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# Penticton Western

## Liberals slash Autism programs

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Something shocking happened recently between Barbara Rodrigues and her seven-year-old son, Jeremy.

On a sunny afternoon, Barbara sat on the couch reading a book while Jeremy busied himself with a plate of grapes. Jeremy then did something completely unexpected: he picked up his snack, grabbed a book and sat down beside his mother.

We just sat there, reading and snacking for close to an hour. We shared a normal mother and son moment," Barbara said, her eyes welling with tears. "It was—overwhelming. Those are the little gifts that keep us going."

Jeremy is autistic and social interaction on this level was unthinkable a few years ago. But thanks to an aggressive — and expensive — behavioural therapy program, Jeremy has made tremendous progress.

But if his care practices are altered to the Liberal government's recommendations, Rodrigues and physicians believe Jeremy's development will not only be arrested, but that he will regress — an ironic recommendation from a government that chastised the NDP for its "shameful" treatment of autistic children.

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# News

## Effective autism programming no more costly than ineffective offering

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The Liberals, however, appear, according to Rodrigues, to have continued the NDP's mandate post election.

Treatment for autism is not covered under the Canadian Health Act. During NDP rule, a group of parents brought the matter before the B.C. Supreme Court in July 2000, and won.

The ruling found that early, intensive treatment for autistic children should be provided either through the Medical Services Plan or block funding via other ministries, as is the case in Alberta and Ontario.

The province was reproached by the opposition Liberals for appealing the ruling. This appeal, which was touted as "shameful," "unconscionable," and "disgusting" by the Liberals during their pre-election platform, has continued post election.

"They basically used our (autistic) children as sympathy-getters during their campaign, then they completely turned their backs on them," said Rodrigues.

Jeremy has participated in the Lovaas therapy program



photo by Colin Aucaunt

**EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION ...** Carolyn Christian, Lovaas lead therapist, helps autistic child Jeremy Rodrigues with a word recognition exercise. Although he is as-yet unable to speak, Jeremy now has a 200 word recognition vocabulary.

since 1998. The intensive 40-hour-per-week behavioural modification program has been remarkably successful and has been embraced by the scientific community.

"(Autism) once seemed like a life sentence. Now we know that sentence can be commuted, even lifted," said

David Suzuki during a Nature of Things episode on Lovaas. "Now we know there is hope. As long as we intervene early enough, intensively enough, we can rescue many children from the solitary confinement of autism."

In a landmark UCLA study of children participating

Autism-spectrum disorders are complex neurological conditions affecting one in seven-10 children, mostly males.

Most autistic children:

- have limited attachment to care-givers;
- display little interest in pleasing them;
- evade eye contact and resist displays of affection;
- engage in repetitive behaviour;
- may have intense tantrums when interrupted.

The causes of autism are still unknown. Autism is not caused by parenting. Currently there is no cure. Research indicates that best treatment is intensive early intervention with a focus on communication skills and individualized education with peer models.

in Lovaas, 47 per cent achieved normal intellectual and educational functioning, 40 per cent were later assigned to classes for the language delayed and 10 per cent were put in classes for the mentally challenged.

In contrast, of the children who received normally-avail-

able services, 45 per cent were later put in language-delayed classes, and 53 per cent were put in classes for the mentally challenged.

Prior to therapy Jeremy was pulling out his hair in rage, throwing continual, day-long tantrums and he rarely slept through the night.

"There has been night and day difference. During the first week of therapy he stopped pulling his hair, and almost immediately he was sleeping through the night," said Rodrigues.

"Now he comes shopping for groceries with me and walks along like a normal, curious little boy."

The Lovaas program costs approximately \$40,000 per year. Ideally this would be fully funded by the government, Rodrigues says. But they're asking for \$1,000 per month for the in-home treatment which courts and doctors have deemed necessary.

Instead, the Ministry of Children and Family Development wants Jeremy in regular school. That would cost taxpayers \$6,000 per year for special education funding, plus, because Jeremy is non-verbal, he would require a full-time aide —between \$16,000

and \$17,000 per year — and the services of a special education teacher.

The Rodrigues' also qualify for subsidized support services through the MCFD.

"In a broad sense, it is apparent that costs incurred in paying for effective treatment of autism may well be offset by the savings achieved by autistic children to help develop their educational and societal potential rather than dooming them to a life of isolation and institutionalization," said the Honourable Justice M.J. Allan in her July 2000 ruling on medical services for the autistic.

Rodrigues says the province is willing to pay for an education experience that won't benefit Jeremy, yet it won't pay for services that have already proven effective.

"We could easily soak the system for more than \$40,000 per year in useless and unproved supports," said Rodrigues.

"All we are asking for is proven treatment to help Jeremy develop to his full potential—the same as any child deserves.

"Help my son with his condition, and our family won't need help coping."