



The Sunshine Fund Christmas Appeal 2023

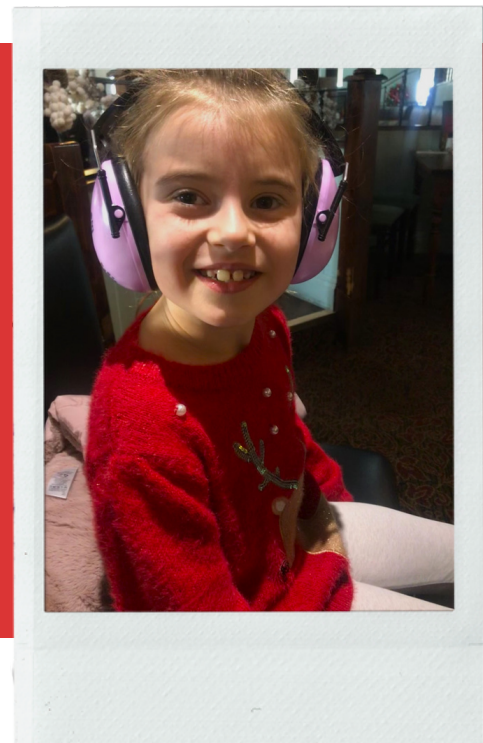
Olivia Hall



There are around **700,000** adults and children living with autism in the UK.

According to research conducted by Newcastle University, **1 in 57** children in the UK are on the autistic spectrum.

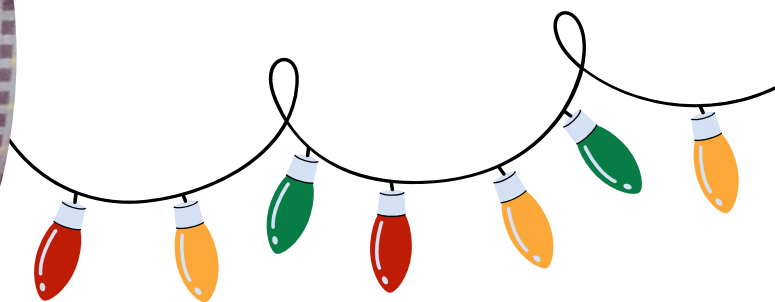
It is estimated that **30%** of children with autism spectrum disorder remain minimally or non-verbal.



Meet 7-year-old Olivia from Gateshead.

Olivia's mam, Jo, describes her as 'adorable, lovable, affectionate, smiley and energetic', and anybody that meets her can see that immediately. She's obsessed with Peppa Pig, loves music, laughing, grazing on food and drinking juice, she hardly ever sits down. She can find other children overwhelming, and is happiest when at home with her family and she finds comfort in her oodie and fleece blankets, which she'll sometimes take to school if she needs it.

Olivia was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at the age of 2, and has a lot of sensory needs. She's a total water baby and loves splashing and swimming in the bath or pool. She loves motion, so enjoys car rides or going on buses or the metro, and she stims a lot by tapping objects. She enjoys the cinema and gets excited about Christmas, but Jo believes this is more about the lights, sounds and feeding off other people's reactions, rather than the event itself. "We enjoy doing lots of things, but have a very different experience to other families", she says.





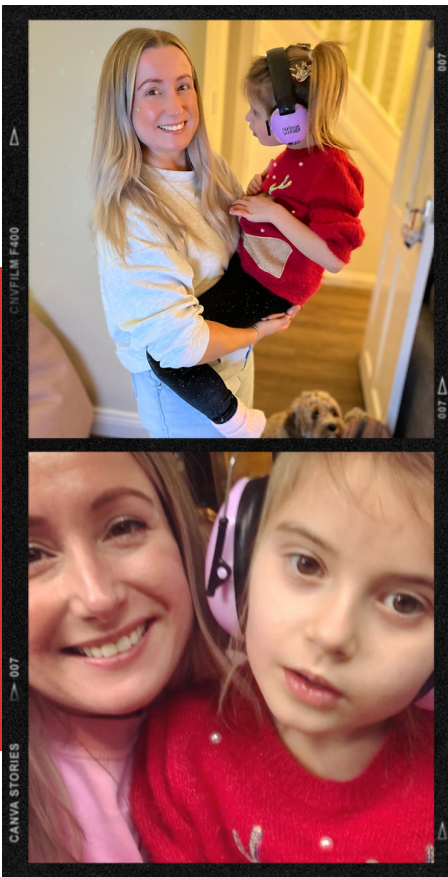
The TiiPii is described as a bed, but it isn't used for sleeping. It provides the sensory stimulation Olivia needs to help her self-regulate, build confidence, focus, concentrate and engage in daily activities, and it encourages her to play more and climb. She has an outdoor swing, climbing frame and a peanut ball that provide her the sensory feedback and she responds really well to vestibular movements.

