

## Welcome to the visitor's center

Our daughter, Mary, was born seven weeks early, endured two surgeries in her first four weeks of life AND she had Down syndrome! She spent a total of six weeks in the NICU of Saint Barnabas Hospital, which despite the medical difficulties proved to be a positive, supportive place. But then, as all families do, we had to take her home...with us!! We thought, "What do we do now?"

Even though we did not live in Essex County at the time of our daughter's birth, we were given the information for Stepping Stones as the "only place to go". We knew nothing of Early Intervention or all the necessary therapies that have done so much to make our daughter strong. I know exactly what outfit she was wearing the first day we came to the school to start the summer program—the experience of being in a room with five other families was overwhelming and comfortable at the same time. Here was finally the place to find people in the same boat, people rowing ahead of us, and people along the way with lifejackets, a "how-to manual", and lots of snacks to keep up our energy. In the context of "Welcome to Holland", Stepping Stones has been the most incredible Visitor's Center that we could ever have hoped for.

Mary has always amazed us with her ability, not her disability. She rolled over, she sat up, she crawled (in a funny way!), and she walked. Now she runs, jumps, does flips on a trapeze, and plays soccer. Mary writes her name, our names, her brothers' names, and she writes sentences. She took piano lessons. She eats different foods somewhat cleanly (she's never met a chocolate ice cream cone that hasn't been worn), and she tells us stories. Without the Physical, Occupational, and Speech Therapists at Stepping Stones, she would have done these things, but she may not have done them as well and we may not have known how to help her.

Mary transitioned easily to the Stepping Stones School program and stayed for the entire pre-school program. Her (award winning) teachers and the volunteers in that class took Mary and our whole family into their care. The individualized academic program and the focus on socialization, as well as the continued therapies have prepared Mary for a successful transition to our neighborhood elementary school.

We feel strongly that attending EI at Stepping Stones and transitioning to the school were the best choices for Mary. One piece of advice that we would feel comfortable sharing is that the bottom line is, "Do what is best for *your* child". Being in a boat with the experts, teachers, resources, and families most familiar with our situation turned out to be the best start for our journey and could be for yours too.