

# Starting Down the Road

## Early Intervention for One Child's Sensory Processing Disorder and Dyspraxia

Michele Gianetti

"O ccupational therapy?" I thought, as I was holding the phone, about to dial. "OT for my 2 year old?" I never thought I would be making the call for my daughter.

Although I am a nurse, my only real frame of reference for occupational therapy at the time came when I was doing my course work and clinicals in a rehabilitation center. In that center, I saw occupational therapy being done every day, but those receiving the therapies were typically in the geriatric age bracket, affected by an illness, or recovering from a stroke.

But OT for Elizabeth—*this* I did not know anything about.

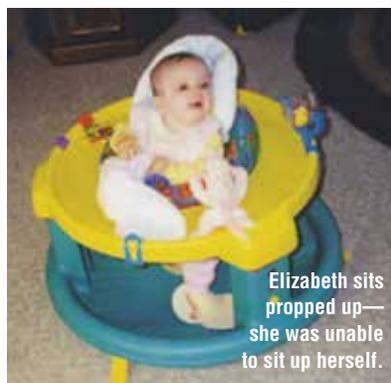
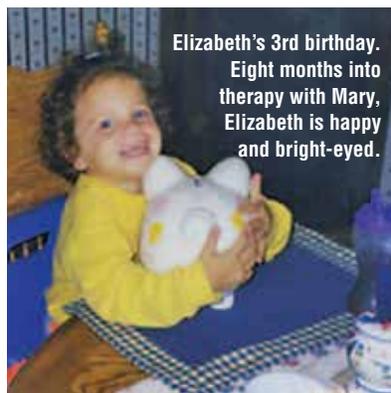
I knew my daughter had something very wrong with her and that she needed help. But what kind of help?

I can remember holding the phone to my ear as I waited for the therapist to answer, for our very first words together. Little did I know that this phone call would be the beginning of a road I knew nothing about but would eventually prove to be a huge part in getting Elizabeth the help she needed.

"Hi," I said. "My name is Michele Gianetti. A friend had given me your name, and I really need to ask what you think of some of the things my daughter does."

I told her our story then asked, "Do you think she needs therapy?" We had officially stepped onto that road.

Looking back to the beginning, June 29, 1997, may be just an ordinary



date for most people. But for us it is special—the day Elizabeth was born. One hard labor, one epidural that worked only on one side, one long latent phase of labor, and we had a beautiful baby girl to show for it. But, by just the second day of her life, it was clear to us that something was wrong. Her cry was shrill, she was hard to settle, and she had trouble feeding. We tried to chalk it up to her being a newborn and move on, but the signs kept coming.... She did not try things, she did not reach for things, she had to be taught her first milestones, like rolling over and sitting up. We did them a little more each day until she got it, but why did we have to work with her so hard? We were in survival mode at this point, so we did not really have time to question too much, we just *survived*. She cried all the time, too—a scared, anxious look in her eyes. Sitting her in a little chair made her cry, as did the bath, as did shoes, textures, foods, as did my leaving her line of vision. I found holding her calmed her, so I did... most days for the first 2 1/2 years of her life.

Our child had us so perplexed—she smiled and laughed, and she made eye contact and responded to her name. She did not focus on objects, but she liked to watch TV and she watched us. But she did not talk, at least not any real words, just garbled attempts. Nothing about her really made sense to us. We just knew she needed something to make her happy.

I hung up the phone from that first phone call, with an appointment for an evaluation for Elizabeth, for sensory

processing disorder and its co-morbid disorder, dyspraxia.

We entered the therapy room for our evaluation. It was full of swings, flat and round; bean bags; therapy mats; and shelves full of balls, containers, and toys. I had not seen this side of occupational therapy before. Elizabeth had the evaluation that day and soon after began therapy once a week.

Although I had hoped that spinning her around a couple times on the swing and receiving instruction on what to do at home would quickly “fix” Elizabeth’s problems, the reality is that the sensory issues take so much time to address, and the work done for the dyspraxia takes so long, that to this day, some 13 years later, we are still working on goals, albeit advanced goals. The point is, there is no “fix.” To those working with children with dyspraxia, it is so important to stress this to them and their family, that the children are not broken and in need of repair. Rather, their neurological systems are just wired differently from those who are typically developing, and they need help learning things their way.

Our initial, wonderful occupational therapist gave us our first lesson in the Wilbarger brushing/joint compression protocol, which made a huge difference in Elizabeth’s system. She was brushed and had her joints compressed every 2 hours, and we started to see her being calm and allowing in some sensory information that typically would be so offensive to her as to make her cry. The therapies were not easy at first, with Elizabeth crying and fighting, and me having to do all them first so she could see what was happening. But we made progress.

Later, we worked with another fantastic therapist, Mary, who not only worked with us to address Elizabeth’s gross motor and fine motor skills, but also her oral motor area, so she could use language. Mary’s work with Elizabeth’s mouth was centered on getting her muscles to work, teaching her how to breathe and make sounds, then words, and then sentences. It was hard work. But she learned to talk and now will officially talk your ear off.

Looking back on the past 13 years, I now better understand that parents with children like Elizabeth need to under-

stand that their work with such conditions is a lifelong journey. But they should know that therapy, especially at a young age, can make a world of difference. Therapy does help. Elizabeth is proof.

The child who cried for everything, and did not do anything, now gets herself ready for the day, including taming her curly, beautiful hair, making her own snack, and laughing with her little brother. We will always have work to do, but if I allow myself a peek over my shoulder at where we started, at myself holding that phone, I know what we did for her worked, and is working. ■

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Gianetti’s book about her daughter Elizabeth’s life and journey with sensory processing disorder and dyspraxia, *I Believe in You: A Mother and Daughter’s Special Journey*, is available at [www.tatepublishing.com](http://www.tatepublishing.com), [www.nichelegianetti.com](http://www.nichelegianetti.com), [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), and [www.barnesandnoble.com](http://www.barnesandnoble.com).

## AQUATICS

*Continued from page 20*

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