

Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders

formerly the Autism Council of Australia

Position Paper on Early intervention Services for Children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder

As stated in our National Call for Action issued in September, 2007, the Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders calls for early intervention services that are governed by the following principles:

- Every child has access to a minimum 20 hours of support per week;
- There is a waiting period of no more than 3 months between diagnosis and service provision;
- Early intervention is available as early as possible, and
- Equitable access is provided for all children with special consideration given to families in rural and remote regions.

This will be achieved by:

- An increase in resources allocated specifically for early intervention services to children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD); and
- The establishment of clear service standards and codes of conduct for the delivery of early intervention services based on sound evidence and quality indicators.

This is a critical priority for the following reasons:

- All research to date demonstrates that early intervention leads to better outcomes for children with an autism spectrum disorder;
- There are a number of significant stressors that impact on both the family and individual that are exacerbated by an unresponsive service system; and
- Sustainable positive outcomes are achieved by providing effective support in the early years.

In addition the Board also wishes to highlight the following issues with respect to early intervention services for children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD):

- **Early intervention services need to be diverse in order to cater to the broad spectrum of abilities in young children with ASD.** It is essential that early intervention approaches be adapted to the child's strengths and weaknesses and take into account family circumstances. A recent study by Anderson et al. (2007) found that children with ASD showed greater heterogeneity and range of trajectories as compared to children with other developmental disorders, and therefore require intervention approaches that address a diverse range of needs. While children who are non-verbal or who have limited verbal skills may require an intensive one-on-one approach, the input of specialist staff into mainstream early childhood programs to target specific social-communication issues may be more appropriate for many children with average range IQ.
- **Early intervention services need to include families.** Effective early intervention strategies must focus not only on the child but also needs to include the other family members in particular the child's carer/s. Parents and carers must be offered the

support that best meets their needs to support and assist their child outside of the specialist interventions. Early intervention services need to build capacity in families where there is a child with an ASD and in their communities.

- **Early intervention services need to accommodate the great variability in the capacity of local service providers in Australia.** In particular, Australian rural and remote early-intervention services have been significantly affected by nation-wide shortages of some specialist therapy staff (Davies, 2006). The lack of access to speech pathologists of children with developmental issues, particularly in rural areas, has recently been highlighted by Speech Pathology Australia (2007). Stahmer (2007) stresses the need to provide to additional support to early childhood and special educators who do not have specialist skills in teaching children with ASD, particularly in rural and remote areas. Hence there is a need to examine a range of approaches including on-line services and video conferencing
- **There is need to provide more training in the area of early intervention approaches to children with autism.** Concerns have been raised about the lack of adequately trained personnel working in the area of early intervention in Australia (Kemp & Hayes, 2005). In addition the bank of available staff who have specialist knowledge to work with children with an ASD means that early intervention strategies also must by necessity build professional capacity in order that more services can be provided to children and families.
- **Persons and families living with ASD require ‘whole of life’ support.** Evidence suggests that the communication and social difficulties and circumscribed or unusual interests experienced by children with ASD usually continue into adulthood and that the capacity of adults with ASD to find employment, live independently and engage in social and long-term sexual relationships is often compromised (Howlin, 2003; Tantum, 2003). It is therefore important that increases in government expenditure in early intervention do not occur at the expense of the equally critical needs of school-aged children, adolescents and adults with ASD and their families.

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