Changing Kids' Lives One Step at a Time

A Day in the Life of Marc Sickel

By Jessica Stockton Clancy

Photo by mbkphoto.com

A child with fragile X syndrome learns how to ride a bicycle and gets to participate in a family bike ride. A boy who dislikes movement and resists exercise becomes a championship wrestler. An autistic girl learns how to throw and catch and becomes uninhibited about joining games with her siblings.

These are just a few of Marc Sickel's success stories.

In 1989 when he founded Fitness for Health in Rockville, Sickel's goal was to design an inspirational program to help children and adolescents overcome their personal obstacles and maximize their potential. His work hasn't just been about athletic achievement, but about what he describes as providing the tools so kids can navigate any situation comfortably. "We could go to a playground right now and if I told you certain things to look for, you could pinpoint those kids that are having trouble," says Sickel. "They're the kids on the outskirts of the field. We want them to enjoy movement and to have that confidence, so they are more encouraged to go in there instead of being an outsider."

Sickel, 49, knows how to connect with kids; both his youthful enthusiasm and non-stop energy help him to captivate his clients. Sporting khaki pants and a blue long-sleeved sport shirt, he immediately engages a child as he walks in the door for a session, "Hey Ben! How are you doing, buddy?" he exclaims.

CUSTOMIZED PROGRAMS

Customizing programs for kids who are all over the spectrum when it comes to motor skills and cognitive development, Sickel has helped clients with attention deficit disorder (ADD), autism and an array of genetic disorders.

He frequently works with kids who are socially inhibited about participating in activities with their peers, those with weight management issues and those whose sole goal is to work on athletic development. "They are all going to leave here feeling successful," he says. When a family contacts him for the first time, Sickel arranges for the parents and child to come in together for a visit. "I want the child to feel like he is part of the decision-making," he says.

On a weekday afternoon, a 6-year-old boy arrives at the colorful fitness center for his session. In addition to his work on gross-motor skills with Sickel,

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he is also working on fine-motor skills with an occupational therapist at school, including tying his shoes, which has recently proved frustrating. Sickel has an idea on how to offer some additional support. After leading the boy to "the glow room," he takes out an enormous men's sneaker (size 18) with white laces. The boy can't help but laugh as he puts the immense shoe on his relatively tiny foot. When the lights in the room are turned out, and a black light is turned on, the boy is thrilled to see the giant shoe and laces glowing in front of him. He eagerly attacks the task of trying to work with the laces, leaving behind his inhibitions about failing.

This same room also houses glow-in-the-dark balls, soccer nets and batting equipment. Kids who are timid about participating in sports, those with body image issues or those who have been teased by others about their skills, are excited to participate in the darkened environment; they stop worrying about "being seen" and are focused on how much fun they are having. "We get the focus to be on those balls, those bats," says Sickel. "Then we introduce the lights again, and they have that motor memory."

THE ROOTS OF THE IDEA

After earning his degree in kinesiology from the University of Maryland, Sickel was inspired to develop a program for which he felt there was a real need. He recalls thinking, "What if we can get these kids to feel like they aren't *really* working on those areas that are difficult for them, but instead they are having the best time of their lives?" After working at the Landon School as an athletic trainer and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute designing exercise programs, he decided to launch his own business working with kids.

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In the early '90s, a few years after starting Fitness for Health, Sickel became a first-time father. His daughter is now 17 and his son is13, and he sees how having his own kids has added another dimension to his work. "It helped me be empathetic on another level," says Sickel. "You get a better appreciation of the challenges and rewards that we all have as parents."

Trying to eliminate any sense of an obvious agenda, Sickel's approach is about coaching kids through their plateaus without the child over-thinking the end goal. "I'm a really big believer in that," he says. Sickel dealt with his own learning, attention and motor challenges as a child, and his firsthand experience helps him tap into an intuition he relies on daily. "The truth is I know what these kids are going through," he says.

His own memories of teachers and coaches who were able to "think outside the box" have shaped one of his major philosophies: The more stimulating the learning process, the more successful the child will be. He vividly remembers his history teacher,at Whitman High School in Bethesda, who included action-packed reenactments of famous battles in the classroom. "If you looked around the room," says Sickel, "there wasn't one kid who wasn't paying attention, because it was fun."

