



Photos by MARIK KASH BANSING/Visuals Unlimited

LOVING HANDS: Mike Skinner, here and below, gives special attention to his daughter Ashley, 3, who suffers from autism. Mother Debra Craig looks on.

Autistic child lost in social services shuffle

Mike Skinner is desperately trying to get his daughter, Ashley, the intensive therapy she requires for autism. But the provincial government doesn't provide funding. Here, Skinner shares his family's story:

All parents who receive word that there is something wrong with their child experience fear and grief. But a diagnosis of autism seems, commonly, to produce an overwhelming degree of devastation, confusion, anxiety and hopelessness.

"Ashley, our beautiful three-and-a-half-year-old girl, with Goldilocks hair and blue eyes, the seemingly perfect baby, was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at the age of two.

"We were lucky to have received such an early diagnosis because it is a known fact that children with autism have the best chance of learning language if they receive intense early intervention before the age of four.

"Maddeningly, Ashley will soon be four and we are still waiting for the appropriate services. What Ashley needs most, an intensive early-intervention program, is rarely funded in B.C.

"Because our social worker left her job, Ashley was forgotten and was never referred to the Infant Development Program. We were not visited by the community health nurse. We were shuffled among four speech therapists, and there was minimal progress in Ashley's language development.

"It took months to see our pediatrician and six months to receive the "official" diagnosis at Children's Hospital. Other services we received have been a Band-Aid on a gaping wound that feels as if it will never heal.

"Autism is regarded as the most severe developmental disorder. The main symptoms of autism are a lack of social skills [this doesn't mean good table manners — it can be so severe that there is no interest in others] and delays in, or lack of, speech.

"Autism is life-long, but each person is different, with abilities varying from no speech to the achievement of a PhD.

"The most impor-

tant intervention in autism is early and intensive specialized education that addresses both the communication and behaviour parts of the disorder. Intensive long-term behavioural treatment has been proven to enhance intellectual, academic, social and emotional functioning in children with autism.

"Currently, we parents have to become overnight experts, doing our own research and evaluating treatment modalities. (I never knew these terms existed!) We have to find and fund

Quote

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our own consultants and therapists.

"Unfortunately, many families cannot afford to pay for these programs, which cost about \$3,000 to implement and \$500 to \$2,000 a month to maintain.

"We must fight on many different fronts, tending to our homes and our other children, earning a living and trying not to break down in the presence of others. All of this, mixed in with sleepless nights, anxiety and frustration, has shown us that services for autistic children in B.C. need radical improvement.

"Applied behaviour analysis is creating a promising future for many children with autism and producing full recovery for some. And yet, two years after her diagnosis, our beautiful Ashley still cannot speak a word because we cannot afford to pay for this scientifically proven treatment.

"It's a sad day when government decides finances come before society's most valuable asset, our children."