



FROM PROVINCE HOUSE TO HOME

Leo Glavine, MLA

Kings West

One of the reasons I became an MLA was to help my fellow Nova Scotians. It's the job of our government to provide services and support to all citizens but particularly to those most vulnerable. That's why it makes me sad to know that so many Nova Scotians with autism are going without the much needed support the government can, but is not, offering.

We are lucky enough to have an excellent program for young children with Autism. It's called the Early Intensive Behaviour Intervention program. Launched in 2005, it aims to reach autistic children at a young age and, by teaching them in their own environment like school or home and working with parents, it is having fantastic results. After just one year in the program, children were making leaps in their learning and developing more than a year's worth of language. In fact, half the children studied developed at double the rate of so-called average children. These results far exceed expectations as children with autistic spectrum disorders usually develop at a much slower rate than that of unaffected children. In addition parents were reporting children were more aware of their surroundings and showed more interest in people. The parents also reported lower stress levels over their children's behaviours and higher confidence levels in their own ability to parent these kids.

These are impressive results, especially when you consider the long term implications. Establishing language skills early can mean less need to rely on government services later. It can mean the difference between assisted living and the need for full-time care. It can mean the difference in being able to find a job. It can mean a measure of independence. Despite such wide reaching implications this service, in its early stages, was offered to only 27 kids.

Parents have to hope their child wins a lottery to be allowed to enter the program. Imagine how that feels, to know the future of your child, and your family, rests on the luck of the draw. The divorce rate of parents of children and adults with autism is astronomically high – it is over 85%. These are families that loose hope, that struggle with children they can't understand and in many cases they can't even hug. The EIBI program can offer real progress yet far too many children are denied its benefits.

There are currently more than 7,000 Nova Scotians with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder. Our government is, quite frankly, neglecting them. Early intervention is not the only area where this growing population is underserved. According to the Provincial Autism Centre there are next to no government services for autistic Nova Scotians once they

leave school. It is left to this amazing organization to fill in the gaps. One of the areas it's focusing on is employment. The Provincial Autism Centre is launching an employment support program aimed at helping autistic teens explore career options and build life skills and opportunities. The work this centre does with a limited budget, which is totally reliant on fundraising, is incredible. It is now asking for government support to run its employment program, a mere ½ million dollars over five years. I, frankly, think it's the least government can do.

Public attention to Autistic Spectrum Disorders has increased over the last few years, and that can only be a good thing. The problem is that media attention has not meant positive results in terms of funding. April 2nd is World Autism Awareness Day as proclaimed by the United Nations – a good time to write your MP and ask for a national strategy. More and more kids are being diagnosed but many are left to find their own supports, often resulting in stress, financial hardship and despair. As a province we owe to these children and their families to offer real and meaningful help.

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