

## *Senate Committee Inquiry into the education of students with a disability.*

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As a parent of two children with special needs, one with autism and an intellectual disability, and the other not currently “labeled” I welcome positive moves by Government to provide better access to services for children with special needs. In addition to being a parent and major care giver I am President of Irabina Childhood Autism Services, Bayswater, Victoria, (*Irabina*) an autism specific non-government early childhood intervention service provider, and a Member of the Committee of Management of the Autistic Family Support Association (AFSA), and their Advocacy Coordinator. AFSA is a statewide parent support group, and represents parents and carers who have a family member with an autism spectrum disorder. These positions are voluntary and unpaid.

I actively seek to promote the needs of our children through raising public awareness of children with disabilities living in our communities and advocating for their needs. Immediate access to services that are critical to improving their quality of life and the support needed for the family unit for children under the age of 6 is currently denied in Victoria. Education for our children must commence immediately upon diagnosis to provide best possible outcomes. Yet families with special needs children are forced to fight every inch of the way, in some cases even before a formal diagnosis has been made, for services. This discriminatory fact of life must change.

Government must be revolutionary and act efficiently and comprehensively upon the findings of inquiries.

### **The effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs.**

My oldest son has benefited greatly from education from the early childhood intervention sector. We have experienced both generic and autism specific early intervention. There is no doubt that his quality of life has improved dramatically because of this intervention, especially the autism specific intervention by Irabina Childhood Autism Services, in Bayswater, Victoria. The family unit has also been supported by services provided by Irabina. His future is much brighter now than had he not had any early intervention. This will directly result in lowering the level of support required in the future. He will now achieve a greater level of independence.

Thousands of families are denied immediate access to early childhood intervention services currently in Victoria. The Department of Human Services in the past did not support specific intervention service providers such as autism specific, or Cerebral Palsy specific. One size does not fit all.

Autism is pervasive by nature and affects language and communication, social interaction, imagination, and behavior. It is a spectrum and affects each individual in degrees of severity of impairment. Also the impairment in one area may be greater than in the other. A skilled team of professionals can only make diagnosis.

Children with autism have different intervention needs than children with other disabilities. For instance, a child with a physical disability requires different intervention than a child with intellectual, behavioral, and communication impairments.

Children's brains are developing and maturing up to the age of 6 years of age and research says that the child's brain requires stimulation to help make the neurotransmitters make their connections. In autism, there is a limited window of opportunity to "make a difference". That window closes by the age of 6 years. When you consider that most autistic children are not diagnosed until the age of 3, specific, appropriate and effective intervention must take place immediately upon diagnosis, or sooner (as the diagnostic services waiting list is up to 12 months).

Thousands of children and families are currently waiting up to 18 months for access to early intervention services in Victoria. – Any service provider, not necessarily disability specific.

Despite the Victorian Government's pledge May 2001, to add approximately \$1m extra to the early childhood intervention sector, this funding is yet to be made available in all regions. It seems that the Victorian Government currently does not care about children with disabilities under the age of 6 years and is happy to make them and their families wait for services that are critical to improving their quality of life.

"Victoria, the place to be" provided you are not a young child with a disability!

### **Mainstreaming**

Choosing the most appropriate school setting for your special child is not an easy decision to make. Some mainstream schools "do it" (integration) considerably better than others. Autistic children with "Normal" IQ's are prevented from attending special schools because of the IQ rating. However their challenging behavior means that they require considerable support. Hence parents of "High Functioning" autistic children are forced to place their children into educational settings that do not provide the best learning environment for their child and without adequate support.

I think it would be beneficial to trial "special" units within mainstream schools per municipality. Staff to student ratio would need to be appropriate to the needs of the children within the unit. I consider this "pooling" of resources would be more effective than spreading the funding across the same number of children over many schools, some within the same municipality.

### **Teacher Training and professional development.**

Our oldest son commenced mainstream primary school this year. He is supported with an aide in the classroom. Playgrounds are adequately staffed during out door periods. It is difficult to find teachers that have had any hands on training in autism, unless the teacher has previously worked in the early childhood intervention sector.

I would like to see a greater part of teacher training spent in the early childhood sector. Teachers who choose to work in the early childhood sector are also qualified to work in Primary Schools, yet their pay rate is approximately \$10,000.00 p.a. lower than their peers employed in the school system. The sector is struggling to cope with the increased demand upon it because of the increase in the prevalence of autism. Irabina provides a service to schools to help them improve their

knowledge of autism. They address issues and how to best accommodate the needs of autistic children within the school sector, both mainstream and special settings. Demand for knowledgeable teachers could be resolved if trainee teachers spent at least one full year with autism specific early childhood service providers before working in the school sector.

**What is the proper role of Commonwealth, States and Territories in supporting the education of students with disabilities?**

The proper role of all levels of government is to keep **all** the needs of all students within the education system their priority. The various levels and layers of Governments should be transparent and work together to provide the services and resources to meet the needs of children with disabilities.

Educational requirements of children with special needs begin before the age of 6. This fact must be recognized and adequately provided for. Currently, children with special needs are being discriminated against. Their needs are not being met. Additional stress is placed upon families, resulting in many cases in the breakdown of the family unit.

The “funding cake” needs to be bigger. Autism prevalence is on the increase and yet the funding slices for services in all sectors gets smaller. I trust that this senate inquiry brings us closer to a revolution, where children with special needs and their families become a higher priority and receive the funding allocation it deserves and that Governments will make this their goal and work together towards it.