

the sweet sound of SUCCESS

The saying “every cloud has a silver lining” rang true when Tracey Butler’s understanding of her own son’s listening problems led to a business that could also help other children. **BY GILLIAN CANNING PHOTOGRAPHY SIMONE HANCKEL**

ALL ABOUT TRACEY

WHO: Tracey Butler, 39, is married to Peter Butler, 44, an IT consultant. They have a son, Hayden, four, plus Tracey has three sons from a previous marriage: Matt, 15, and 11-year-old twins Benjamin and Bradley. **LIVES:** Adelaide. **BUSINESS:** Links2Learning uses sound therapy to assist children with learning difficulties. Classical music helps stimulate their central nervous system and allows them to become more “open” to absorbing information. **CAREER:** After studying at the Centre of Performing Arts in Adelaide, Tracey worked with a modern dance company, then as state manager of a greeting card company. **MY BEST DECISION:** Having the courage to train as a sound therapist despite having no formal qualifications in the field. I overcame my lack of confidence and received respect for what I’ve learnt.

★ **WHEN TRACEY BUTLER’S** then five-year-old son Benjamin started school in 2000, she quickly realised something was not quite right. Although his older brother, Matt, and his identical twin, Bradley, were happy and well-adjusted, Benjamin had trouble making friends and hid under the table in the classroom when it got noisy.

Tracey took him to a GP, followed by a paediatrician, an occupational therapist and finally a psychologist, who tested Benjamin and found he had a “superior” IQ. But his behaviour only got worse. In shopping malls, he became agitated and hyperactive, and when he started crying and banging his head on the floor at a school concert, Tracey realised the problem had to do with his ears.

Finally, she consulted an audiologist, who discovered Benjamin had a severe auditory processing disorder.

“She told me he can hear sounds but the pathways that process the information aren’t working properly so his brain can’t make sense of what is heard,” explains Tracey.

Relieved to have discovered the cause of her son’s condition, Tracey immediately asked, “How do we fix it?”

“You don’t,” came the answer. “You sit him at the front of the classroom, have him make eye contact and give him short instructions.”

Tracey knew that with 25 children to look after, Benjamin’s teacher would not have much time to give him special attention.

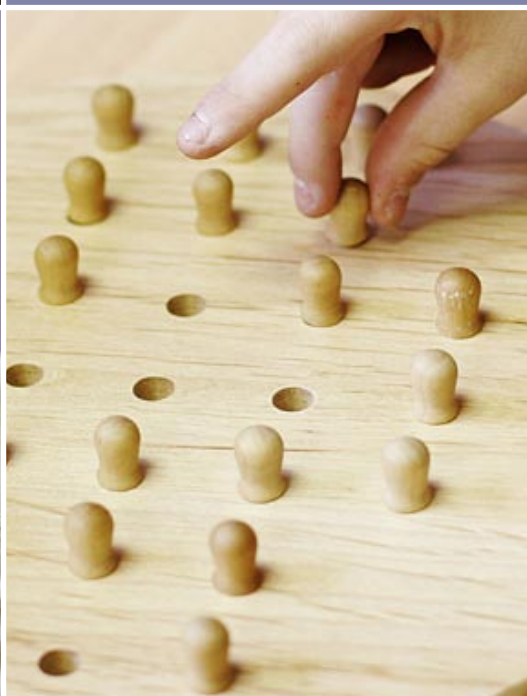


Tracey with her 11-year-old twin boys, Bradley (left) and Benjamin.



TRACEY'S TIPS FOR BALANCING WORK & HOME:

- Good family support is essential. I often start work at 8am, so Peter will do the school run. My mother and Peter's father helped look after my youngest son, Hayden, so I could set up the business.
- You've got to be really organised – I'm very good at planning and have a cleaner and someone to do the ironing. Because I work, my kids are expected to help around the home and they're also learning to cook.
- Be really passionate about what you want to do. If I were to open a business selling ice-cream, I would fail because I'm not that passionate about selling ice-cream. Your business is like another child – it's as demanding as any part of your family.



Instinct told her, too, that he would need more than his teacher's efforts to help him cope with school.

On the internet Tracey read about sound therapy, a treatment devised by a French ENT (ear nose and throat) specialist in the 1950s. The underlying theory was that playing classical music to children would stimulate the brain's auditory pathways and make them more receptive to learning. Dozens of scientific studies supported the program's basis.

Tracey found a centre called Learning Connections in Queensland that treated children like Benjamin. By this time she had a two-month-old baby, Hayden, however she still decided to travel from her Adelaide home to see if any of the information available at the centre might help her son. For the next two weeks, she breastfed Hayden in between attending lectures there.

To Tracey, the program made perfect sense. On her return from Queensland, she discussed with both her husband, Peter, and Benjamin's dad, the possibility of Benjamin undergoing sound therapy.

"I didn't have any great expectations – I just thought we should give it a shot. Frankly, if they'd told me to stand on my head, I would have done it," she says.

Unfortunately, there were no authorised providers in Adelaide who could oversee the listening program to Benjamin.

"In order for Benjamin to benefit, I had to learn how to do it myself," says Tracey. Teaming up with a local teacher who'd also been on the course, she set up Links2Learning in 2002. In order to qualify as a sound therapist, Tracey studied through Advanced Brain Technologies (ABT), a US company offering sound therapy training, and also conducted case studies of three children, one of whom was Benjamin.