TAKING THE WORK OUT OF WORKOUT

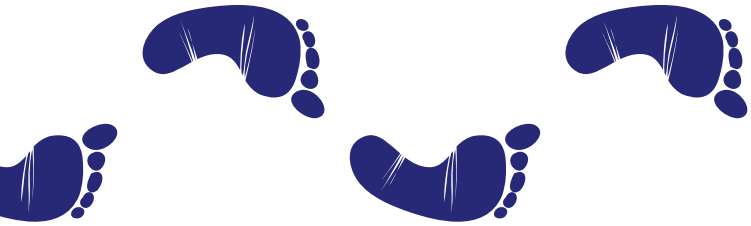
He started with a few pieces of simple equipment and a lot of ideas. Today Sickel uses everything from balls and Frisbees to climbing walls, trampolines and slides, to high-tech machines (called "Exergaming" equipment) that incorporate video technology, flashing lights or audible cues requiring the user to actively move their bodies. He seeks out state-of-the-art equipment at trade shows, some of which has been designed to train race car drivers, tennis players or martial arts masters.

His creative approach has helped kids with their visual-processing skills, problem solving, kinesthetic awareness and motor skills, and they usually forget all about the intensity of their workout. "You have skewed their perception of how hard they are working," says Sickel.

If a kid is into Disney characters or Beanie Babies, Sickel integrates toys or laminated flash cards into the exercises, sometimes sticking them onto a climbing wall for a kid to retrieve. "Before you know it, they are going across that wall and not even thinking about it," he says.

BRINGING THE LEARNING IN AND TAKING IT OUT INTO THE COMMUNITY

These same techniques—integrating flash cards and using playful learning drills that focus on anything from spelling and vocabulary to math skills—have become part of a new program Sickel devised called Tutoring Through Movement. Parents like Karen Hammerman of Rockville have seen great results. All three of her sons, now 18, 16 and 11, have worked on their athletic development goals at Fitness for Health, and her youngest, Jason, also comes for Hebrew tutoring. "My son comes out red-faced,



sweaty, wet hair sticking up—and he has just had the best hour of his life," says Hammerman.

She first learned of Sickel after hearing him speak at a school dinner where he was being honored eight years ago. She immediately knew he understood children. "He just got it," says Hammerman. "He said if kids have a positive experience and feel confident, they take that with them out into the world and use it in other parts of their lives."

Nearly two years ago, local educators approached Sickel about bringing his philosophy into the community. Now Sickel and his project director Julie Schumacher, along with his team of trainers, go into independent schools, public schools and special needs schools to help design customized programs based on the schools' needs. The programs include physical education programs, recess initiatives, field days and other community outreach programs. Among the many benefits, kids learn team-building skills (working together to reach a common goal), and the carefully planned activities reinforce cognitive learning. "I'm really proud of the fact that we work with every type of school," says Sickel. "From schools where you have kids at one level to those with kids at the opposite end of the spectrum, we are able to meet all those needs."

CHANGING LIVES

Having worked with kids for so long, it isn't uncommon to run into former clients who are now adults. Sickel is moved by how their lives have taken shape, and he is humbled when they tell him they will never forget him. He recently received a letter from a man, now 25, who he worked with for six years during his adolescence. Emotional issues exacerbated his challenges with poor motor skills, and the letter acknowledged how important Sickel was to his personal growth. "Thanks for not giving up on me," he wrote.

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Parents often have tears in their eyes as they relay their stories:

"My son finally made it to first base in a baseball game and felt like he was part of the team," or, "For the first time ever, my daughter went outside to play with the neighborhood kids."

Some call him a miracle worker.

"That's very kind," says Sickel. "But I just try to help facilitate this work. These kids all have the ability, and sometimes we just need to come at it a different way."

Jessica Stockton Clancy is a mother and freelance writer. She grew up in New York City, lived in Detroit and Los Angeles while working in the film industry and now calls Washington home. Jessica is an instructor for The Momoir Project (themomoirproject.com) and teaches workshops and classes to inspire mothers to write their own first-person stories.