

# Vote 4 Autism & Special Needs in 2010



22 July 2010

To: All Federal Political Parties and Independents

## "I SUPPORT THIS CAMPAIGN"

### AUSTRALIAN'S DESERVE IMMEDIATE ACTION FOR AUTISM & SPECIAL NEEDS!!

#### **"We stand for equity, respect, dignity and opportunity for all Australians"**

Australia's official prevalence rate for autism is **1 in 160** for children between the ages of 5 and 12 (Australian Advisory Board report, February 2007), however a recent study undertaken by Melbourne's LaTrobe University found that **1 in 100** children qualified for a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This figure is comparable to other nations that have accurate measurements of ASD rates. This equates to an estimated 39,782 children with an ASD (based on 2005 Australian Bureau of Statistics population statistics) and substantially many more with special needs (SN). Regardless of these statistics, ASD/SN attracts only a small portion of funding compared to other juvenile conditions.

*"Autism is more common than childhood cancer, juvenile diabetes and pediatric AIDS combined."  
"Government statistics (US) suggest the prevalence rate of autism is increasing 10-17 percent annually." (Autism Speaks Website)*

Children with an ASD/SN **are** worth investing in so they may have a chance to reach their potential and to be contributing members of society. With the current skills shortages and the situation worsening over time, it is **ESSENTIAL** the Australian Government starts investing substantial funds into ASD/SN, or there will be generations of people out of work (and their carers) and dependent on the Government for their survival. **Australia's economy can't afford for this to happen.**

On Friday 21<sup>st</sup> May 2010, Rainbowland Autism Services (RAS) initiated the 'Vote 4 Autism and Special Needs in 2010' campaign on Facebook with the support of Autism Advisory Support Service (AASS). The cause has exceeded 5,000 members and continues to grow in numbers. Both not-for-profit charity organisations are committed to advocating for the human rights of people with an autism spectrum disorder and special needs (ASD/SN).

The campaign's purpose is to notify all Federal Political Parties and Independents of the seriousness of the situation when it comes to education, services and support for ASD/SN families. A very large percentage of the population (at least 20%) are directly affected by ASD/SN, and of whom **will vote for policy** that delivers adequate outcomes for individuals and families living with ASD/SN to ensure both a quality of life that complies with the United Nations Convention for People with a Disability, and a sound economic future for our wonderful country.

We acknowledge the importance of the Labor Government's \$190 million 'Helping Children with Autism' Package implemented after the last Federal election, and the commissioning of the recent inquiry undertaken by the Productivity Commission into disability services in Australia. We stress that

what has been done is a great start, but is just the tip of the iceberg and must continue to gain swift and significant momentum with effective and positive outcomes.

The needs of the ASD/SN community are many. A significant number of families are at crisis point given their dysfunctional lives and alienation due to the lack of services and support. Documented below are our RECOMMENDATIONS for the most immediate and serious issues for ASD/SN.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **1) NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR DISABILITIES AND SPECIAL NEEDS IN EDUCATION**

**“I believe passionately that every child, every child deserves the right to an education in Australia.” Julia Gillard ... incoming Prime Minister of Australia 24th June 2010**

We call for the development and implementation of ‘national standards for disabilities and special needs in education’. There are many inconsistencies across the country when it comes to support services (e.g. intervention programs, therapy, tutoring, support staff) within education for children with an ASD/SN. These same support services are grossly insufficient and work in opposition to government policy on social inclusion, disability discrimination and human rights. How is it that one child is granted 10 support hours a week (still insufficient), while another child with the same or similar needs only receives one support hour?

We call for all political parties and independents to adopt policy following extensive consultation, for the development and implementation of ‘National Standards for Disabilities and Special Needs in Education’ to adequately support the needs of children with an ASD/SN in addition to all recognised disabilities. It is highly probable that this will necessitate a newer, modern and updated perspective in teaching methods to suit all children’s learning abilities.

