

Mr Bill Shorten MP
Federal Parliamentary Secretary for
Disabilities and Children's Services
Parliament House
Canberra

24 April 2008

RE: AUTISM PROPOSALS FOR TASMANIA

Dear Mr Shorten

I welcome the opportunity to meet with you in Hobart as arranged by Senator Carol Brown. To facilitate this discussion I have enclosed two documents prepared by my organisation.

The first is a proposal for the promised Early Intervention Centre for Devonport. The proposal is based on information from two centres in New Jersey (USA) which are regarded as world's best practice for these types of centres. [See Proposal Document]

The second is a copy of a letter sent to the State Premier, Mr Paul Lennon, detailing the organisation's concerns at the situation for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders [ASDs]. Mr Lennon has acknowledged our correspondence and indicated he will respond in person. [See Children At Risk]

Sir, my organisation has deep concerns that the present Federal initiatives will be squandered in Tasmania, and will lead to little change in the position of children with ASDs in our State.

The parochial nature of Tasmania is already raising its ugly head. We know that each area is vying with each other; Launceston and Hobart feel the centre should be in their area, while we also know another group is trying to change the location in the North West from Devonport to Burnie. We, however, as the largest organised and most active Autism group in the State, have adopted the attitude that the promise has in fact been made for the centre to be located in Devonport, and it is so important to our children to have an evidence-based Early Intervention Centre in the State that the promise must be supported.

We do have concerns, however. We can expect that as a result of having a world's best practice facility that just under 50% of the children who attend the centre will be able to cope with and achieve in a normal school setting. The others will still need support in the schools they attend to ensure they do not lose the gains they have made.

At present, however, our schools do no more than baby sit our children. Many of these children break down and become violent. If we are to experience the full benefit of this initiative we will need the co-operation of the State Government and its various agencies.

I am aware that there is a tender being called for at the moment for the education of teachers and parents. My organisation fears this will consist of just another round of seminars in which we are told what autism is, but **not** what we can do about it. If the education programmes instituted do not supplement the teaching practice in the Early Intervention Centre, then someone will walk away with a lot of money, but our children will benefit not one iota.

Similarly, if the centre is to succeed we need to be able to diagnose at an early age. In Tasmania, diagnosis is very hard to get, and many children are not diagnosed until they are of school age.

We know that in many states of America they are mandating screening by using the modified CHAT system before children are 2 years old. There is 95% accuracy with this system. My organisation believes that this can only be done in Tasmania by training the nurses at Child Health Centres to do the

initial screening, and then refer those suspected to have ASDs to a multi-disciplinary panel for confirmation, and for the development of appropriate individual programmes for each child.
We hope to be able to discuss these matters with you when we meet so that we can ensure that the Federal initiatives are a success in Tasmania

Yours
Roger Law
Secretary **ATAC** - Action for Tasmanian Autistic Children

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