

An inclusive space for your little monkeys to let loose

Words by Rosalind Tulloch

When we heard about **Gympanzees** and their plan to open the first fully inclusive leisure

centre in Bristol by 2021, it really hammered home the fact that this was to be a UK first. Why is it that in this day and age children with physical, sensory, emotional, behavioural and learning difficulties have nowhere safe and fun to play?

We are constantly reminded of the importance of encouraging children to do exercise and lead a healthy lifestyle, yet if there are no opportunities that include disabled children then how are they supposed to lead healthy and active lives?

Gympanzees founder Stephanie When recognised the need for an inclusive facility that celebrated disabled children and offered sessions that catered to every need, allowing them to participate fully just like any other child. A space for all children to play together, no matter what their abilities, somewhere for parents to relax and socialise, safe in the knowledge that their kids were having a great time playing, making friends and being active.

Steph spoke to PosAbility to tell us about the idea for Gympanzees and how they plan to



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bring her dream to fruition.

"I am a physio for disabled children and I have a private practice. I was trying to work out how to provide my services without people having to see me because I was getting overrun with referrals. So I was trying to think how I could get my children out into the community so that my clients were out in the community doing exercise that way and when I started taking clients round to various places like softplays and climbing walls and gyms, nothing was working. So I started looking into what there actually was out there and it turns out there is incredibly little.

"The research we did actually matches the national research that says that 84% of disabled children can't access leisure facilities. Obviously that is a crazy number and I was hearing over and over from families that this was a big and important part of their lives because it meant that they were stuck at home because they weren't able to go swimming or

to the park or to ballet - all the things that you take for granted with other children.

"So it kind of started there and it has grown and expanded into what we are now planning which is a leisure centre - an inclusive leisure centre. It will be open to everyone but it will be fully inclusive for all children with disabilities. It will have all the right equipment and the right environment but also sessions that are specifically tailored for children with physical needs or children with behavioural needs or sensory needs so that everyone has somewhere to go, like you would go to your average trampoline park or your average softplay, so it's not just an hour here or an hour there, people can come seven days a week, 11 hours a day just like any other leisure centre."

A fantastic idea, but something that Stephanie was well aware would take a lot of hard work and funding to get off the ground. As it is a UK first there has been nothing to compare it to and no working business model

to look at for viability. With this in mind, Stephanie decided to plan a pop-up centre over the summer holidays this year to assess the need for something like this.

They rented out Emerson's Green Primary School in Bristol for four weeks and transformed it into an inclusive leisure centre.

"We rented out a school and basically set up five indoor different play activity areas and trampolines outside with a café and there were different sessions for different children and abilities and siblings and families and groups. We started thinking about that last December and we had to raise £60,000 to do that and we ended up raising £85,000 which was amazing! We had a massive team of volunteers and others who were helping us out, it was an incredible journey really.

"It was a raging success so we have got the proof really we think we need to push it forward."

The feedback from parents and children

was incredibly positive and many had travelled from far and wide just to attend the pop-up.

"It was amazing, we had two interns from Bristol Uni who researched the whole thing so they were asking parents every day and we had feedback forms and got lots of reviews on Facebook and it was all hugely positive. We had one little boy who was on the trampoline with his mum and had his first ever laugh which was incredible.



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We had other parents saying they had come to us three times and that was the only three times that they had left home that whole summer holidays. One parent said there was a difference between her child being tolerated and celebrated but here it was so clear that they were celebrated, which was really touching.

"We ended up having over 1100 bookings over the four weeks, people came from as far as Daunton which is about a two and a half hour

journey and we had someone staying in a hotel so they could come to us two days in a row and that was their summer holiday. Our bookings doubled in the four weeks. It was a huge success and it just shows the massive need that there is."

If you missed out on this summer's pop-up, don't worry as there is another one planned for the Easter holidays and again next summer with the idea that they will continue until the centre is opened, hopefully in 2021. ■



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