Significant numbers of ASD/SN Australian children are being denied their basic human right to a decent education because of a lack of adequate policy, training and resources. It is discriminatory that children are being turned away from the school(s) of choice because the school is underfunded for training, resources and support services and not able to adequately support their needs. It is also discriminatory that a significant number of children are only allowed to attend school for a couple of hours a day or are getting suspended or expelled because a sensory meltdown is interpreted as naughty behaviour and is escalated due to inadequate handling of the situation. This situation is urgent and **MUST** be immediately addressed.

It is necessary that an inquiry be undertaken that benchmarks other countries standards in education for disabilities, which are way ahead of the standards and practices experienced in Australia.

*The crisis situation is a gross violation of the nation’s Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), administered by the Australian Human Rights Commission.*

### **2) IMMEDIATE NATIONAL POLICY FOR EDUCATION**

We call for:

- a) new policy to mandate suitable and appropriate training in ASD/SN/disabilities for all school principals, teachers and student teachers. This could be introduced in the immediate future as an extension of the Positive Partnerships initiative for example;
- b) the majority, if not all schools to have at least one special needs unit/class. All children deserve the right to a local education and to live inclusively within their own community;
- c) special funding for states/territories that have an inadequate number of special and autism specific schools;

- d) funding for **ALL** schools to employ a special education teacher/consultant and provide ready access to speech and occupational therapists. (*The cost of therapy currently rests on the shoulders of the families who are already financially challenged.*);
- e) safety requirements/standards for all schools needs to be reviewed. Children with ASD/SN must have a safe and secure environment that facilitates social inclusion and one that is not partitioned off from the neurotypical students. Every Australian child deserves access to a safe and secure school regardless;
- f) a significant increase in funding for Education Support Officers (ESO) and Student Support Officers (SSO) to provide appropriate support to teachers and students;
- g) all teaching degrees to adequately prepare student teachers with the knowledge and skills to teach children with ASD/SN/disabilities, including suitable teaching methods for ASD/SN/disabilities that can be integrated into mainstream education. This is essential to support teachers with their daily responsibilities, substantially reduce incidences of discrimination and create a more inclusive and tolerant society.

### 3) IMMEDIATE INCREASE IN HEALTH & SUPPORT SERVICES

**Support for National Disability Reform (i.e. an appropriate National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) that includes the following):**

- Services for people of all ages, regardless of how their disability was acquired;
- An **'inclusive'** and **'streamlined'** system where the scheme is not separate from Medicare. Having separate systems will mean there is still the idea that people with disabilities are, and should be dealt with differently, facilitating prejudices within the community.
- An NDIS must be easy to navigate, streamlined and not facilitate an increase in the cost of therapy like the FaHCSIA funding did, i.e. to be completely integrated with the existing Medicare system;
- Lifetime funding that ensures people beyond the age of 6 receive the necessary support services;
- Appropriate respite and support for carers with a variety of service options for families;
- Streamlined and accessible health and therapy services with no to minimal waiting lists;
- Choice of medical provider and/or therapists;
- Employment opportunities and training for people on the spectrum and their carers;
- Case management;
- Counseling available to all families, particularly during and after the diagnosis of an ASD/SN/developmental delay;
- Funding to include access to free social skills training for all children with an ASD or developmental delay;
- Funding to be allocated for support programs for siblings of children with an ASD/SN/disability;
- Funding to include access to free social skills/support groups for adults with an ASD/SN;
- Increased access to services for a diagnosis, with increased funding and decreased waiting lists. Services to include easier access for adults with a suspected ASD or developmental delay;
- Implementation of a national database (preferably through the Medicare system) to accurately record statistics of all Australians with a disability. This database must be able to record and recognise multiple disabilities/conditions for an individual for statistical purposes.

