

# Weesie Pals: Stuffed Animals for Children with Microtia and Atresia

Interview conducted by Lindsay McHutchion

I recently had the pleasure of chatting with Erin Wozniak, an artist and teacher from Canton, Ohio. Erin is a mother of two and the creator of Weesie Pals.

## What is a Weesie Pal?

A Weesie Pal is a stuffed animal with microtia that comes with its own BAHA. They're hand embroidered and about 21" long. I've made a cat, dog, mouse, lamb, fox, and a monkey. I am currently designing a green monster for a little boy with Microtia who loves monsters and specifically requested one.

## What was the inspiration behind Weesie Pals?

The inspiration came from my daughter, her name is Elyse, she's two years old and she was born with microtia and atresia of her left ear. We call her Weesie, so that's where the name came from. I wanted to make something for her that would reflect her identity so that she could see herself in it. I also wanted something that would reinforce the daily wearing of her hearing aid. The first one I made for her was a mouse. I never

had any intentions of making these for other children, but I wanted to make her her own stuffed animal that would be special to her and she just loved it. She loved it so much that she literally wouldn't put it down. So I thought, I should try making these for other children, that's how the whole idea came about.

They're really fun to make, I had fun designing them and making them. It's really rewarding when you hear back from families and see the little kids with their stuffed animals.

## Does there seem to be a favorite?

The fox is by far the most popular and then the rest are fairly evenly distributed.

## How many have you made so far?

I've been doing this for about five months now and I'd say I made about 20 so far.



Elyse and her Weesie mouse

## What kind of feedback have you had from other parents that you've made Weesie Pals for?

Everything that I've heard back from parents has been really positive, that their child really loves it. I think what makes me the happiest is when they send me pictures or videos. Just seeing how happy their child looks with their Weesie Pal is very rewarding.



Weesie Pal lamb mouse and cat



*Weesie Pal monkey*

### **Do you hand sew everything?**

I use a machine for most of it and then faces are hand embroidered.

### **As a parent what have you found most helpful in dealing with your daughter's microtia and atresia?**

When she was born we were connected with an organization called Help Me Grow (<http://www.helpmegrow.ohio.gov/>). Once every two months a couple caregivers come out and evaluate her to make sure she's meeting her developmental milestones. An audiologist comes with them too. We're always informed and always know if she's starting to slip in her speech and language skills. We're not in the dark because they're constantly there for us.

Also The Ear Community (<http://earcommunity.com/>) which is an online, non-profit supportive community for individuals with hearing impairment, Microtia and other related conditions. That's been great too; we went to a picnic once hosted by The Ear Community. Just being able to network with people and communicate with other families who are going through the same thing, I think that's been the best. 10% of every Weesie Pal purchase is donated to The Ear Community.



*Elyse and her Weesie cat*

### **What have you found to be challenging so far?**

Honestly, I feel like the biggest challenges are in the future: when she starts to understand that she's different, and when she starts going to school. I think that's going to be the most difficult thing. I don't feel like we've had that many challenges so far, developmentally she's doing great. Honestly I feel like I'm still just so relieved. When she was first born we had some doctors tell us that they thought she might have a couple of different syndromes, and both of them were fatal. That was terrifying but then as time went on we realized she didn't, and then it felt like microtia was no big deal. We are just so thankful. I don't really look at it like we've had that many challenges, I just think that we'll expect that in the future.

### **Tell me a little more about yourself.**

I'm married with two kids, Lana and Elyse, a four and a two year old. I am an artist and an art teacher. I taught high school art for the past five years and next year I'll be teaching 4th and 5th grade so I'm looking forward to that.

I don't have a background in sewing at all, literally nothing. I knew how to stitch something with thread and a needle before this, but this was something I really wanted to do and so I figured out how to do it. I watched YouTube videos, I read things and researched and I probably made three different versions of the Weesie Pals before I revised and perfected it to where it is today.



*Weesie Pal Fox*