

# Denville school celebrates kids with autism and special needs, beaming not broken

By [new\\_view\\_media](#) on April 9, 2019 [No Comment](#)



By Jillian Risberg

For 15 fantastic years, Celebrate the Children has helped autistic and special needs children realize their full potential while supporting all those who love them.

The state-approved model school for ages 3-21 has grown from three students to 130 students serving 75 different districts across the Garden State, with an additional student from New York and one from Pennsylvania.



According to Lauren Blaszk, CTC co-founder and executive director, the program has grown because of the methodology. They utilize the DIR (Developmental, Individual Difference, Relationship-Based) intervention developed by Dr. Stanley Greenspan and Dr. Serena Wieder.

“DIR is different from other methodologies, it’s just really thinking about how you’re connecting with a child, building a relationship, thinking about the child’s individual profile, how is the child experiencing the world, then using that as a foundation to support their growth and development,” Blaszk says.

Within this approach they presume competence in the children, the executive director says.

Trish Boll of East Hanover can definitely attest to this.

Her daughter, Vickie started CTC in the summer of 2007. She chose the school after being blown away with Blaszk.

The executive director asked what Vickie liked to do at home and Boll said she is obsessed with Elmo.

“Lauren picked up an Elmo doll and immediately started to engage with Vickie. Lauren expanded on the play and got Vickie to vocalize by making various noises with Elmo,” Boll says. “Vickie’s eye contact was directly on Lauren. She was connected immediately. This had been a very difficult task for Vickie up until this point. Lauren explained the DIR/Floortime method that is used at Celebrate the Children.”

She explained that it utilizes the power of relationships and human connections to help kids communicate, socialize and learn.

“We were hooked,” Boll says. “From this point on CTC was our new home away from home.”

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex developmental disorder related to brain development that impairs the ability to communicate and interact with others.



More than 3.5 million Americans currently live with ASD, and 1 in 68 children are born with a variation of it, so you may certainly know someone on the spectrum.

Many people support the cause by wearing blue on April 2, Autism Awareness Day as Autism Speaks kicks off its yearly campaign, Light It Up Blue to help raise awareness for this important day.

“Individuals with autism may have a different way of thinking about things or expressing themselves but it’s a time to celebrate neurodiversity,” Blaszk says.

“We don’t look at children who have autism or other special needs as having cognitive disorders, we look at it as more of a sensory motor challenge,” Blaszk says.

According to the co-director, it's a very big difference when you're interacting and engaging a child and adapting a curriculum to their individual learning profile and working on their IEP Goals and Objectives.

According to Blaszak, within DIR, there's the developmental approach versus a more behavioral type approach and not to say that one is better than the other.

"I don't believe that they should be so polarized and we actually work at our school to integrate different types of programs that will benefit the child," she says.



The CTC co-director calls 'you've met a child with autism, you've met a child with autism' a true statement.

"Each child is different and when you teach to the label, you don't see the progress in the kids," she says. "You have to really take a look at their individual profile."

The longstanding relationship with the school's team of educators, doctors, etc. has meant so much to the Frick family

"CTC gave us a roadmap, training to reinforce therapies at home, a highly skilled and unbelievably creative staff who are dedicated to expanding each student's unique strengths.

According to Boll, Vickie has progressed tremendously academically.

"My husband and I are not able to help with her math homework because it is well beyond our scope of understanding," she says. "We never thought this would be possible for her when she was diagnosed with autism as a toddler. She wrote a speech for her eighth grade graduation that shows how amazing she is."

Another important piece with DIR is the heavy focus on working with the family and emphasizing their involvement.

"Autism is not a 9 to 3 job and we do a lot of work at the school, not only with parent training and community outreach but parent coaching and making sure we have good relationships with the families," Blaszak says.

"If we're rowing the boat together we're going to get there quicker and if we're not, then we're not," Blaszak tells the parents. "So it's critical that you're involved."

For Mariana Zamora, CTC has been a sanctuary for her family, a home.

“Our son Gabriel [Gabby] does not suffer from autism, he was diagnosed with microcephaly at the age of two,” says Zamora, of Hackettstown. “It means his head is smaller than expected, resulting in a smaller brain causing multiple intellectual disabilities and global developmental delays.”

The executive director says anytime you visit the school, you’re going to see parents and districts there.

