

▼ Autism

Province ends funding for alternative treatments

Ruling means Chilliwack family will not get financial help for four-year-old son's therapy

By Sandra Thomas
Staff Writer

Parents of autistic children are being brutalized by the Ministry for Children and Families.

So says Dr. Sabrina Freeman, mother of a ten-year-old daughter with autism, and executive director of Families for Early Autism Treatment (FEAT of B.C.) in response to a recent memorandum from the Ministry.

Part one of the memo states: "no further individual funding for families to pay for any treatment options for children and youth with autism (such as Lovaas, Giant Steps) unless already authorized through existing contractual agreement."

Bottom line: the little bit of funding parents were able to reroute from existing programs for Lovaas therapy will no longer be available.

"This is nothing less than the Ministry being

vindictive because of the class-action law suit launched this summer. There are blatantly punishing these parents for fighting for their children's lives."

On August 14, a lawsuit was filed in B.C. Supreme Court demanding medical necessary treatment to be provided for an autistic child named Connor Auton. Many families around the province launched similar suits including Chilliwack couple Leighton and Joelle Lefavre on behalf of their four-year-old son Jordan.

Joelle says she was disheartened to hear about the cut to funding. The Lefavres had hoped to receive some government money toward his Lovaas treatment but to date had no confirmation on any – including funds rerouted from day care or respite.

"Oh no, that's bad news," said Joelle. "I haven't been contacted yet, but I guess that's because we haven't received any money from the ministry yet."

The family has borrowed heavily to bring therapists trained in Applied Behavioural Therapy into their home because they couldn't risk waiting for answers from the Ministry for

FastFacts

Autism is a neurological developmental disorder that shows its first signs at approximately 18 months of age.

Developmental signs of autism are apparent in various behavioral disorders which include difficulties with social relationships, communication, perceptual integration, and adaptability to change their environment.

Children with autism have difficulty integrating new experiences or information with prior experiences.

The most thoroughly documented treatment of autistic children is a 15-year research project conducted by Dr. Ivar Lovaas at the University of California. His studies conclude that through intensive "operant conditioning" or behaviour modification therapy, a significant number of autistic children can recover and function normally if intensive therapy is commenced before age four.

At a 30 per cent normal range of functioning, gained as a result of the therapy, net savings are approximately \$1,196,048 per child from age three to 45.

▼ From Front

Ruling 'flushes' future of autistic children, says advocate

Children and Families. FEAT says it's vital to start treatment at as a young an age as possible.

"Brain development really begins at age two," says Dr. Freeman. "If Lovaas is started early enough I've heard of children actually losing their diagnosis."

Dr. Freeman says the problem started years ago when a government system to deal with autism

was first set up.

"At the time they weren't aware of any treatment for autism so all the programs they set up were support based, like respite and day care. But now we have a scientifically based treatment that works and the government is ignoring it."

She says it's akin to treating a child with cancer and refusing to pay for chemotherapy.

"The government wouldn't refuse to give a child chemotherapy, so why do they refuse to grant our children a treatment that's scientifically proved to work."

And while autism isn't fatal, as cancer can be, without treatment many suffering from autism end up institutionalized, which can be just as traumatic to a parent. Another aspect that makes Dr. Freeman

angry is the fact parents seeking Lovaas for their children must do an income test to prove they're eligible for any assistance.

"There is this whole 'autism business' out there that's making millions from the government offering programs that do nothing. We say give the money to us parents and we'll make sure our children get treated. We want valid treatment for our children."

She says the government is putting a price tag on children with autism.

"They are flushing the future of autistic children down the drain," says Dr. Freeman. "We need the government to pay for treatment, not baby-sitting."

Error: Sabrina Freeman is quoted as saying, "Brain development really begins at age two".

Corrected Quote: "The brain is really developing at age two", so that is when intensive autism treatment should start.