

LifeStyle

By **Rose Mary Roche**

IRISHWOMAN Marie Dunleavy is a mother, author, computer whizz and one very determined lady.

When her son Daniel, who has Down Syndrome, was three — and frustrated with the available resources to help with his difficulty learning to read — she started to write her own books featuring the POPs Family. What began as a personal project to help her own son has turned into a professional publishing venture that has benefited special needs children in countries as diverse as Scotland, New Zealand, Australia and the US.

Now these wonderful books are available to Irish parents and can be used by any child with special needs, dyslexia, a developmental disability or even children learning English as their second language. This is particularly apt as they are printed in Ireland and also feature the drawings of Irish illustrator, Stella Kearns. Marie — who is based in Edinburgh and has two other children — is extremely excited at the prospect of her work selling in her native country. As she observes: “Seventy per cent of the work is done in Ireland.” Inspired by the rapid progress that Daniel made in both his reading and language skills while using her home-made books, she recalls: “Myself and my mother made a few books, and we thought ‘This is great, this will do us for quite a long time.’ “But really at the end of two weeks he’d read four books and gathered 12 or 13 new words.” Marie was even further encouraged when Daniel’s teacher started using the books in her class for other children too.

The POPs Family features a mother and father, their children, Ben, Don, Millie and Kal (who has Down Syndrome) and the cat, Bella. Marie was especially keen that a positive image of a Down Syndrome child appears in the books; not only to promote their self-confidence and sense of esteem but also to promote the message of inclusion on a wider level too. Marie remembers: “Kal, the youngest little boy, has got Down Syndrome because I wanted Daniel to see himself in literature. She continues: “And he loved that, he loved seeing himself, being the star of his own books.”

Over a two-year period she produced over 100 books for her son, who raced through them at a rate of a title a week. Marie explains: “I used to spend every Sunday... and every Thursday night at it.” She has now



A NEW CHAPTER: Mum Marie Dunleavy reading with Daniel using her colourful POPs story books

Mum's books helped Down Syndrome son learn to read

published 17 books in her Red Elephant Series as a professional venture and has two further series in development. She has ambitious plans to continue publishing until she has completed a comprehensive set of 100 titles and is also planning the release of a CD Rom later in the year.

To this day, Marie claims that there is no other publisher catering to special needs children with a similar product. The books are carefully designed to appeal to special needs children with large, double-spaced text, colourful illustrations, catchy stories, word cards, interactive games and a healthy dose of humour. There is also a particular emphasis on the phonic approach to reading (decoding words through their sounds) which is particularly important as some special needs children, especially those with Down Syndrome, have low normal hearing and a corresponding difficulty in differentiating sounds Daniel has always attended a mainstream school and due to the progress that he has made with the POPs books has integrated successfully



WRITE IDEA: Marie with books she wrote to help son Daniel

with his school peers on both a social and an educational level. Marie enthuses: “It’s given him a lot of self confidence. He knows he can read, he’s a good reader. His self-esteem, I feel, has really benefited from that.” Marie is obviously delighted that her son has been able to fulfil his potential. She is particularly keen to emphasise the important role that reading plays in speech development: “Teaching reading to teach talking is a big plus....It’s one of the good strategies to use.”

The books are now available to order in Ireland from the company’s web-site (www.pops-resources.com)

Down Syndrome Ireland will be holding their fourth annual HB Ice Cream Sunday on Sunday, May 21 next. The day will involve thousands of families, friends and children eating ice-cream at parties all over the country with HB providing the ice cream. All proceeds raised will go towards the ongoing development of the National Resource Centre which provides Early Intervention, Counselling, Health, Education and Independent Living. To register as a host on HB Ice Cream Sunday, please call 1890 37 37 37, log onto www.downsyndrome.ie or pick up a registration form at your local Supervalu store.

Novel approach has given hope to other special needs kids