

\$25M for autism, 'raises a lot of questions' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Families of children with autism are reacting with guarded optimism to news that the Ontario government has pledged \$25 million to expand services for those who have the developmental disorder.

The new services, known as applied behaviour analysis, or ABA, would help children with autism learn communication, social and behaviour management skills. It would also help them develop daily-living skills such as toileting and bathing.

In announcing the funding Tuesday, Children and Youth Services Minister Laurel Broten said the range of new supports would benefit 8,000 children - a figure that critics say is vastly inflated given the McGuinty Liberals' uneven track record in managing autism intervention programs.

"Of course I endorse any funding that goes to autism, but how are they intending to carry this out? Because 8,000 kids is a lot," said Laurel Gibbons of Ottawa, whose 13-year-old son has autism. "Where are all these trained professionals going to come from? Is the infrastructure to support these new services actually in place?"

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The new funding is in addition to the \$114.5 million already being spent annually on another treatment known as intensive behaviour intervention, or IBI. Despite steady increases in funding for IBI, the number of children waiting for the therapy (1,609) continues to soar, outpacing those actually receiving funding (1,446).

In Eastern Ontario, 82 children are currently being funded, while 142 wait.

The intensive one-on-one treatment can cost between \$30,000 and \$80,000 annually per child.

Aschaiek, whose four-year-old son has autism, said the long waiting list points to service gaps that have not been addressed. Indeed, even when families finally receive IBI funding, many find their children arbitrarily cut off from treatment after only a few months, said Aschaiek.

In such cases, the government also announced Tuesday an appeals process. Beginning next fall, parents will be able to request an independent review of a decision to withhold IBI treatment, or to discontinue it.

Broten said the new ABA program would help cut down on the estimated two-year wait list for IBI. "ABA will give support to those families that were not eligible for IBI and those families that might have been waiting for IBI."

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ABA and IBI are the most scientifically recognized methods of helping the estimated 18,000 Ontario children with autism.

Of the two interventions, IBI is considered a more intensive therapy, which has proven to be particularly effective in jump-starting learning in children aged six and under.

"It's really targeted for that very small percentage of children who are at the severe end of the autism spectrum," said Lise Bisnaire, a psychologist and director of the autism intervention program at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario.

In contrast, ABA can be used to change the behaviour of older children and adults, as well as those who have a mild to moderate form of autism.

Bisnaire expressed her support for the new services. "I think what they've done is very responsible and very much needed because what you want to do is build a continuum of care for these children."

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- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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