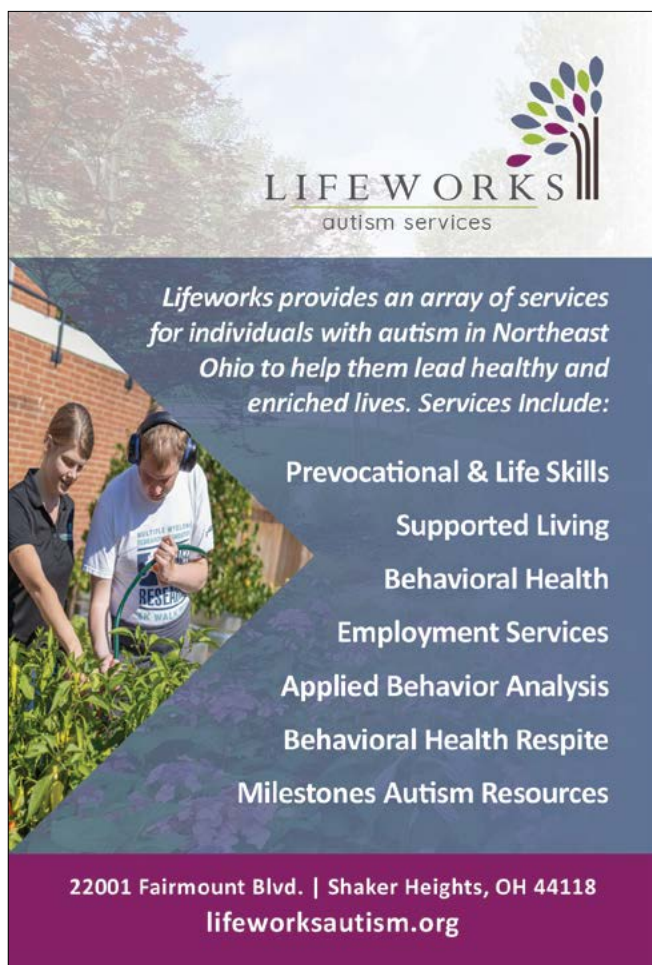
Instead, I encourage families to become food detectives, not food judges.

Be curious. Keep meals predictable. Offer at least one safe food. Celebrate exploration, not just eating. When the pressure comes down, curiosity often goes up.

What are realistic expectations for progress?

Progress isn't measured only by bites swallowed. Sometimes progress is sitting at the table without crying. Sometimes it's touching a strawberry for the first time. Sometimes it's smelling a food they've avoided for years — those are victories.

The goal isn't perfection. The goal is helping someone become healthier, safer, more confident and more comfortable around food.



LIFEWORKS
autism services

Lifeworks provides an array of services for individuals with autism in Northeast Ohio to help them lead healthy and enriched lives. Services Include:

- Prevocational & Life Skills
- Supported Living
- Behavioral Health
- Employment Services
- Applied Behavior Analysis
- Behavioral Health Respite
- Milestones Autism Resources

22001 Fairmount Blvd. | Shaker Heights, OH 44118
lifeworksautism.org



Check Out Our New Special Needs Newsletter
Focusing on Early Intervention, Sensory-Friendly, Inclusion, & Adaptive

Parent
Special Needs Newsletter
Early Intervention, Sensory-Friendly, Inclusion, & Adaptive

Welcome to the first edition of Northeast Ohio Parent's Special Needs Newsletter! We are excited to launch this monthly edition dedicated to supporting families of children with special needs. Our focus will be to provide a variety of articles about resources and upcoming happenings around the region.

You are receiving this email newsletter due to your affiliation with Northeast Ohio Parent. We hope that you find value in this content and would welcome forwarding to a friend as well. If you want to update your subscription preferences or opt-out, please go to the link at the bottom.

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Special Advertiser Listings

Achievement Centers for Children



Achievement Centers for Children has served the community since 1940 with a mission of empowering children and adults with disabilities to

achieve their greatest potential through holistic and family-focused services. It is home to Camp Cheerful, Ohio's first recreational camp for those with disabilities, which today provides year-round camp programs. The agency's programs also encompass Adult Services, Family Support, Therapy and Recreation (including Adapted Sports and Therapeutic Horsemanship). To learn more, call 440-577-8886 or visit achievementcenters.org.

