

HEALTH

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Dealing with autism

B.C. parents of autistic children have found help in the form of an intensive one-on-one therapy program — the down side is that they have to pay for it.

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VANCOUVER SUN

Six-year-old Joshy Kier circles a picture of an octopus holding a ball and waits for the "game" to begin.

He's in the recreation room of his family's Dunbar home with Kara Dannenhold, who will figure out what he has circled by getting Joshy to tell her clues.

It looks like a simple game between a child and his babysitter, but the reality is quite different. Joshy is autistic, Dannenhold is a therapist with specialized skills and the game he is playing helps language development.

This is just one small part of an intensive therapy program Joshy has been getting at home for the past year. It's called the Lovaas method of applied behaviour analysis. The Kiers — along with about 130 other B.C. families with autistic children — are paying for it themselves.

To get Lovaas therapy for their children, each family

must hire a U.S.-trained consultant to help implement the program and provide ongoing assessments. They're paying between \$30,000 to \$60,000 a year.

Dr. O. Ivar Lovaas, of the University of California at Los Angeles, reported unprecedented results for young children with autism in 1987, after treating them in an intensive program.

The study found that of 19 preschool-aged children who got 40 hours a week of one-to-one behavioural treatment, 47 per cent would later successfully complete Grade 1 and obtain average or above-average scores.

Autism is a neurological developmental disorder that has no known cause. It's estimated to affect one in 500 children.

Symptoms include lack of awareness of people, repetitive or self-injurious behaviour and poor or inappropriate communication skills.

The children have abnormal responses to sensory

stimuli and resist any changes to their routines.

Joshy's mother, Sarina Kier, says he used to get extremely upset if anything was moved in their home. Carrying on normal activities was impossible at times.

"I couldn't vacuum because he'd scream. If the baby cries, he'd cry," Kier recalls.

Joshy was often ostracized by peers as the "weird kid" because he would sometimes pace in circles and flap his hands.

He didn't know how to interact socially, Kier says he would memorize books and try to communicate with people by reciting them. However, if you asked him a question there would be no response.

"Where Joshy is now is not where he started. The Lovaas program takes everything we do in life and breaks it down to its smallest component and teaches a child," she says.

"It teaches eye contact, how to dress, how to talk,

how to eat at the table, how to play. Everything you see a typical child doing an autistic child has to be taught."

Lovaas is the only treatment program that has been scientifically proven to bring positive results for families, says Sabrina Freeman, who founded Families for Early Autism Treatment of B.C. (FEAT). A class action lawsuit was filed Friday to get the government to provide the intensive Lovaas therapy for B.C. children.

Says Freeman: "We have a two-tier health care system. The very rich can afford the therapy and the middle class beg, borrow and steal."

Like FEAT, the Autism Society of B.C. has been lobbying the provincial government to provide full-day intensive early-intervention programs for all children on the autism spectrum.

The ministry for children and families is reviewing how it delivers services to families of autistic children to see if it can come up with a better plan, says ministry official Kate Pasieka. The review is expected to be completed some time in September.

She says the review is being done because so many families have come to the

ministry requesting the Lovaas program. But Pasieka says there is no way the ministry could afford to cover the high cost of therapy for every family that requests it. She added that the ministry also doesn't endorse a particular therapy, such as Lovaas.

At the moment, families with children with autism can apply for help, such as respite care, under the Community Living program. But the maximum the ministry pays to a family under the "At Home" program is \$2,800 a year.

