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Shape up!

by *Clara Engel*

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When you have an idea, run with it. That's what occupational therapist and inventor Elisabeth Wharton did when she came up with products to help special needs and typical preschool children develop their motor and visual spatial-perceptual skills.

"These children are learning basic geometry, coloring, labeling and what shapes are," says Wharton. "It's pre-math and pre-science, and it also helps with developing pre-writing skills, language, and fine-motor coordination, too."

With 20 years of experience as an Occupational Therapist and more than 16 years teaching children in Toledo Public Schools, Wharton has seen a lot of children through the integral early stages of development and education. Over the years, she noticed a lack of tools, support, and resources to help special needs children with basic motor skills and elementary activities, such as cutting and tracing. "I really don't know why no one came up with this idea sooner," she says. After searching for tools that could assist her students in learning these skills without success, Wharton decided to create her own. Developing the concepts was easy, but manufacturing them was the next step. She turned to her husband, a nuclear engineer.

As with any invention, test samples and prototypes were developed, discarded and expanded upon until the Whartons had created their signature "Cuttables" and "Traceables."

Cuttables, designed to help children cut out shapes and patterns to aid in the development of motor skills, depth perception, and hand-eye coordination, are two identical plastic shapes with magnets that children can place on either side of a piece of paper. Once positioned so the magnets line up, children can use the Cuttables as a cutting guide without having to keep the piece of paper in place, or worry about under-or over-cutting. "They can simply follow along the shapes of the Cuttables, and they'll have a circle or a triangle or a square," says Wharton. "Even blind children can use Cuttables to make the shapes and art that everyone else in their class is making."

Similarly, Traceables are tracing aids that allow children to trace all the way around a shape with their pencil, crayon or marker. Traceables have thicker edges and external handles that make it easy for any young child to hold their shapes in place on paper and draw all the way around them without having to reposition their hands or concentrating on keeping the paper and tools perfectly aligned.

"It helps eliminate the frustration that a lot of children experience when they have one idea of how they'd like their picture to look, and then see what their picture actually looks like," says Wharton. When her autistic, blind, special needs and even typical preschoolers have had to juggle the paper, pencil, scissors or stencil, she says it's easy to tell by the look on their faces that they're disappointed, and to a child, these are the things that matter. "Some of my students just refused to participate in projects because they knew it wouldn't turn out like they wanted."

Convinced that these products could assist other teachers, the Whartons began to research mass production and how to market their product. In 2008, they teamed up with the Regional Growth Partnership, which assists local companies looking to grow in Northwest Ohio and Creatable Learning Concepts, LLC was born.

"We've had a lot of help working with them," says Wharton about the organization. "This process is daunting and expensive, but it's worth it and they've been wonderful helping us develop and share these products."

The Whartons and the Regional Growth Partnership have been marketing and selling their products at the local,

national, and even international level since spring 2009. "We're helping [children] express what they want to learn ... it's a different way of teaching that is attractive to all students," Wharton says. "It's been a lot of work, but it's well worth it to see my students create art and projects that they couldn't have before."

Interested in Cuttables, Traceables, and the ideas of Elisabeth Wharton and the Regional Growth Partnership? Just visit www.CreatableLearningConcepts.com or call 419-873-5991.

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