Her TiiPii provides Olivia a safe space indoors that she can go to when she feels overwhelmed, and allows her to seek these essential movements safely and securely. This is vital for winter months or when the weather is bad, when she can't play outside. Along with her sensory lights, the room has been transformed and provides the perfect area for Olivia to feel comfortable.

When we talk about sensory needs, we often think of the physical side, but for a lot of children like Olivia, this can be emotional, too. She is sensory in her feelings which means she can't switch off, and she is most hyperactive around bedtime. Olivia wears ear defenders in most places to reduce the harshness of sound so she doesn't get distressed, and this has helped Jo to engage her in more activities.

Olivia communicates differently, mostly through touch, and is so gentle and careful with everything she does, which means she always needs a helping hand when balancing on a bike or climbing on to a swing. She'll communicate her needs through various gestures, for example she'll take your hand to her tummy to ask for tickles.





Jo describes her relationship with Olivia as having an “unbreakable bond”. She’s learnt so much about Olivia’s unique ways of communicating and says **“I can more or less read her mind when she looks in my eyes”**. Olivia loves days out with her mam as much as she loves lazy morning cuddles.

“During covid we got our little tourer caravan which stays on a small site in Morpeth. This was a god send for us, as it gave us another place to go to. In the warmer months we would stay there as Olivia could run around in a safe area and we would go to the beach for the day, she loves the waves. She enjoys being altogether in the pull-down bed and we play music and have the sensory lights on. Olivia and the dog take up most of the bed and we get no sleep, but it’s worth it to see her smile!”

- Jo, Olivia’s Mam

At The Sunshine Fund, we celebrate difference, and recognise that each child’s unique traits are what makes them who they are.

However, we also recognise that many children need that additional support, and we acknowledge the daily struggles that parents of children with complex needs face, that many of take for granted. It can be hard knowing the right things to do and the approaches to take when adequate resources and guidance can be hard to find.

There are also financial indifferences for families of children with disabilities as well, as they face on average additional monthly costs of £260, but this can be as high as £1000. Using kids toys as an example, those that are labelled ‘SEN-friendly’ generally cost much more than generic toys, but for many children like Olivia, standard toys just aren’t appropriate, and many parents find themselves buying them only for them to not be used as they don’t meet their child’s needs.

Jo is determined to get therapy to help Olivia, but she is on a long waiting list to get the help they feel she needs. They were recently told by professionals that Olivia also has a learning disability, which makes simple tasks very difficult for her to learn. This is what the family need to focus on most at the minute.

However, as Jo told us, she will never give up on her daughter; she says that it sometimes feels like it’s “us against the world”. The family have put in so much work to help Olivia progress, and over the years she has come such a long way. For example, before her diagnosis, the family were concerned that she wasn’t walking, but she skipped the crawling stage and was walking by the age of 2. Over time she has learnt to make great eye contact, and she has learnt that she needs to apply more pressure when pressing things, something that wasn’t instinctual due to her gentleness, and she attends a weekly dance class which means being around lots of other children, something the family could have never imagined before. She may take a little longer to get there, but with faith, resilience and the correct support, the family are determined to help Olivia reach her full potential.



