

[PEDIATRICS]

# Children at Play

## Family-oriented Pennsylvania facility gets back to the basics

By Rob Senior

**THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE CORPORATE WORLD IN THE 21ST** century makes juggling a career and a family quite a challenge for many professionals. So when Lisa Mackell, MPT, of West Chester, PA, a mother of two, decided to start her own business, one of her main concerns was creating a company in which working mothers would be not only welcome but encouraged to find a balance between their family lives and careers.

Since then, Theraplay Inc. has grown both in size and in number of locations—but Mackell has never lost sight of her initial vision. Last year, Theraplay was named one of the top-25 companies in the nation for working mothers.

The family-oriented approach to business is exhibited throughout the Theraplay institution. Mackell serves as president and co-owner and was joined in 2003 by her husband Steve, Theraplay's chief operating officer. Mackell's mother, Marcy Moyer, has been her office manager from the outset of the company. "Our entire family is invested in the company," Mackell said.

### Getting a Start

Depending on their diagnoses, Mackell said Theraplay will see patients up to age 21. Patients can be seen as early as a few days after birth, particularly for conditions such as torticollis, cerebral palsy and Down syndrome.

"We can make progress almost immediately," reasoned Mackell, "so there's no need—or reason—to wait."

Sitting around and waiting has never been Mackell's approach. After graduating from Philadelphia College of Pharmacy & Science (now the University of the Sciences of Philadelphia) in 1988, Mackell waited only three years before starting Theraplay from her home in West Chester. From a spare bedroom in her home, Mackell ran the company, which initially offered physical, occupational and speech therapies to children in their homes, schools or early intervention centers.

"I always knew I wanted to focus on pediatrics," said Mackell. "That was my focus in school."



KYLIE, 11, WORKS WITH LISA MACKELL, MPT, AT THERAPLAY'S LIMERICK LOCATION.

But it wasn't until October 1996 that Theraplay opened its first outpatient rehabilitation center in Malvern, PA—about 40 minutes west of Philadelphia. Offering the same services as the home and school care approach, the center was such a success that it led to the opening of additional locations—Horsham (July 2000); Drexel Hill (April 2004) and Limerick (January 2007). The home office in Malvern has since moved to West Chester, a location that also serves as Theraplay's corporate headquarters.

Despite all this, Mackell still looks to expand and create new locations based on need. For her part, she spends most of her time at the corporate office in West Chester. "I do very little patient care anymore—mostly just because I love the business side so much," she admitted.

But another reason Mackell is able to limit her involvement in patient care is her trust in her management team. "People are able to flourish in the departments they run," she said. "As a manager, my tendency is to be hands-on, while still allowing each person to do his own thing. That strategy has helped us to succeed and grow."

### Business Philosophies

While Theraplay sees patients up to age 21, Mackell said the bulk of patients fall in the 12-and-under category. "We see lots of infants for PT and orthopedic conditions," she explained.

One issue Mackell has encountered is working with insurance companies. Her refusal to yield on one company policy has caused some long, drawn-out battle with providers. "We always bill to insurance," she said. "That's very important to me. I know what we pay, what they pay—I'm not going to change that."

While that policy has won Mackell great appreciation and loyalty from the parents of her patients, it hasn't always been an easy mantra to uphold. Most likely, this is due to the reluctance of other organizations to follow suit. "I had one parent tell me that [his family had]

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gone to another facility,” Mackell recalled. “When they mentioned some difficulties in paying a bill, the therapist advised them to ‘take out a second mortgage—it’s not my problem!’ That’s not going to happen here.”

For two years, Mackell and her staff locked horns with the largest provider in their area. “It was a matter of making them realize that we couldn’t treat four to five people at a time—we had to do everything one-on-one,” she said. “Finally, they relented and gave us a certain rate.”

From a professional standpoint, Mackell has joined several networks, allowing her to make friends with PTs running similar companies. She recently attended a conference in California for female business owners and executives.

‘Children can be shy and have some social issues. Therefore, it serves no purpose to have them see only one person—why limit the customers?’ —Lisa Mackell, MPT

#### Office Work

On a weekly basis, the teams of PTs, OTs, SLP and social workers at the four Theraplay locations field an average of 700 to 800 office visits (cumulatively). Each new facility means more new hires in each department—but Mackell said she finds a good number of her therapists through Theraplay’s sophisticated clinical affiliation program. “Currently, [our clinical affiliations] are booked through 2009,” she said.

Mackell said she hires a good number of students who complete affiliations—somewhat of a rarity in the outpatient treatment field. All she asks is that students take their time at Theraplay seriously, and that they have a legitimate interest in pediatrics.

“I tell them right away, if they’re just applying to fill a requirement so that they can get into sports, it isn’t going to work,” she said. “Those who stay get a full picture of pediatrics—home and school care, as well as outpatient therapy.”

When a patient comes to Theraplay, they are not assigned a particular PT, OT or SLP—rather, they visit with different people on every visit. “That’s part of the philosophy of the team approach,” said Mackell. “Children can be shy and have some social issues. Therefore, it serves no purpose to have them see only one person—why limit the customers?”

Mackell attributes this approach, in part, to the fact that many kids have reached goals at an accelerated rate, and to the low level of burn-out she’s observed in her staff.

Treating different patients all the time also has the effect of staff taking very careful notes and taking notice of every observation, no

matter how small. These notes and observations are taken during therapy, allowing the family to leave with a progress report of sorts for each day.

From a marketing perspective, Mackell said she has formed strong relationships with numerous area pediatricians—to the point that some doctors have been known to call Theraplay for advice on a particularly puzzling patient. “We have a full-time marketing department out there, letting these doctors know what we do,” said Mackell. “Once they see how we can help, we form strong, long-term referral relationships.”

Word is spreading too—Mackell said it isn’t uncommon for families to drive more than an hour for an appointment at Theraplay.

Unfortunately, there is a downside to treating such young patients—which occurs when the tragic end of a life comes all too soon. On the day of our visit, Mackell was preparing to attend the viewing for a young man that evening. While she never gets used to such occurrences, she is consoled by the fact that she and her staff were able to make the patient’s time on earth that much more productive and comfortable. “We like to think that usually, we can ‘fix’ things,” she said.

#### All in a Day’s Work

As previously mentioned, most of Mackell’s work at Theraplay is in the office, not the treatment rooms. But on a recent day, she made an exception to see a particularly endearing patient, Kylie, 11, at the new Limerick location (about an hour from Philadelphia.)

Born with cerebral palsy, Kylie has a natural happy, playful attitude that is rare in some children with disabilities. “She and her family were very instrumental in the opening of this facility,” recalled Mackell. “As a result of that, she comes here one day a week, free of charge, for as long as she wants.”

As Kylie works with Mackell on a simple throw-and-catch game, they chat easily about school and summer vacation plans while Kylie’s mother watches from the side. Not surprisingly, both patient and therapist appear to be having a blast. It is, after all, “Theraplay.” ■

**For more information on Theraplay, visit [www.theraplayinc.com](http://www.theraplayinc.com)**

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