

# Making Another Jump

BY CARRIE MACMILLAN | REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Forty-four years ago, Catherine Risigo was kicked out of a ballet class. The expulsion — blamed on the then-4-year-old's clumsiness and lack of attention — still stings, but it turned out to be a lifelong lesson.

In elementary school, Risigo was placed in remedial reading classes. Her high school guidance counselor told her she wasn't college material. Risigo, now 48, wasn't officially diagnosed with ADHD until she was an adult. By then, she had already made a career out of ensuring kids of all abilities get the help and support they need.

Today, Risigo is the chief executive officer and owner of Oakville-based Therapy Unlimited. The company's Family Junction program, which encompasses youths from birth to age 3, is the state's first daycare accessible to children with special needs. Its Jumpstart Therapy & Fitness



Network is a center that provides playgroups, fitness classes and sports readiness for kids of all abilities.

For some children, Jumpstart, housed in a refurbished factory adjacent to World Gym, is a place for occupational, physical, speech and behavioral therapy. For others, it's a place to play.

About five years ago, Risigo was working with a child who had been kicked out of a dance class. Remembering her own experience, Risigo knew she wanted to add dance to Jumpstart's roster. Starting Friday, Jumpstart kicks off two eight-week dance sessions: one featuring genres including tap, jazz and ballet for ages 4 to 6, and another called Zumbatomic, a dance-fitness program for ages 4 to 12.

Classes are designed to help kids with focus, attention and motor-skill challenges that would not normally thrive in a traditional, large setting. Although the sessions had not officially started, two weeks ago, a half-dozen kids were led through a class. They hopped from one circle mat to another, twirling long ribbons in the air.

Along the way, Jumpstart employees and the dance instructor provided individual help to students. One 5-year-old, Katheryn Gallucci of Watertown, initially resisted participation, but got in the spirit once everyone started doing lunges during the warm-up. Wearing a T-shirt that said, "I color outside the lines," Katheryn shouted out her numbers as she did jumping jacks, her blond ponytail bouncing.

Katheryn, Risigo said, began coming to Jumpstart about two months ago. Her mother, Trish Gallucci, said she chose to home-school her daughter because she believed Katheryn, who is hyperactive, would not flourish in kindergarten. .

"She is go-go-go. I drive a school bus and she's up with me at 5 a.m., doesn't take a nap all day and is still bouncing around at 9 or 10 at night," said her mother. "And she is so smart. She figures out

ways around things. She is doing third-grade science and second-grade reading. A lot of people told me, 'Oh, she's just high-spirited, but I knew something was off.'"

Katheryn's pediatrician referred her to Risigo. She now comes to Jumpstart for therapy sessions twice a week and playgroup every day.

"She's starting to focus better and is not as easily distracted," Gallucci said.

At Jumpstart, each piece of equipment in the 2,500-square-foot space has a purpose, whether it's how the swing moves in circles and makes kids develop core strength, or the drawbridge that encourages balance. The "castle room" features dungeons and tunnels to play in, as well as a zip line and floor-to-ceiling fake tree for kids to practice climbing. The fantasy-style element of the castle lets them act out games

"So they have a blast, but they are learning and doing so much," said Joline Douglas, program director at Jumpstart. "We have a speech pathologist come every Wednesday and she can check how children are doing. If you have a gut feeling about something, but don't want to make an appointment with your pediatrician, we have caught a lot of stuff that helps kids start school better."

Playgroups, which are for ages 3 months to 6 years, can be for kids looking to have fun in an indoor gym setting, or they are used as a part of therapy programs provided by Risigo and her staff.

"I see things through a kid's eyes," said Risigo, a tall, well-dressed woman with long, wavy brown hair and rectangular-framed glasses. "I know what it's like to be bad at sports and never picked for teams. And so many kids are not doing sports these days. ... I had one boy who wanted to play football but he couldn't do jumping jacks. I'm here to get them to use their motor skills, get fit, and have fun. It's not about building Olympic athletes."

Not all kids even have a diagnosis. They just might need a little extra help, Risigo explained.

"Fitness is for life, therapy is short-term," said Risigo, speaking in her rapid-fire delivery.

Risigo, who is divorced, is raising three teenage children, and has two international high school students living in her Watertown home, as well as a foster child. How does she keep up with running a company and six kids?

"I stay focused by being so busy," she said. "No one is surprised to get e-mails from me at 2 in the morning."

Recognizing her tendency to get overwhelmed with too many decisions, she has implemented processes in her day-to-day life to make things easier, including arranging her closet in a way that includes color-coding.

Risigo grew up in Wolcott and graduated from Holy Cross High School in Waterbury. She obtained her bachelor's in occupational therapy from Quinnipiac University, and later, her master's in nutrition from the University of Bridgeport. She worked in schools as a therapist before starting her own practice in 1987.

The impetus for Jumpstart came when insurance companies would not cover more than one weekly therapy session for children.

"A weekly visit was just not enough for kids to see a difference," Risigo said, explaining that playgroups, exercise and dance classes allow kids to get extra help. Plus, it's a way to combat childhood obesity and have children get fit and toned. Ideally, parents are working out at the gym and setting a good example, she said.