After only a week on the program, Benjamin was noticeably more relaxed. As the weeks passed, he started asking more intelligent questions and his schoolwork improved.

At the end of term, Benjamin's teacher told Tracey that his reading age had improved ►

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by just over two grades. She also reported that his self-confidence and concentration had increased, he was speaking more clearly, had made new friends and improved his spelling.

Tracey was astounded at the change in her son. As other parents heard of her achievements, her client list began to grow until she found herself working four days a week, treating children with attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, autism and auditory processing disorders.

With Links2Learning getting off to a good start, Tracey and her business partner at the time rented premises in Adelaide and watched their business grow without even having to place an ad.

“It was real fly-by-the-seat-of-our-pants stuff,” says Tracey. “I believe the key to a successful business is word of mouth. You work with one child and get results – so many people witness that and they know somebody with similar issues who they tell about it.”

While this was happening, Hayden was looked after by his grandparents two days a week. The other two days, he came to work with Tracey.

“I’d feed Hayden in the office and race back to my clients,” she laughs. “It was hard to work with a toddler around, but Hayden was really important to me. As much as I wanted my business to grow and thrive, I also wanted to be a good mum.”

After working with her little clients all day, Tracey would be with her four sons from school pick-up time until bedtime, then stay up late writing reports.

“I would often be working till the early hours. Peter was wonderful – he is my rock. He had to pick up a lot of slack at home; it was never an issue for him. We never had one argument about it. All he would say is, ‘Watch out, you’re going to burn out and not be any use to anyone’.”

After a year in business, Tracey and Peter purchased premises for Links2Learning,

which brought extra responsibility. “When we bought the office, I’d be there painting until 11pm. I was overcommitted and working up to 40 hours a week,” Tracey admits.

She kept it up for two years, but in January 2005, having bought out her business partner seven months earlier, Tracey reassessed her commitment to the business and her family.

“I started to get really tired and decided not to do reports at home any more,” she recalls. She cut her weekly hours back to about 28 and told Peter, “If people have to wait a month to see me, then that’s the way it has to be.”

“I had the attitude that I had a lot to share and I was willing to help people, but not at the cost of my own family. My clients had my 100 per cent attention in school hours. If that didn’t suit people, then I couldn’t help them.”

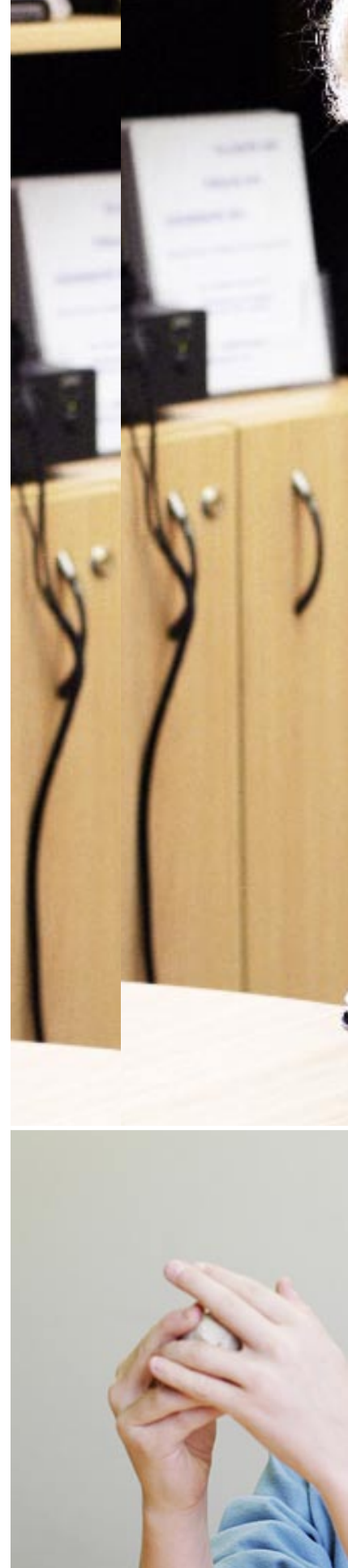
Today, after four years of running Links2Learning and having helped about 1000 children, Tracey is content with the balance she’s struck between work and family.

“With four children and running my own business, I organise things with military precision. However Hayden has been hospitalised three times with pneumonia – no amount of planning can get you through that.”

Her sons, meanwhile, all appreciate what their mum does to help other kids: “The boys will often say to me, ‘It’s really great the way you help all these children.’ I think they’re more compassionate than the average kid.”

All four children assist in the business – Matt, 15, helps his mum set up databases, while the younger children fold newsletters and stamp envelopes.

“If the business fell apart tomorrow, I would be devastated because I love the work and the feedback I get from parents,” Tracey says. “It’s such a rewarding business to be in. I had a little five-year-old autistic boy in this morning who started speaking his first words, which is amazing. It’s exhilarating for me to be able to help somebody in that way. Financially, I’m not doing this to get rich. I’m doing it to change people’s lives.” ■





LEARNING THROUGH FUN

Links2Learning uses music-based auditory stimulation to improve listening problems in children.

The treatment is based on a child listening to a series of specially engineered classical music CDs through headphones, which helps stimulate the brain's auditory pathways. While listening, the child is given games to play, designed to enhance brain development. For more information visit www.links2learning.com.au.