**Note:** Each of the above issues needs to be addressed with positive outcomes achieved while waiting for the outcome of a National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

### 4) MANDATORY TRAINING FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS IN ASD/SN

**We propose that the existing Positive Partnerships initiative (or something similar) be extended to provide as a minimum ASD/SN training, including a component on discrimination for:**

- General Practitioners and medical specialists;
- ALL School Principles;

- student teachers;
- student therapists;
- community professionals such as emergency services;
- staff from Government Agencies such as Dept. Of Transport, Centrelink, etc where important decision are made regarding someone's eligibility for public services.

*“I was told by two different GPs that my son at the age of 11 months, not yet crawling or sitting up, was just 'slow'. When a specialist finally noticed, it was an 8 month wait until he could be assessed. He was diagnosed with autism a year and a half after my initial concerns were taken up with a GP. Being my first child and also the fact that I was young and unaware that doctors could be so wrong about something so important, has left me heartbroken. I agree 100% that all GPs should have MANDATORY training!” Jessica Booker.*

## **5) NATIONAL CONSISTENCY & ACTION ON DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION & VILIFICATION**

**We call for national standards and consistency when dealing with disability vilification, i.e. national consistency with Anti Discrimination Acts pertaining to disabilities.**

Discrimination and social exclusion against people with a disability and special needs is widespread in Australia and is in many cases a direct result of Government Policies at all levels. People with disabilities and special needs deserve the same opportunities as the everyday Australian without all the hardships being faced. There have been many incidents of disability discrimination and vilification in the media in recent times, which is making the plight of affected families even more difficult.

In addition to the vilification being experienced by people with a disability or special needs themselves, their carers also experience this treatment with serious consequences, such as social exclusion and the loss of jobs.

To download a copy of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992, go to:

<http://www.comlaw.gov.au/ComLaw/Legislation/ActCompilation1.nsf/0/C3380D1AC643D437CA25768E0011A400?OpenDocument>

## **6) AUTISM ACT and AUTISM STRATEGY FOR AUSTRALIA**

We call for the Australian Federal Government to follow England's lead and look to introduce an Autism Act and Autism Strategy for Australia, ensuring both adults and children with an autism spectrum disorder are represented. (It is important that people who have developmental delay/special needs are represented under such policy.)

In November 2009, England committed to improving outcomes for adults with an autistic spectrum condition through the Autism Act 2009. From this, an autism strategy to improve the provision of relevant services by local authorities, NHS bodies and NHS foundation trusts was published in March 2010.

“The English Government has committed to amending the Children and Young People's Plans (CYPPs), which are the key strategic planning tool for local authorities, as the Bill has suggested. Through a different Bill, called the Apprenticeship, Children, Skills and Learners Bill, the Government will place a new legal duty to ensure that local areas collate and share data on disabled children as part of their CYPP needs assessments and include children with autism in their plans for children's services. Ministers also made a commitment that the statutory guidance that accompanies these duties will state that autism must be specified as a specific category on these registers.” Excerpt from The National Autistic Society – Autism Act: frequently asked questions document.

<http://www.autism.org.uk/>

'Vote 4 Autism & Special Needs in 2010' is proudly supported by Autism Advisory Support Service (AASS). AASS are the providers of the only national 24 hour Autism Hotline, which is operated by volunteers (ASD Mums) and relies on the generosity of donations to continue its operations. [www.aass.org.au](http://www.aass.org.au).

Rainbowland Autism Services proudly launched the inaugural 'Autism Rainbow Day' (global awareness campaign) on Friday 30<sup>th</sup> April 2010. Due to the campaign's success (with 15,000 global members on its dedicated Facebook Cause), Autism Rainbow Day has become an annual event and will be celebrated in 2011 on Friday 29<sup>th</sup> April during Autism Awareness Month in Australia. [www.rainbowlandautismservices.com](http://www.rainbowlandautismservices.com)



Please contact either Rainbowland Autism Services (RAS) or Autism Advisory Support Service (AASS) regarding this campaign.



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