A New Spin on Physical Therapy

It's a phrase as well-worn as a ballerina's slippers, but for Parr Burton's family, it rings true: Sometimes you have to think outside the box.

Eight-year-old Parr has cerebral palsy (CP), a condition in which damage to her brain in utero affected her ability to move. Though she's very bright, Parr has difficulty with speaking, standing, walking and other movements of daily living. This requires countless hours of tedious occupational, speech and physical therapy. But Parr looks forward to physical therapy at Children's thanks to therapist Julie King, who offers a new spin on the routine. Parr and other children with disabilities could gain the benefits of "traditional" rehab by doing what many of us love to do—dance.

Julie and her Children's colleague, Dana Altman, co-founded Dance for Fun, a program where children twirl, plié and boogie—while strengthening their bodies and building confidence.

"We're lucky to have a physical therapist who thinks outside the box," said Beth Burton, Parr's mom. "Julie had treated Parr for two or three years before starting Dance For Fun with Dana. Julie knew that the class would help Parr move her body in ways that are often difficult. And she had a hunch that, by using music and singing, she could get Parr to concentrate and perform certain tasks."

Parr loves the class, and reports that her favorite dance tune is "So Long, Farewell" from "The Sound of Music." She also enjoys performing recitals with her group several times a year.

For Parr, Dance For Fun is simply about fun. But Burton knows it is so much more, and she's grateful that Children's found a way to make her daughter feel less like a patient.

"Anybody that knows Parr will tell you that she has great self-esteem," said Burton. "And I think that comes from doing all the things that other children do. Programs like Dance For Fun make this possible."

Burton benefits from the program as well: In the three years that Parr has been involved, Burton has bonded with the other mothers of participants. "It is often hard to talk about your struggles, even with your closest friends and family. With our group, we understand each other in a way others may not. It is nice to have an outlet to share frustrations as well as triumphs." •



