

# TRANSCRIPT

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder**

Geelong — 19 September 2016

#### Members

Ms Maree Edwards — Chair

Ms Cindy McLeish — Deputy Chair

Ms Chris Couzens

Mr Paul Edbrooke

Mr Bernie Finn

Ms Emma Kealy

#### Staff

Executive officer: Dr Greg Gardiner

#### Witness

Mr Stephen Williams.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome back, everyone. I have on my list of members of the gallery who wish to make short statements Stacey Smith, Stephen Williams, Gordon Portway and Leah Thomson. If your name is not on the list, could you go and see Dr Greg Gardiner so he can record your name and give it to Hansard.

The way we are going to run the format today is that I will call you to make a 5-minute presentation to the committee. We will probably not ask questions unless we feel that there is a real need to, because we would like to get through as many people as possible during this public forum. Thank you very much for presenting to the committee this afternoon. The committee calls Stephen Williams.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Thank you, Chair. Firstly, we would like to say thank you to Christine Couzens, who has been very accommodating to me and my son. He was diagnosed with Asperger's about four years ago now. We did see a note in the newspaper about Christine serving on this inquiry and she kindly agreed to see us. He thinks that he is the initiator of this whole exercise, such is the nature of the young man. I am sorry he cannot be here. School holidays being what they are, he is away this week. However, Kelly kindly spoke to me last week, and Dominic will look forward to presenting when you sit in Melbourne at some stage in the future.

I would just like to make three very brief points. I think, speaking from Dominic's point of view, one of his frustrations is with people trying to fix him. He gets quite tired of that. I do see on your inquiry and even three times on the front page you call it AS disorder, which is a bit of an unfortunate name. I know it is a typical one, but in our household we try to use the term 'condition' rather than 'disorder'. Please do not try to fix them. Certainly in terms of accommodating them, we would be grateful for as a family — and I will let Dominic speak for himself — two points in relation to that. One is tailored learning. Dominic's writing is terrible and his spelling is worse, and so what we found with his school, which has been extremely accommodating — they been wonderful — is that a digital environment is what he works best in. We have certainly been pioneering Dragon dictation software that as you speak it types — it is magic software — which is fabulous.

He also enjoys specialist teachers. His reading is terrific, his writing is horrible and his arithmetic is quite poor as well, so the support he can receive in those areas is tremendous on both a delivery level but also, importantly, on an assessment level as well. NAPLAN will never truly reflect his ability because it demands that he write. My father was a doctor, and he would give my dad a run for his money in terms of handwriting.

The other point that I would like to make is about empathy, and I think this goes two ways. Dominic really appreciates specialist teachers because he finds that they 'get him' more so than the mainstream classroom does, so he appreciates the acceptance of difference. He will use the term 'bullying'. I guess it means many different things, but there is a certain amount of intolerance or a lack of understanding about difference that he finds problematic at both a student level and at a staff level as well.

We are very fortunate that his current school is extremely open for us to come and speak with every staff member, and we do — his arts teacher, his science teacher, his PE — we speak to all of them so that we are all trying to work on the same playing field. This is now his second school since his diagnosis, and both schools have been extremely supportive, within their resource constraints. The second thing about empathy in our view is that it needs to go the other way as well. His social skills I would say are poor and underdeveloped, his awareness and empathy for others is poor and underdeveloped, and so we would think that there is much scope for empathy and awareness training in both directions. Thank you.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much, Stephen. I hope Dom is enjoying his time up on the mountain skiing and that he comes back in one piece.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — He is having a wonderful time, thank you.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much, Stephen; much appreciated.

**Witness withdrew.**