Beck Center for the Arts



Each participant in Beck Center's Creative Arts Therapies program receives

attention that is individualized with personally-designed goals tailored to meet their needs. Staffed by board certified arts therapists and professional adapted instructors, Beck Center's program is the first of its kind in the state of Ohio. 216-424-7634, beckcenter.org/education/creative-arts-therapies

Blossom Hill



Since 1968, Blossom Hill has provided personalized,

loving care. Its history includes the first group home in Cuyahoga County designed to meet the unique needs of each individual within its care. Today's services range from family-style group living (respite and long-term residential care) to supported living services for individuals in their own homes to day programming. All care is delivered by a trained,

dedicated staff of nurses, cooks, direct support professionals, activities directors, housekeepers, Qualified Developmental Disability Professionals (QDDPs) and shift managers. 440-892-2042, blossom-hill.org

Community Fund Ohio



For more than 30 years, Community Fund Ohio has empowered individuals with disabilities across the state of Ohio to live fuller, more secure lives. It protects access to vital government benefits while supporting current and future needs through pooled special needs trusts. It also provides education and related services to help individuals, families and professionals navigate the complexities of disability planning with confidence. Learn more at communityfundohio.org

Connecting for Kids



Connecting for Kids

Connecting for Kids is a group in Northeast Ohio that helps parents. It supports families who are worried about their child — whether it's autism, ADHD, anxiety, school or just a hard time in life. It offers free programs, help finding resources and a caring community where parents feel welcome. Programs for adults include support groups and presentations. Hands-on programs such as Music Therapy & More and Adapted Playgroups allow parents and children to interact together. Ask Us! provides a Family Resource Specialist who meets with families to help them navigate resources. It also offers Facebook groups, resource fairs and online resources. 440-570-5908, connectingforkids.org

Cuts N Curls



Cuts N Curls is a unique adult and children's hair salon, retail store and birthday party venue that prides itself on being sensitive to your family's needs. The specially-trained staff makes sure your experience is both safe and fun. Solon, 440-542-1750, cutsncurls.net

Cuyahoga DD



Independence is a common goal: living away from parents, getting that dream job, finding your people! The Cuyahoga County Board of Developmental Disabilities helps youth and adults with DD to live, learn, work and play, confidently. From innovative housing and job support to assistive technology and local accessibility, Cuyahoga DD helps you live your best life. Because everyone deserves their independence! To learn more or check for eligibility, please visit cuyahogadd.org

The Down Syndrome Association of Northeast Ohio



DSANEO provides support, education and advocacy for individuals with Down syndrome, their families and communities. DSANEO is the primary resource for families and communities regarding Down syndrome, where all people with Down syndrome are accepted, included and empowered. DSANEO supports individuals with Down syndrome through their lifetime with family support programs, education enrichment for toddlers to teens, life skills classes, social programs, medical outreach and advocacy. DSANEO supports more than 1,100 individuals with Down syndrome and their families throughout 16 Northeast Ohio counties. 216-447-8763, dsaneo.org

Education Alternatives



Education Alternatives provides specialized education for K-12 students at seven locations across Northeast Ohio. It uses a compassionate, experience-informed approach to help children with behavioral challenges and autism, with personalized plans based on each child's needs and ACE score. Students receive both academics and therapy, including ABA therapy, counseling, behavior support, and psychiatry. REACH Behavioral Health delivers therapeutic services at every site. Education Alternatives is also an approved provider for the Jon Peterson, Autism and EdChoice Scholarships through the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce. Learn more at easchools.org

Eisner, Gohn Group



Eisner, Gohn Group is a leading resource for life insurance, long-term care insurance and long-term disability insurance. Its team has subject matter experts in each of these disciplines so it can craft and deliver the most cost effective and efficient plans for clients. eisnergohngroup.com

