

Getting a Chance to Work It Out

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

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In many ways, Ellie Thompson looks like a typical 9-year-old. But Ellie was born with a hole in her heart, has scoliosis, and low muscle tone in her legs, so sometimes she has trouble keeping up with other kids her age.

But thanks to the Work It Out exercise class offered by [OSF HealthCare Children's Hospital of Illinois](#) physical therapists, Ellie is gaining strength – and confidence – and is more active.

"I was just really lazy and didn't want to do it as now I can do more things and am more active at school," said Thompson.

According to therapist Saundi Pugh, "They feel like this is their own thing, because maybe their siblings have other activities they go to and there's not really anything that's theirs. So they get to own it and have it be their special thing."

Work It Out was brought to OSF Children's Hospital by physical therapists Monica Blunier and Saundi Pugh who learned about it while doing continuing education. They had been looking for something to fill the gap for older children who no longer qualify for traditional therapy services but may have trouble keeping up with their typically developing peers.

Kids from 4-to-13 years old with a range of needs – from developmental, like autism, to physical, like spina bifida and cerebral palsy – are paired with a high school student for the six-week class. They work together on things like strengthening, stretching, and activities to get them moving, along with improving the athletes' social interactions with others. It's all cleverly disguised in an hour of fun.

"We try to target on things like if we know a child needs stretching of the hamstrings, we would - as a therapist - know that, so then we would show their mentor how to make sure and do that each week so that they can gain some range of motion or some strength. Usually they're better with their balance by the end of the time, they're able to do more of the activities," explained Pugh.

"I really need to stretch out my leg and I like to do that. We do freeze dance and we jump on balls," added athlete Wren Leman.

5-year-old Wren Leman has cerebral palsy, left side hemiplegia. She and her mentor, Ella, have developed a special bond over the multiple classes they've done together. Ella has seen Wren's coordination get better, and Wren got the opportunity to watch Ella's high school marching band – where she's drumline captain – perform and then visit her and the rest of the band afterwards.

For Ella, who wants to be a nurse, the Work It Out class has been a great opportunity to learn about the struggles some people go through, and how we can all have a positive impact.

"Some of these kids might not get attention and like the normal PE classes, so this is such a great opportunity for them to just keep growing and learning and really know that they're something important to us."

"I think people with my problems and other peoples should come here to get to know what's wrong and help fix or possibly make it easier to do things in life if they come here," said Ellie Thompson.

Both the mentors, who only receive volunteer hours for their time, and therapists will tell you they get as much as the athletes out of the class.

"I like that we get more of the community involved. We're out in the hallway, people see us, see these kids in this work out environment working out, too, and it makes a good statement to the community about everybody needs to be healthy and be involved in something," said Pugh.

While the class is only offered in one location in the fall and spring currently, there is a possibility of it being expanded. To learn more about the program offered through the [pediatric rehabilitation](#) department at OSF Children's Hospital of Illinois, call (309) 655-6961.