

## **INQUIRY INTO SERVICES FOR PEOPLE WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER**

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Autism is a complex, yet individual condition. Students with such a diagnosis are rarely funded under the DET guidelines for students in the Programme for Students with Disabilities (PSD): when a student is funded it is usually due to an Intellectual Disability. Without an intellectual disability, autistic students are generally unfunded and therefore enrol in a mainstream school. If the child is funded, they may be eligible for the Special Schools.

Students are included in ever increasing class sizes with little or no support to the teacher or the student. Some schools access training for staff and then provide what limited resources they can usually from within an increasingly tight budget. Often autistic children struggle to 'fit in' in a normal classroom. The noise, the colours, and the expectation of both the teacher and the students can be unbearable, and may lead to a meltdown. If the student does suffer a meltdown, there is difficulty in being able to provide for both the classroom needs and the autistic student. Safety becomes imperative for all the students involved.

The nature of the condition may manifest in defiant behavior, minimal social skills and learning difficulties. On the positive side, students may be great problem solvers, artists or even gardeners, but they cannot read or write. It is a distressful situation for all those involved - family, educators and the community at large.

Some students will fail at their schooling, being unable to meet the Department standards. This may be due to the type of assessment required which is standardized across the mainstream. The positive abilities of an autistic child may not be included in such testing. Often these children achieve success in a play-based environment or learning space but assessments such as NAPLAN focus on curriculum only and are competitive in nature. They face an uncertain future, without hope for employment, relationships or financial security.

Education overall needs to be better resourced to help these students. One way would be to provide Education Support Staff to work one-on-one with the student. This would allow a focus on the child's strengths and abilities to help build confidence and self-esteem. It may also result in improved curricula outcomes. Another idea is to provide safe, supervised spaces along the lines of the Nurture Room model. This concept works at

providing a withdrawal space that is inviting and special. It also offers teaching in a non-threatening, non-competitive format. In schools where The Language Support Programme is offered the students may be referred as the learning here is generally play-based or game-based. It also operates in small groups or one-on-one situations. If Autism was funded in the same way as for PSD students (Programme for Students with a Disability), they would have access to improved support and programmes.

Schools also need assistance to provide safer and supervised play areas. It is likely that autistic children find the playground uncomfortable, if not threatening. They usually lack the social skills and behaviours that are natural for other children. In our school we created a sensory garden to help with outside activities and we also offer inside games for those students who struggle with social behaviours in the playground environment. These activities must all be supervised as well as the regular spaces and that can, at times, spread the teaching class thin on the ground - after all they are entitled to a lunch break too.

A teacher's task is increasingly difficult. The world is changing and the family structure is changing with it. Children are enrolling in school often without kinder experience and without basic knowledge of colours, letters or numbers. An Autistic child added to the mix is tricky for all. If an assessment is provided it is recorded in a special language which must be decoded, deciphered and understood before it becomes useful information. My school was lucky to obtain a grant and fund a local psychologist to explain this information over a 4-week period. Those who attended found the path to assisting with a student clearer, being able to transfer the assessment data into academic expectation. This training, though, was outside school hours and completely voluntary. I believe it should be a compulsory part of Teacher Training in the degree process, as being able to understand would assist teachers with other students with a learning difficulty who are referred for assessment. It would also be very appropriate to include specific learning about the complexities of the condition and strategies for managing the condition that allow for and promote inclusion policies. It is possible to "learn as you go" - getting the experience through direct involvement with the condition, but that suggests that newly employed teachers have little knowledge or expertise. The Education Department provides on-line training for teaching staff and there are many Internet sites connected to this condition, but it would be beneficial to create a specific site with as much information as the condition is complex - a "one-stop-shop". Any

information needs to be accessible, easy to understand and have practical applications.

The community at large has a duty of care to provide the same, if specialized, opportunities for these children. They have the same rights to a successful life as anyone else.

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