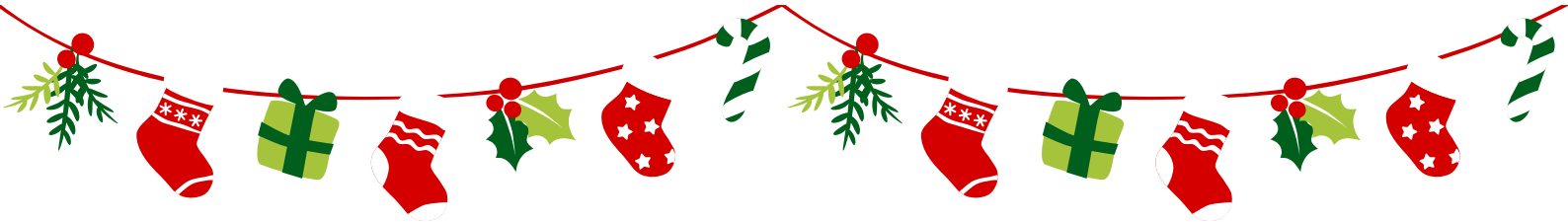
Too often we hear of families being told that things won't change, or their child won't progress, but we know from seeing it firsthand how untrue this is. An item of specialist equipment can make such a difference to families, and it can open the door to brand new opportunities, and be that stepping stone to developing and progressing their skills, which is where we come in...

"I'm always recommending the charity; we've gained lots from our experience. Not just from the equipment Olivia received, but from the team/support. We come along to events whenever possible, everyone is always very welcoming and so much effort is made for the children. You all do an amazing job, and it's such a worthy charity. Special needs toys and equipment are so expensive, children just wouldn't have access to these items if it wasn't for you."

Over the Summer, Jo organised a fantastic charity BBQ to raise donations for our charity, which was attended by our Family Co-ordinator Bev. The team put so much effort in and managed to raise over £1000!

Bev said ***"this was an incredible amount that has gone a long way in helping us to provide more children in our region with the specialist and adapted equipment they desperately need, but can't access through the NHS or local authorities, or simply can't afford."***

It's support like this that The Sunshine Fund relies on; as a small charity that receives zero statutory funding, we can't do what we do without the generosity of Chronicle readers. So please, if you can spare anything this Christmas, donate to our charity and help us prove that all children can reach their full potential, they sometimes just need a helping hand.



How you can help... Your Gift to Us

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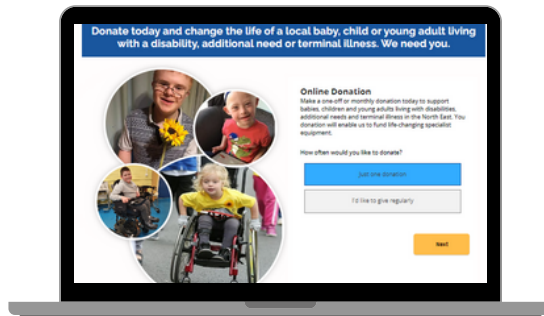


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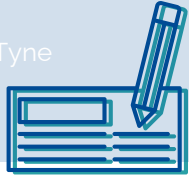


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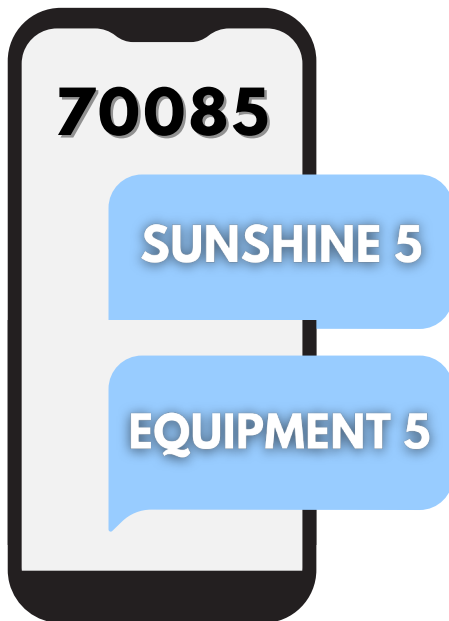


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Text **SUNSHINE 5** to **70085** to make a **one-off donation of £5**.

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