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THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2008

The Traveling Orthotist

When Shiloh Richardson was 4 years old, doctors told his mother to "buy a casket and write his eulogy." Shiloh's cerebral palsy (CP) was so profound that he would never walk, they said — which would mean atrophied muscles, constipation, poor circulation, fluid-filled lungs, and a host of other problems that would eventually kill him. And until he was 11, it was going that way.

Now Shiloh walks — even runs — and his doctors say he may outlive his mother. The difference? A funny-looking device called the TAOS Walker, a recent invention of South Florida orthotist Peter Bukacheski and his team.



Bukacheski, who for the last 20-odd years has built and fit orthotics and prosthetics for children with a bevy of physical disabilities, has dozens of stories like Shiloh's. For a little over a year he has been using the TAOS Walker to help children with CP — a crippling physical disability caused by damage to the brain's motor control centers due to a lack of oxygen in the womb or at birth — take their first steps.

ABOUT THIS BLOG

Rachael Joyner is a former *Sun-Sentinel* reporter and Lindsay Moore is a current *Forum* photographer who were so moved by the story of the TAOS Walker that they decided to cover it on their own time. So far, no other media outlets have done anything on this amazing device with an unusual story — eccentric orthotist helps children with cerebral palsy "walk" for the first time.

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BLOG ARCHIVE

- ▼ 2008 (3)
 - ▼ November (3)
 - [The Traveling Orthotist](#)
 - [Botox Therapy?](#)
 - [Baby Steps](#)

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“Parents get pretty emotional when they see their wheelchair-bound 12-year-old, who has never walked on his own, take steps,” said Bukacheski, as he walked through a small office on a Sunday in August, preparing for an 8 a.m. appointment. He was adjusting a TAOS Walker that belonged to a 7-year-old blonde with a severe case of CP.

Bukacheski is just how you’d picture an absent-minded inventor — coke-bottle glasses, an unkempt mop of thick white hair atop his head and a stream of overlapping thoughts proceeding from his mouth.

“This isn’t my office,” Bukacheski said with a chuckle in his Canadian accent. “I guess you could say I’m a traveling orthodist. My office is a big white van.”

Bukacheski travels from house to house fitting his patients, a lot of times on weekends. “It’s just easier that way,” he says. “These parents already have a dozen doctor appointments a week.”

The whole thing sounds too good to be true, but dozens of parents of children with CP throughout Palm Beach and Broward counties say that Bukacheski and the TAOS Walker are better than the hype — they changed their child’s life. Just ask Shiloh and his mom.

POSTED BY RJOYNER AT 6:55 AM 0 COMMENTS

Botox Therapy?

Every inch of available wall space was lined with equipment — walkers, wheelchairs, and several other funny-looking contraptions that help kids stand and walk.

The therapists are about the only people in the building not strapped into some kind of chair or therapy device at the ARC School for children with physical and mental disabilities in Boca Raton. While the children — about 15, ages 3 to 9 — spend some of their day doing regular school activities such as lunchtime and story time, much of their day is spent doing different types of therapy.



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The newest device to be added to the ARC School's therapeutic arsenal: the TAOS Walker. On a recent Tuesday, two young students used them for the first time. Though some of the therapists were skeptical of the lanky-looking device, Jodi Brooks, a physical therapist assistant at the school, was intrigued.

She wondered if the TAOS Walker's reputation as being "a lot simpler than other therapy devices out there" was true. If it is, parents could be in for a relief, she said.



"It can be kind of endless, the types of therapy out there," Brooks says. "Parents get pulled in three different directions all the time. Their doctor is telling them one thing and the therapist is saying something else. Right now there is no golden ticket therapy."

Not only do parents have to find the right therapy tool, but they also have to find one they will actually have time to use. "If a device takes a lot of time to set up and their kids aren't getting much out of it, they won't bother with it," Brooks says.

That is not to say parents don't try though. Most go great lengths to make their kids better — to help them walk. They try everything from the common gait trainer or stander, two devices that help the children practice weight-bearing, to the more experimental hyperbaric chamber or Botox injections in their child's legs. Yes, you read that right — Botox injections.

POSTED BY RJOYNER AT 6:27 AM 0 COMMENTS

Baby Steps

Frankie Toscano was diagnosed with cerebral palsy (CP) when she was 4 months old. Her twin sister died during childbirth and in the process blocked all the oxygen to Frankie's brain, causing CP.



The first doctor Frankie's parents brought her to said she would live the rest of her life "in a vegetable state." Frankie wouldn't grow, she wouldn't talk or walk and she would have to get a feeding tube surgically implanted in her chest because she couldn't swallow.

Not only is Frankie, now 4, sitting up and eating with a little help. Her mother, Jennifer Toscano, thinks she will eventually walk with the

help of the TAOS Walker. After about a week of using it, she says her daughter has already made progress.

"She holds her head up really well on good days. I've also noticed that she's trying to stand in her wheelchair a lot now."



It doesn't sound like much, but, as Toscano explains, therapy for children with CP is all about baby steps.

And patience.

With two other children — Anthony, 1, and Giana, 6 — Toscano's life is all about juggling. In addition to school every day, Frankie has physical therapy three times a week and dozens of doctor appointments — she has seven doctors right now. On top of that Toscano has to make sure Giana gets to and from school and keep a constant eye on Anthony, who “loves to get into everything,” she says.



“It’s always like this – running from one kid to another,” she says, jumping up to grab Anthony who was climbing on the walker with one of Frankie’s foot supports in his mouth. “I actually got to stay in bed until 7 a.m. this morning, which was nice.”

No, she wasn’t being sarcastic.

With her busy schedule, Toscano doesn’t have much time for dozens of different therapies. “The TAOS is the easiest thing I’ve ever had,” she says. “Maybe we will actually find the time to use this.”

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