

From:
To: laehsc@parliament.wa.gov.au
Date: Thu, May 1, 2008 12:04 pm
Subject: General health screening of children at pre-primary and Primary school level

The Principal Research Officer
Education and Health Standing Committee
Legislative Assembly

Parliament House
Perth WA 6000

Dear Doctor Worth,

I have two children who are both on the Autism Spectrum. Both were diagnosed as having Aspergers syndrome at around 10 years of age. This means they struggled for many years with problems that could have been treated early on if people had been aware of what was going on. Early treatment and understanding would have certainly increased the chances of school being a supportive and understanding environment instead of one that caused a great deal of pain and mental anguish for all of our family.

One of the greatest difficulties with Asperger's syndrome is that it is a hidden disability. Teachers who do not have the education to understand what they are seeing make the assumption the child is being naughty when in fact they are behaving in a different way because of their need to be educated in ways that are different from the general population.

As a great number of children with Aspergers are completely different behaviourally at home and at school it may be that the problems which crop up at school are not seen at home and so the child may go a very long time before someone picks up that things need to be done to support them.

Because my children were so advanced academically the assumption that they were being naughty is entirely understandable but it has meant that I have struggled for years to get them the support they need to be successful.

Unfortunately in my sons case the problems at school ended up being so enormous that my son has been homeschooling for the past two years on the recommendation of his pediatrician with a clinical psychologist recommending that he never return to school.

With a far greater understanding of Autism Spectrum now then I had 5 years ago I can see that he would have easily been picked up at Kindy level had he been assessed by someone who knew what they were looking for. On bad days I sit and think about how much more social he would be now if he had recieved the help he needed in his early childhood.

People who know what they are looking for can often pick up the warning signs of autism within a few minutes of being in the company of children on the spectrum.

The assesment of autism can be long and convoluted but an initial assesment

can raise the awareness that further investigation may be warranted.

The other concern that I have with the system as we found it (My children are now 13 and 15 so it may be that the system has changed) was that when a teacher did refer my son for assessment by the health nurse it was never done. The teacher contacted the health nurse to arrange for her to talk to me but as the health nurse never contacted me I assumed that the teachers concerns had reduced and never followed it up. While I accept that I could have followed up on that myself, my child was not assessed for another two years after this concern was first raised, and so he missed out on at least two years of understanding and support.

So I would ask that children be assessed for autism spectrum on their entry into the school system. Given that the early warning signs of autism spectrum can be hidden in the early years it would be extremely beneficial to re assess at year 4 level when indicators of concern are becoming more pronounced with the child being left behind socially. While it may not be necessary to assess all year 4's for autism it would certainly be beneficial to assess those children who are being left out or bullied, perhaps seem cheeky and require more teacher time then expected.

Children that are being targeted by bullies or who make frequent complaint of bullies even if nothing is seen are worth investigating for the possibility of autism spectrum disorder.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the improvement of the health assesment of our children.

Kind regards
Donna Philp