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Families of autistic children suing Ontario government

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TORONTO, ONTARIO - Several Ontario families are taking the provincial government to court to win their autistic children the right to special health and education services. Two groups of parents want the Conservatives to fund costly therapy and education programs for the 1,500 children with autism living in Ontario.

Brenda and Steven Deskin are suing Health Minister Elizabeth Witmer and her ministry, as well as the ministries of Education, Community and Social Services and Children.

The couple's autistic four-year-old son, Michael, undergoes intensive therapy called Applied Behaviour Analysis at a cost of more than \$80,000 a year.

These kinds of treatments are fully funded in most American states and also in Alberta.

The therapy, also known as Lovaas treatment, is controversial because it's expensive, and critics say there is a lack of proof it actually works.

Autism is a mental condition characterized by complete self-absorption and a reduced ability to respond or communicate with the outside world.

The funding controversy stems from this definition. Ontario considers autism to be a psychological condition. Some doctors and parents say it is a neurological disorder.

As a brain disorder, the cost of treating autism would be fully covered by provincial health care programs. As a psychological condition, little government funding is available.

A separate group of 12 families with autistic children was expected to hold a news conference today to announce a separate suit that also asks the court to enshrine the rights of autistic children in the Constitution.

Ontario has proposed a \$19 million plan for



Raj Ahluwalia reports for
CBC TV

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