Friendship Circle of Cleveland



Friendship Circle of Cleveland creates meaningful, inclusive experiences where children, teens and young adults with social needs can connect and flourish. Through social programs, one-on-one friendships, camps, holiday events, family programs and community gatherings, Friendship Circle helps individuals build friendships, strengthen social skills, gain confidence and discover

a true sense of belonging. By bringing together participants, teen volunteers and families, Friendship Circle provides a supportive community where every individual is welcomed and empowered to create lasting connections. 27900 Gates Mills Blvd., Pepper Pike, 216-377-3000, friendscleveland.com

I Am Boundless



For more than 40 years, I Am Boundless, a statewide nonprofit, has provided people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and behavioral health challenges the freedom and opportunity to live boundless lives. It serves all ages and abilities in autism services, primary care and dental appointments, job training, counseling and residential support. It proudly provides person-centered care that celebrates each individual and encourages them to become active participants in the communities where they live, work and play. To learn more about how Boundless can help you or your loved ones, visit iamboundless.org

Julie Billiard Schools



Julie Billiard Schools educate, empower and nurture K-8 students with social and learning differences. JB serves mild-to-moderate special learning needs including ADHD, anxiety, autism, dyslexia and executive function support. With campuses in Akron, Brecksville, Lyndhurst and Westlake, we provide an exceptional learning environment including a maximum 8-to-1 student-to-teacher ratio and intervention specialists in each classroom. Our facilities feature safe and sensory-friendly spaces, onsite occupational, speech, art and music therapies, behavior supports and a nurturing whole child approach. Learn more or set up a time to visit; call 216-716-8318 or go to juliebilliardschool.org

Lake County Board of DD/Deepwood



The mission of the Lake County Board of Developmental Disabilities/Deepwood is to empower individuals with developmental disabilities to engage in activities that enrich their lives and contribute to their community. In the ever-changing landscape of federal and state regulations, the LCBDD's overriding vision remains constant: to offer Lake County citizens the highest-quality, most-inclusive, collaborative, and person-centered services and supports available within resources. Working closely with other agencies and community partners, the LCBDD helps individuals and their families identify and receive services needed for a safe, healthy and fulfilling life. Learn more at lakebdd.org or follow @deepwoodlakeDD on social media.

Lifeworks Autism Services



Lifeworks Autism Services supports individuals with autism in leading healthy, enriched and self-directed lives. It provides essential, evidence-based clinical services across the lifespan, delivered by highly trained and credentialed professionals. The programs include Supported Living, Day Habilitation, Prevocational and Life Skills, Behavioral Health Community-Based Services, OhioRISE Behavior Respite, Applied Behavior Analysis, and the Milestones Autism Resource Program, its newest division. Milestones connects individuals and families with trusted resources and offers professional trainings statewide, strengthening providers and expanding community support. Together, the Lifeworks programs create a continuum of care that empowers individuals, families and the professionals who serve them. Visit lifeworksautism.org



With more than 2,000 providers, LiveSpecial.com assists families in finding therapists, financial planners, doctors, recreational opportunities, and many other resources for individuals with special needs and those who develop special needs. LiveSpecial.com, a project of Jewish Women in Action Cleveland, helps make connections for a long-term or temporary need that one may encounter due to illness or an accident. LiveSpecial.com partners with many other agencies to provide free educational programs that deal with the different obstacles and challenges that individuals face with their loved one over time, especially as they age out of the public school's responsibility at 22 and beyond. LiveSpecial.com facilitates inclusive/integrated activities and programs in the community. It advocates for access for ALL in ALL areas of life. LiveSpecial.com magazine is published yearly and is available in print and online. Go to LiveSpecial.com to find providers, to read all past issues of the magazine, visit the video library, and to see the many more resources available. 216-378-2204, livespecial.com

LLA Therapy



LLA Therapy is a therapist-owned pediatric therapy practice

serving families across Northeast Ohio through five clinic locations in Fairlawn, Hudson, Medina, Alliance and Mentor. LLA provides speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), music therapy, reading therapy and intervention services using a collaborative, whole-family approach. The LLA

2,000-Plus Providers and Resources in Northeast Ohio.

