

# 'Lovaas' treatment brightens young eyes

By **DONNA HENNINGSON**

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It started when her son was a year old. Barbara Rodrigues and her husband Joe thought they had a healthy baby boy.

But Jeremy's gross motor skills were developing slowly. He was big at 37 pounds, though other members of the family had been, too.

Then Jeremy started to slip away from them.

"He had a red rattle he liked," said Barbara. "We would say 'Okay, go get the red rattle.' Over a period of time he didn't seem to know what we were saying."

Jeremy would sit spinning the wheels on a toy, and would scream if Joe interrupted him for a hug. A stranger coming in the front door would trigger hours of screaming.

Tests found nothing physically wrong, but medical authorities suggested autistic tendencies. Even so, the Rodrigues' said they were led to believe he would grow out of it.

Jeremy continued to go to the OSNS Child Development Centre, working with a behaviour consultant, but according to Barbara his behaviour was getting worse.

Jeremy slept only in spurts, and would kick and scream when she tried to dress him.

He started pulling out his hair in frustration, and was losing the few words he did know.

It was by inadvertently reading a letter in his medical file that Barbara found out he had been diagnosed as autistic.

A November 1997 conference in Edmonton on sensory integration appeared to confirm there was little hope for Jeremy. Rodrigues cries at the memory.

"There were 10- and 13-year-old

boys with no language and a lot of aggression," she said. "I came home and was so depressed. My mom said 'I can't believe that is all there is,' and started getting books from the library. She would find something and read me a paragraph over the phone."

It was enough to give Rodrigues hope, and through her own research she found what appeared to be the answer, the Lovaas treatment. Her mother calls it "the day the lights when on in Jeremy's eyes."

For two years, every effort to build eye contact with Jeremy eluded them. But shortly before Christmas 1997, they tried carefully timed smiles and encouragement. Within a week of intensive reinforcement, they say, he was looking them in the eye.

Barbara was heartened by the success, and decided Jeremy needed more intensive help than what the OSNS was equipped to offer.

"The methods used are good for delayed kids, and other disabilities," she said. "But autistic kids don't learn that way."

The following March, this time at a Lovaas conference, Barbara saw severely autistic young people talking, socializing, even tying shoelaces.

Almost six months into Lovaas, although expressing himself continues to be difficult, Jeremy is making strides in vocabulary. Five months ago, it took a month to learn "banana." It has taken him less than three weeks to identify 20 letters in the alphabet.

He now can identify 150 nouns. "He gets everything quicker than I probably could," said Angelee Evans, one of three students specially trained in Lovaas who work with Jeremy. "He is picking up two verbs a day now."

