

Ontario kids with autism aged 5 and older cut off from government-paid therapy ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ontario children with autism aged five or older no longer qualify for government-funded intensive therapy, a move critics say is leaving many families in the lurch.

The Liberal government announced a new Ontario Autism Program with \$333 million in funding, but changes include limiting Intensive Behavioural Intervention to children between two and four.

Children and Youth Services Minister Tracy MacCharles said advice from experts was to focus on children in that developmental window.

"I know it's a transition, I know it's challenging," said MacCharles, whose son has special needs.

"The research has said before and most recently with our clinical expert committee that the best window for IBI is those younger years, the two to four, and we're also going to be launching four early intervention diagnosis pilots so that kids are showing markers, not necessarily being diagnosed, can potentially get that diagnosis earlier."

Families with kids five and older on the IBI wait list will get \$8,000 to pay for treatment as they are cut off the wait list.

Lisa Meunier, a Brampton, Ont., mom whose nearly five-year old daughter has been on the IBI wait list for almost three years, said that amount will only pay for a few weeks of therapy.

"I'm disappointed that the government would do that to our children," she said. "There's so many kids that it's crucial that they need this therapy to help them. It's sad enough that our children were born with this and having to struggle and there is a therapy out there that can help our children and now they're just taking that away from them."

Jacques Sturgeon's son turned five in November and was supposed to start therapy in July. The Ottawa father said he doesn't understand why those few months mean the therapy is less likely to be successful for his son.

"He's not getting this intensive behaviour intervention at a time when he needs it," Sturgeon said. "He's low-functioning and he has a very hard time with integration."

'Rug pulled out from under them'

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath said she is very concerned for the children who have "had the rug pulled out from under them."

"Do you reduce the wait time by kicking people off the list? Is that the game?" she said. "This government likes to game things in their favour, things that make them look good, without very much attention whatsoever to the impact it has on real people."

Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown said the government's move is disappointing.

"The notion that the government's now saying that that treatment is not needed when you're five — autism doesn't end when you're five," he said. "I think this was a short-sighted decision and I hope the government will correct course and will acknowledge they made a mistake."

The changes to the program mean that 16,000 more children will get access to services, mostly Applied Behaviour Analysis, a less intensive form of therapy, the government said.

The new program combines both types of therapy into a single program, which the government says will lead to faster and more individualized services. It hopes to cut wait times at least in half, on average, within two years and to have average wait times of six months or less by 2021.

In 2005-06, there were 753 kids waiting for IBI and as of last year there were 2,192. In 2011-12, when ABA funding began, there were

2,784 kids on the wait list and now there are 13,966, though some children may be on both lists.

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