



BARC Developmental Services

Noreen Coleman EI Peer Recognition Award

September 2025 Nomination Ballots

Nominee: Joann Kirk
Nominator: Andrea Braccio

I nominate Occupational Therapist, Joann Kirk, for the Noreen Coleman EI Peer Recognition Award. Joann is a talented and dedicated therapist whose passion for supporting children with Sensory Processing Disorders shines through in everything she does. Her compassion, creativity, and persistence make her not only an outstanding occupational therapist, but also an incredible coach and partner to families and peers.

While occupational therapy is often thought of in terms of fine motor or feeding skills, which Joann is AMAZING at, her true gift in my opinion is in helping children who struggle with sensory processing challenges.

What is sensory processing disorder, you may ask, as it's not a concrete developmental area that we look at when working with children. "It's a condition where some children experience an unusual sensitivity or reaction to certain environmental and sensory stimuli" which really effects how they feel, how they move, how they connect with others and their world, and they may even exhibit certain behaviors that may be challenging as a result. Joann often says this area is the foundation to a child's overall learning.

Joann has an incredible ability to recognize the subtle signs of dysregulation and a unique way to guide families toward understanding what their child is experiencing and why. She is a great coach, empowering families to carry over strategies in every day routines. Joann is very creative. And if a strategy isn't working, she doesn't stop there, she problem-solves and shifts gears until she finds what is needed.

Joann is extremely dedicated. I have been on many cases with her where I will get a late-night text or email telling me that she has some great new ideas or learned some new strategies from a continuing education class and she can't wait to share them with me and our families. Her wheels are always turning, and her heart is always fully invested, not stopping until the family gets that breakthrough moment. For me, as a speech therapist, Joann's expertise may often be the missing link that allows children to move forward in communication and other developmental areas. When a child is regulated with their sensory system, they are often able to attend and focus much more which is what they need to learn, interact, play and communicate.

I have seen firsthand how her work changes lives. On one of our current cases, a little boy who once could not engage, play purposefully, or even open his mouth to attempt speech, is becoming regulated, connected, and thriving. Just 6-months ago, he would bang his head and hit, would often be "on the move", threw toys, and always had his mouth tightly closed so was not talking. Joann saw the bigger picture. She saw these signs as symptoms of a dysregulated sensory system and worked so hard on getting this child regulated using input strategies such as pillow squeezes, deep pressure hugs, textural activities, blanket swings and oral motor activities

that would stimulate his mouth, just to name a few. Joann is a team player and when we collaborated, I was able to take her strategies and reinforce them in my sessions and add my communication piece.

As this little guy became more regulated and calmer, our breakthrough happened! He started to say “Mama” and “Dada” which is a parent’s dream, and now he currently has 15 words! Why? Because this little guy’s sensory system is becoming more regulated and he is better able to respond to the other strategies our team has been implementing to help him grow. He now engages with his parents, is smiling and laughing, accepts more hugs, is enjoying more toys and activities, follows more directions and is more willing to try new things. His parents have been empowered by Joann to see the signs of dysregulation and to continue to give him what he needs throughout the day in so many fun and creative ways. Enhancing his sensory regulation opened the door to endless possibilities for his growth, relationships, and joy.

The parents themselves have shared how Joann transformed their perspective:

- “When the evaluating team recommended OT I was thinking why, I just want my child to talk. Joann helped me understand that it’s not an isolated piece, that all the pieces need to be working together for him to progress, and I am seeing that now.”
- “Joann helped me understand there are specific reasons why he is doing certain things.”
- “Joann is approachable. As a new mom it’s comforting to be able to ask questions about anything, even if it’s not related to EI.”
- “She is a natural, she has made it fun.”

To me, Joann embodies what it means to be a true coach in early intervention. She has made such a positive impact on the many children and families she has worked with. I too have learned so much from her as a peer and have enjoyed working with her for the past 20 years through BARC Developmental Services.

Nominee: Joann Kirk
Nominator: Katie Mill

I would like to nominate Joann Kirk for the Noreen Coleman Early Intervention Peer Recognition Award to share about her kindness, knowledge, dedication, and patience when working with families and other interventionists. Joann is dedicated to helping not only each child learn and thrive but also educating and supporting the parents that she works with. She is an empowering individual who helps all families build confidence and skills by providing them with excellent strategies that meet each child's needs.

Joann is very knowledgeable not only in the field of Occupational Therapy, but Early Intervention as a whole. She is dedicated to taking time to explain sensory needs, fun activities using supplies in the family's home, collaborating, and wearing fun outfits around the holidays when going to sessions. Joann has spent a generous amount of time on the phone with me consistently providing me with strategies to support my work and helping me feel more confident in being a Special Instructor. At times, when work gets overwhelming, Joann is more than willing to lend a hand and be a listening ear, always ready to jump right in with kindness and support.

During sessions that I have overlapped with Joann, she consistently demonstrates professionalism with the families and takes the time to clearly explain each child's individual sensory needs. She offers great strategies and gives clear explanations to help the families support their child. Joann provides the families with visuals to break down the sensory system as a whole. She provides the families with insight and educates them on how to best support their child. During a recent session, a family shared with me how thankful they were to have found Joann and how much she has benefited this child's older sibling. She has made such an impact on this family in particular and they requested to have her back for the sibling.

Joann models many exciting activities and thinks quickly on her feet during sessions. A great skill of Joann's is using everyday household items to create engaging and developmentally appropriate activities. She makes Occupational Therapy fun and functional to meet the needs of each child. Joann has supported families by helping them create large sensory bins, creatively incorporating items like laundry baskets into song routines, and providing sensory tools for at home use. She has also met families in community settings and consistently demonstrates flexibility and collaboration during sessions. Families have expressed numerous activities that Joann has modeled that their child has enjoyed engaging in such as a scooter/sticker activity, blanket ball pits, alternatives for crash pads and using a broom stick to engage in a matching game, blanket swinging, and a variety of obstacle courses. Joann is very flexible with families and will take time to ensure that they understand what they will be working on during the next week. If the family is unsure, Joann is always willing to stay after and model again for the family until they feel confident to perform it independently.

When collaborating with Joann, she is always willing to use any suggestion/strategy that is given by another therapist/SI. I have gotten the opportunity to be on multiple teams with Joann since I have been working for BARC. As a Special Instructor, I have provided many families with visuals to implement into each child's daily routine. Joann will consistently collaborate and give suggestions and implement these visuals into her sessions as well. Another great strength of Joann's is her problem-solving skills. At times, there are strategies that do not end up working for

the family. Joann will take time and discuss with the family what they noticed over the last week and how they can make a change for the following week. She truly cares about each child and family that she works with. One of the ways she demonstrates this is by touching base with families throughout the week to check in and see how strategies have been working.

Overall, Joann is an amazing Occupational Therapist that has truly left an impact on many families, children, therapists, and Special Instructors, including myself. She goes into each house with the biggest smile on her face ready to help in any way she can. I have learned so many amazing strategies from her and I have the honor of nominating her for this award.