

Local autism group looking for mutual support

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By Kristena Schutt-Moore

At the age of two, Erin Browning's daughter was diagnosed with autism and has been waiting for support ever since. Now four, Skyler is still on a wait list to receive therapy and funding promised by the Ontario government.

“So as a parent, you have a child that will not really go into restaurants or stores or anything, and you get a little inward if you know what I mean,” explains Browning. “You don't get to go out and socialize. I was getting a little desperate. I needed somebody to talk to, some people who kind of related to me. So I started the support group.”

That support group is called the Bancroft Autism Support Group. She created it after researching online and finding the Ontario Autism Coalition which helps families find supports and programs. The members include experts in mental illness and issues, including autism, and most importantly the families that have children with autism. Some members are adults who deal with different forms of autism themselves. This group of volunteers recently gathered together and went to Queen's Park to protest the changes that were made to Ontario's Autism Program.

The Bancroft group is based on Facebook and can be found under the search name “Autism Support Group Bancroft Ontario” and was created for the purpose of providing mutual support. Those who are living with autism in their family are able to support one another, share stories and information and even give advice based on their own experiences.

Currently both the Bancroft group and the OAC are protesting the changes that have been made to the Ontario Autism Program. Originally this program was designed to help all children up to the age of 18. Now with changes, children under six with autism could qualify for up to \$140,000 for support and therapy while children six years of age to 18 can qualify for up to \$55,000.

According to the OAC, this funding will be rationed by age and income. So if a household that the child is in makes up to \$55,000 the funding for that child is reduced. As Browning puts it, “That's two parents both having a minimum wage job.” This means that every year the family would receive roughly \$5,000 a year to help support their child and if the household makes more than minimum wage, the amount would be reduced and they would have even less support.

This can make things difficult as therapy for those with severe autism can be upwards to \$90,000 per year, especially for those who are non-verbal or have difficulty learning the basics like potty training or feeding themselves.

What the OAC has asked the government for is child-based funding. Each child diagnosed with autism is different and each family faces individual challenges. Browning says that, “funding cannot be based on age, it needs to be based on need and the government is not listening to us right now.”

This is also part of the reason that Browning created the Bancroft support group. Bancroft currently has no services for children with autism, and parents can feel very isolated. Reaching out for help can sometimes feel difficult so Browning wanted to make it simple and easy to give people a way to help each other and gather information and support without the need to travel or try to fit more programs or meetings into busy schedules.

Currently the Bancroft group has 60 members who are sharing information and asking questions to help the lives of their children. More are always welcome.