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team focuses on individualized, evidence-based care that helps children build confidence, strengthen skills and reach their fullest potential. LLA partners closely with families, schools and healthcare providers to support long-term success for every child. Follow LLA on Instagram and Facebook, call 330-867-2240, or visit llatherapy.org for more information.

Medina County Board of Developmental Disabilities



The Medina County Board of Developmental Disabilities is the community resource responsible for connecting, coordinating and funding services for individuals of all ages with developmental disabilities. It helps with everything from early intervention and education opportunities for children to employment and community inclusive living for adults so they can live, learn, work and socialize in the community. mcbdd.org

NPower Services



NPower Services finds and creates social, fitness, artistic and kindness opportunities throughout Northeast Ohio for

neurodiverse adults, including: RockAbility, a rock band of neurodiverse and neurotypical musicians; Geauga Joggers & Walkers, a jogging and hiking group for all abilities; Inside Circle, drum and ukulele circles for all abilities; Power Ups, TNT & cardio drumming fitness groups for all abilities; and Project: Kindness, which puts neurodiverse adults on the giving end of service. npowerservices.com

Stark County Board of Developmental Disabilities (Stark DD)



The Stark County Board of Developmental Disabilities (Stark DD) supports more than 5,000 children and adults with developmental disabilities and their families, helping people live, learn, work and thrive in their communities. It provides funding and coordination for early intervention, school-age services, community living supports, employment services and advocacy education. By partnering with individuals, families and community providers, it connects people with personalized supports that promote independence, inclusion and a good life. To get started, visit starkdd.org or contact the team.



Talia Zimmerman, 26, is autistic and nonspeaking. She learned how to communicate by typing and spelling out her thoughts. The method is called spelling to communicate.

FINDING MY VOICE

MY JOURNEY TO COMMUNICATION

By Talia Zimmerman

My name is Talia Zimmerman, and I have autism. It's the kind of autism where I cannot speak. Spelling to Communicate (S2C) has been a positive and successful method for so many who are like me. It would be an understatement to say spelling changed my life. It saved me. I am sure it is difficult for people to understand, but not having a voice was torture, and now I have one.

With my voice through spelling, I get to experience even more with my family and friends. I have gotten to travel to Canada and Switzerland because I chose to. I love going to baseball and basketball games and spending time with my friends in our spelling community. The best part is I have the choice and I am having the time of my life.

I know that many people could benefit from it. Unfortunately, only a very small percentage of our population knows about it; but we are strong

advocates and will continue to spread the word. Spelling has helped both my family and me.

I am eternally grateful that my parents brought me to Access S2C (accesss2c.com), which is my local spelling center. Growing up, my life was happy and full of love because I have the

best parents and sister. I don't feel as though I missed out on much because my family included me. They have crafted a beautiful community that has allowed me to build lifelong friendships and be part of endless opportunities.

I've been able to share my story, as well as my typing skills, at multiple events alongside my other friends who use the method. Advocating is what I need to do.

My advice: Don't give up. There is hope. There are people in this world who believe in you. I also want to encourage anyone who is reading this to give your nonspeaker a chance with S2C. It is absolutely worth it.

It would be an understatement to say **spelling changed my life.**



LiveSpecial.com is Northeast Ohio's go-to guide for individuals with disabilities, their families and the professionals who support them.

**Discover
What's Possible**

What You'll Find

- A comprehensive guide to local services and resources
- Free educational tools for every stage of life
- A searchable provider directory tailored to your needs
- Connections to inclusive events, programs and community opportunities



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A VISIT WITH
A CARING
FRIEND.”**



“We chose Achievement Centers for Children because we love that Nyle knows he is in a safe space and can be free to still be a kid, while receiving the best therapy in Northeast Ohio.”

Nyle’s parents have trusted Achievement Centers for Children with his Therapy since he was a year old.

The 3-year-old recently took his first independent steps – with ACC’s Therapy team joining his parents in cheering him on!

**» Let us tailor a plan for your loved one to reach new milestones –
with a team that feels like family.**

Read more stories:



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www.achievementcenters.org/therapy

