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## TARA CUNNINGHAM – RELEASE

**WHILE WORKING AS** a fund-raiser for Down Syndrome Ireland, Tara Cunningham came face-to-face with the frustration that the parents of children with speech problems experience. At a meeting where she was trying to kick off a local fund-raiser, a parent of a little boy with Down syndrome asked her if the fundraising would help get speech therapy for his child. When Cunningham replied that it might in the future, the father told her in no uncertain terms that waiting was not an option for him and stormed out.

Deeply unsettled by this experience, Cunningham wondered what she could do to help. She researched the problem and found that speech therapy provision in Ireland (and globally) has been hampered by huge waiting lists and a shortage of therapists. Irish children requiring speech therapy face a wait of between one and three years for assessment and a further one to two years waiting to start treatment. After that they receive on average just six hours of treatment a year from the HSE.

Not surprisingly, results from this model are not exactly stellar. “I was driving to Cork with my boyfriend and I was giving out about it,” says Cunningham. “He said to me – you’re a smart girl, you figure it out.” She went silent for about two hours, and by the time they got to Cork she had the basics of Release figured out in her head. What is particularly remarkable about this is that someone who had no background in speech therapy could conjure up an approach to the provision of services that is now considered revolutionary.

“Whenever I talked to parents, what struck me was their overwhelming passion. They kept asking me, ‘What can I do to make my child better?’ My feeling was that if you could harness that and teach the parent to help their child, there would be a better outcome.” The Release approach is essentially to “train the trainer” – to increase the therapy time available to children by teaching parents and caregivers the techniques they need to help children overcome speech problems ranging from stammering to severe autism, from Down syndrome to dyspraxia. Instead of six hours a year, using the Release method parents and caregivers can give the child up to 160 hours of speech therapy a year. The results are stunning – since its foundation in 2005, Release has given speech therapy to almost 1,000 children and, says Cunningham, 45 children who were described as “non-verbal” are now speaking.

Cunningham set up Release armed only with her savings, a small grant from Dublin City Enterprise Board and collateral from her partner’s apartment. The organisation needs to raise about €500,000 this year – something she says will be an immense challenge. “I had in my head that I wanted to be a business, not a charity. I don’t believe in the handout mentality. But I also don’t believe that I should make a profit on the backs of parents whose children need therapy. If we ever do make a profit, the money goes back into Release.”

Originally from New Jersey, Cunningham went back to her roots in her efforts to strengthen the company’s methodology and gain credibility. She partnered with the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and several leading universities including New York University and George Washington University. The obvious next step, she says, would be for Release to be appointed as a national service provider in Ireland.

“About 52,000 children need speech therapy in Ireland and only 11,000 get it. If the HSE used us to deliver these services we would eliminate the waiting lists overnight without them spending a single penny,” she says. “Mary Harney and Brian Cowen have been really supportive but we can’t get past the HSE. Work practices would have to change to adopt this model and the unions are too strong when anyone tries to change things. I am not putting down HSE speech therapists, because they are really good at what they do – this is about middle management trying to protect the status quo.”

Ashoka’s involvement means there is now a big push to export the Release model. “We are currently looking at countries that would really benefit from it. Being an Ashoka fellow means that children not yet born in countries I will never visit should benefit from the approach I have developed.”

[www.release.ie](http://www.release.ie)