“When it comes to the parents — whether they’re coming to observe, coming for training, observing a speech session, they want to learn how to better use a communication device at home,” she says. “We recognize that as a real strength of the program.”

That’s probably why they see a lot of progress in the kids — from the carry over between home and school.

Kim Frick’s 21-year-old son Connor graduated from CTC last June after spending six years as a full-time student.

At the beginning, he really struggled with sustaining any type of shared attention. Early sessions were



spent rolling a ball back and forth with the therapist and she used toys he enjoyed playing with as tools to expand on his very limited ability to engage and close circles of communication.

“The task was complicated by the fact that he was functionally non-verbal,” Frick says. “The therapist was extremely creative and flexible in using a developmental approach to enable him to build a skill set. I often describe him as being born without an operating system, pretty much everything had to be built from the ground up.”

When Blaszak was in grad school, she didn’t know what population she wanted to work with so on a whim she decided to try special needs.

“I had gone into this preschool and it was actually the first public school program in New Jersey that used DIR,” she says. “So Monica (co-founder and executive director, Monica Osgood) had started this program in Mt. Arlington and I had come to work within that program, which is how we met.”

“I don’t know what happened, but it was a whirlwind, within like six months I really took to it, I understood it, it made such sense to me,” Blaszak says. “I became very vested and interested because it was so new.”

At that point no schools did DIR, everyone did only ABA, according to the co-director.

“There was not as much research. People didn’t really believe that it would be beneficial. So it was a cutting edge thing at the time because it was done in a therapeutic setting,” she says.

It was the first time it was really being mainstreamed in educational settings, so that was a new frontier in terms of the educational world.

“Socially Vickie has come leaps and bounds from flapping her hands and ignoring anyone who tried to engage with her to having many friends at school whom she socializes with on the weekends,” Boll says.

At the time, Blaszak and Osgood worked as behavioral consultants to public school districts in New Jersey and New York and with child study teams and teachers to integrate DIR into the public schools.



“People were just eating it up and more people wanted it,” Blaszak says. “I think when you’re a parent of a child with special needs and you know your child the best — you’re only given one way to teach your child. For some kids that will work but maybe for my kid it’s not working or I need something different.”

Zamora says their journey has been full of obstacles and uphill battles. After they received Gabby’s diagnosis they felt lost and confused, bouncing from one specialist to the

next without any concrete answers.

CTC has given them hope for a better future for their eight-year-old.

“He is cherished, loved and accepted for who he is, encouraged to rejoice in the fact that being different makes him unique and special,” Zamora says. “We have seen him become more verbal and independent in his daily living skills. Their expectations are high when it comes to his progress so it makes him feel capable and empowers him to be better each day.”

According to Blaszak, as a parent you should have a choice. That thought process was a vehicle for them to say, ‘we see the need, there are so many kids being diagnosed.’ They couldn’t keep up with all the consultant work and started to consider if they could open a school.

And the rest is history.

“It took us two and a half years; we were the first DIR school to open in New Jersey,” Blaszak says. “It was a lot of work but so worth it. That’s probably why we’ve continued to grow. It’s very specialized but also an opportunity for parents who have tried other things or want to move in a different direction to have that option.”

Throughout Connor’s life he continued to work on developmentally relevant goals.

“Now that he has graduated it is really satisfying to see the skills have ‘stuck’ and he is employing them in the community at large. He is engaged, social and generally very happy,” Frick says.

And the school tries to maintain very good relationships with the sending districts and they’re always available for training and support.

“We take great pride in transitioning kids back to district, so every year we have a few kids who go back into their mainstream, home district and that is the goal,” Blaszak says. “We’ve been very fortunate that we’ve been able to open the school and we’re in the position we are now.”

When Boll and Vickie go food shopping, sometimes the hustle and bustle of the store can exacerbate her autistic symptoms.

“People stare. Not just children, but adults too,” Boll says, adding that Vickie asked her to tell them she is smart.

“They look at me like I am stupid,” Vickie says. “Tell them I can do algebra. Tell them to say hi to me. I am a fierce friend they would want to have. Tell them mom.”

At the end of the day, Boll wants people with autism to be respected by everyone.

“Not just their families, friends or teachers,” she says. “They want to be seen by all people as the awesome individuals they are.”