

DAILY NEWS

50¢

NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

nydailynews.com

BIG TOWN BIG HEART

CELEBRATING NEW YORKERS WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

BY JOSHUA M. BERNSTEIN

IT'S A SOGGY WEEKDAY morning and, on the 10th floor of a creaky Union Square office building, Richard Ellenson has a problem.

"I'm so close to my son, Thomas," the married, 50-year-old upper East Sider says about his 8-year-old, "that he gave me pink eye. I just had to give him a hug."

It's hard to fault Ellenson, boyish in his rumpled white pants, chunky black glasses and tousled, salt-and-pepper hair. He loves his wife, Lora, daughter, Tait, 3, and Thomas, a whip-smart, soon-to-be third-grader with a sunshine smile.

But while other kids dangle from monkey bars, cerebral palsy confines Thomas to his wheelchair. The disability short-circuits his muscular movement and speech, leaving his highly functioning brain in a malfunctioning body.

Though Thomas can't run or jump, he has an expressive face and can say "no," "yes" and "Emeril." ("He loves Emeril Lagasse," Ellenson says.) Yet it's difficult for Thomas to express complex thoughts and emotions.

For example, Ellenson says, when Thomas attends school, "he can understand what he is told about, say, oceanography. But how can he say that he knows something is an octopus, a seal or a whale? He can't simply say it, so he would need to spell it on his [speech-generating] machine — but spelling comes after recognizing objects. So he is at a loss unless the symbol is there for him."

But while cerebral palsy may be incurable, Ellenson has found a way to enable his son to significantly overcome his communication disability.

The dad's technology company, Blink Twice, has invented the Tango, a speech-generating device intended to revolutionize assisted communication like the iPod did for portable tunes. Operating the sleek, sparkly white Tango is as simple as pressing a button: Select colorful illustrations symbolizing emotions and actions, and a child's voice, not a robot's, pours from the speakers.

"It's an exciting device developed by someone who understands his child's struggles," says Dr. Vicki Casella, executive director of The Bridge School, a leading learning institution for kids with severe speech and physical impairments. "Richard isn't in it for the money; he's in it to help his son."

The Tango brainstorm struck one frustrating, sleepless night three years ago.

"I was up until 4 a.m. programming Thomas' speech-generating device," Ellenson says in his chummy, conversational tone that can put kids and CEOs at ease.



Thomas Ellenson, 8, uses the Tango as dad Richard looks on.

TALISMAN BROLIN/DAILY NEWS

The programming was pulling-teeth painful. "I called the company's support line. Their response was, 'Oh, we know that's a big problem.' I thought, 'If the company knows about the difficulties and they're not doing anything, someone should.'"

At the time Ellenson toiled in advertising. He handled the Honey Nut Cheerios account and wrote the slogan, "It's not TV. It's HBO." Why not transfer his talent for language to adaptive communication?

VOCAL HERO

Richard Ellenson created a device that lets his disabled son 'speak'

Soon after scrawling on a napkin the first rough sketch of the Tango, Ellenson found a new calling: "My son became my business."

And business, as they say, is booming. The Tango recently rolled off the assembly line, ready to change Thomas' life. The speech machine lets Thomas easily expound on topics ranging from mealtime to homework to, yes, cartoons like *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

Though it's impossible to anticipate every vocal need, the Tango's voice recorder and voice-morphing technology cover every communicational whim — even idiosyncratic New Yorkese. Take, for instance, Thomas and Ellenson's recent Shea Stadium trip.

"If you programmed a device with 'Let's go, Mets!' it

would sound robotic. But with the Tango, I recorded myself saying 'Let's go, Mets!' then morphed it into a kid's voice. Whenever Tom 'cheered,' guys [around us] started clapping like crazy.

"Normally, if several 30-year-old guys saw a kid in a wheelchair, they would feel sadness. Instead," Ellenson says, pride welling in his voice, "they shared our joy. They didn't see a disabled child; they saw a child enjoying a Mets game."

Another time, Thomas and Tait were playing the card game war when the boy noticed that his sister tried to cheat by pulling a card from her discard pile. But "instead of getting angry and not being able to do anything about it, Tom used the Tango to tell Tait, 'You cheated,'" Ellenson says, laughing. "The machine helped her to understand her brother."

But Thomas utilizes the Tango for more than reprimanding his sister. He recently used it to write a poem for school, "allowing Tom to join the world of his peers," his mother says. "With the Tango," she adds, "he can talk with his friends in their language. It gives him the freedom to be a part of the entire world, not just the world that knows him."

To communicate with friends and strangers alike, Thomas has an army of more than 2,000 unique, preprogrammed phrases. By quickly pressing a couple of buttons, he can add his two cents to any situation.

"There's no limit to what Tom can say with the Tango," Ellenson says. "We just put into it, 'Dad, you're really bugging me.' He likes that."

Such utterances are becoming everyday occurrences for Thomas — and soon for speech-challenged kids and adults nationwide.

The Tango will be released this summer, and preorders are "well above projections," according to Ellenson, who prefers to keep actual numbers under wraps. That is no small achievement for a device retailing for more than \$6,000. Thankfully, Medicare and Medicaid offer subsidies, bringing the Tango to people in dire need.

Ellenson glances at his Apple laptop. On the screen, there's a picture of the dad hugging Tait and Thomas, all with grins stretching from ear to ear.

"I feel my life is destined," Ellenson says, smiling sheepishly. "When I left college, my résumé said I wanted to get a job in communications.

"I finally got my job. I've given my son the ability to talk."

For more information on the Tango, visit blinktwice.com.

Do you know a New Yorker who's making a difference? E-mail Big Town Editor Dawn Eden: bigtown@nydailynews.com.

MISSED A BIG TOWN? READ THE ARCHIVE ON THE WEB: NYDAILYNEWS.COM