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LET THE BATTLE START

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HELPING OTHERS

MOTHER TURNS HER EXPERIENCES INTO A BUSINESS - PAGE 24

News

Fairfax Community Newspapers

Pictures grant a voice

Ferntree Gully mother Wendy Haag-Witherden knows the difficulty of communicating with an autistic child. She has found a way to help others, EMMA TYNER reports.

WENDY Haag-Witherden understands frustration.

Two years ago, communicating with her daughter Chelsea, who suffers from autism, was all but impossible.

Just getting her to put her shoes on or understanding what she wanted to eat was a chore.

But last year the family's world was turned around. In June 2003, the Ferntree Gully mother spent a month trying to teach Chelsea to communicate, using pictures.

"It was one of the worst months of my life. Chelsea just hated it, because it was change."

But at 6.30 one morning, her hard work finally paid off.

"She came to me in bed and brought with her a picture of choc bits and handed it to me and then just looked at me. I said to her 'choc bits' and flew out of bed and into the kitchen; my feet didn't even touch the floor and I gave Chelsea her choc bits. She lived on them and ice-cream for the next two weeks."

Wendy then spent countless hours photographing and laminating hundreds of objects and places to help Chelsea.

The photos have now become her way of communicating.

"Chelsea has a folder with hundreds of pictures to give her the words and



Here's how: Wendy and her daughter Chelsea using some of the aids.

ability to communicate, which she would not otherwise have."

From her hard work of compiling the photos, Wendy is now turning her experience into a business that she hopes will help other families who have children with communication problems.

Called Chelsea's Challenges, the business is about creating a range of visual aids tailored to each individual's needs.

"After many months of heartache, stress and sleepless nights setting up Chelsea's visual aids and hearing what other parents in my group were going through I started to do a bit of star gazing," Wendy said.

Putting pen to paper, she mapped her ideas and made her debut into small business.

Using information from specialist staff working with each child, she goes into the child's home or kinder and photographs objects to create an array of visual products for the child to use.

"If there is a family who needs these things, who doesn't have the time to go

in and do it, I can," she said. She said she saw herself as a "stress reliever" for the families of children with special needs.

"I know what it's like. I've been there and done that."

"I have been told that I'm mad; how am I going to start something like this and expect to be able to still meet Chelsea and [other daughter] Montana's needs?"

"Supply of visual aids is a service that is badly needed and was not available to me when Chelsea needed it."

"I know there are many families in the same boat, and I am sure it will be of great assistance to families of all children with additional needs."

Wendy's business has already started to make an impression — in an anonymous letter, a parent told the *Journal* about it.

She wrote: "Being a mother of a child with autism I can see just how this will help me, along with many other families who need visual aids and have no way of creating them themselves."

Wendy hopes it might be a legacy she can leave for Chelsea — "something she might be able to take over and continue to use, to help other people just like her; who knows?"

Chelsea is now able to put together sentences with the aids, rather than just single words.

"Being able to communicate has turned Chelsea's, and the family's, world around."

"With this her frustration levels and aggressive behaviour subsided considerably," Wendy said. "It opened up her world so she can tell everybody what she wants, and it's allowed me to show her what we want her to do."



Breakthrough: Wendy Haag-Witherden with some of the visual aids she makes as part of her business.

Pictures: Robert Carey