

Autism Spectrum Disorder **Action Plan**

Progress Report—Spring 2012



Front cover:

A young artist works in a window at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in Halifax during the Autism Arts program, a partnership between the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia and Autism Nova Scotia. *(Photo: Courtesy of Art Gallery of Nova Scotia)*

Introduction

Government recognizes the complex lifespan needs of persons with autism. Government also recognizes the vital role that early intervention plays in the quality of life for individuals with a diagnosis of autism.

The provincial departments of Education, Community Services, Health and Wellness and Justice worked with community partners and organizations to develop an Autism Spectrum Disorder Action Plan. The action plan recognizes the need for enhanced early intervention services for children and the impact these services will have over their lifespan. The government also recognizes the need for further supports throughout the lives of individuals with autism. The action plan is designed to support children, youth and adults with ASD and their families through a phased-in approach. It includes five key focus areas:

- Intervention and support services for families with preschool children diagnosed with ASD
- Supports for school-aged children with a diagnosis of ASD
- Supports for adults with ASD and their families
- Skills training and awareness
- Partnerships to support programming and services

Government is supporting the plan with ongoing and new investments to strengthen government, community, and individual capacity to address the lifespan needs of persons with autism. Some work in this plan is new, some was already underway, and other work has been refocused or rounded out to address a particular gap.

The action plan has also created opportunities for ongoing dialogue and networking between government and community groups. Working together, we can improve the programs and services for persons with autism.

This progress report gives an overview of the status of new actions government has taken in each of the five focus areas to address the lifespan needs of persons with autism.

Professional Development

Thanks to 'Social Thinking' training provided to team members, my son Ethan is learning that everything that upsets him does not require a huge response. Amazing teaching tool from well-trained people!

— *Marsha, parent*

I have been provided with training opportunities involving best-practice methods for persons with autism spectrum disorders. The training provided has meant I can support students with ASD more effectively by creating an environment in my classroom within which they are more able to learn.

Through this approach built on these training opportunities, my students are able to focus on tasks in a step-wise manner. This process has supported them in experiencing success: socially, functionally and academically.

—*Elsa, Learning Centre Teacher*

Preschool services EIBI

The EIBI program has made such a difference for our family. My son's speech has come along, he's learned how to interact with his peers, and he is excelling in the little day-to-day things.

—*Tina, parent*

Our son went from a silent, frustrated little boy to a boy with a voice. I believe the boy with a voice was always there. EIBI taught us, as parents, how to nurture it enough that we could understand it. I would be the first to admit our son did learn and grow throughout this past year. But the biggest (and best) change and growth have been in my husband and me.

—*Melaney, parent*

School services

Our 14-year-old son is able to succeed in the mainstream classroom and is learning to become an independent young man thanks to the dedicated professionals on his program planning team who work with us, his family.

—*Susan, parent*

Actions and Accomplishments

Intervention and support services for families with preschool children diagnosed with ASD

- Nova Scotia is providing \$4 million over two years to ensure Early Intensive Behavioural Intervention (EIBI) is available to all preschool children.
 - \$2 million was invested in the District Health Authorities (DHAs), the IWK Health Centre and Nova Scotia Hearing and Speech Centres in 2011-12 for the hiring and training of new team members to implement and support the EIBI program across the province. The second disbursement will occur in the coming year.
 - All children with ASD who are eligible to start school in 2013 will have the option to receive EIBI.
- The province provided \$247,000 in new funding to Early Intervention programs. This allowed 100 new families to access Early Intervention programs in 2011-12.
- \$1.3 million in new funding was invested to expand the Department of Community Services Income Guidelines. This will allow approximately 80 more families of children under age 19 with disabilities to access Direct Family Support for Children funding.
- The province has provided \$420,000 in new funding for an Enhanced Family Support Program, which will be implemented in 2012. This program will assist families who are supporting children or adult family members who live at home and have disabilities that require enhanced care. This funding will help about 12 eligible families access services to address their children's enhanced care and support needs.
- The Department of Health and Wellness is exploring ways to improve access and increase early identification and appropriate timely intervention for 18-month-olds as a way to support improved outcomes for children diagnosed with ASD.

Supports for school-aged children with a diagnosis of ASD

- The Department of Education has hired a Provincial Autism Consultant.
- All school boards have maintained specialized staffing dedicated to supporting students with ASD.
- The Department of Education provides \$413,000 annually in targeted funding for school boards to support resources and professional development related to ASD, as well as transition planning for children with ASD entering school.

Supports for adults with ASD and their families

- \$1.3 million in new funding has been made available for the Independent Living Support and Alternate Family Support program. This includes developing 40 new residential options for persons with disabilities.
- The province has provided \$520,000 to support Access to Community Employment and Education (ACEE) and the Strait to Work program. These programs are collaborations between the Departments of Education and Community Services and the Nova Scotia Community College.
- District Health Authorities were surveyed to identify their capacity for autism assessments and intervention for adults. The DHAs are looking at further training requirements that will enable clinicians to provide these supports.

Skills training and awareness

- Fifty 911 dispatchers have received training in Project Lifesaver, a search and rescue tracking system that makes it easier to find people with autism when they stray from their homes.
- The Department of Justice is developing online training related to ASD for law enforcement officials, in consultation with Autism Nova Scotia.
- The Physician Toolkit, a tool for assisting persons with autism developed by the Miriam Foundation, is being reviewed to determine its relevance for Nova Scotia physicians.

Transition to work

The Student Service Teacher Leader helped schedule visits and test drives to Strait to Work and she answered any questions I had. I feel I can go to Strait to Work on my own now because I know where all the rooms are. The transition to Strait to Work is better than just going (to work) because I would have been very nervous and it got me to calm my nerves and got me familiar with the people.

—Taylor, young person with ASD

Teacher training

No two students diagnosed with autism are alike. The training provided has been crucial for enabling me to effectively support all my students with autism—socially, emotionally and academically.

—Cindy, resource teacher

As a Learning Centre teacher, I feel well-prepared and I truly appreciate the outstanding training and resources available to effectively teach social thinking, functional behavior and life skills to students with ASD. I know I can count on our ASD team to support us with their enthusiasm, expertise, and above all their genuine concern for our students and their families.

—Teresa, resource teacher

Family support

Parents can appreciate the need for a break from the day-to-day challenges of caring for children with disabilities. The respite offered through the Direct Family Support for Children Program has made that bit of time away possible.

—David, parent of two sons with autism

This investment means that many families who weren't eligible before now have access to this program and the help it offers. This kind of funding can make all the difference to families caring for a child with a disability. It means families can breathe a little easier and be in a better position to make the decisions that best fit their needs.

—Dr. Noni MacDonald, professor of pediatrics at Dalhousie University

Partnerships to support programming and services

- The Departments of Education, Health and Wellness, Community Services and Justice have collaborated to ensure the implementation of the ASD Action Plan.
- The Department of Education partners with other Atlantic provinces on the Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority (APSEA) Autism in Education project. Initiatives for 2011-12 included:
 - Work began on a website that will provide an Atlantic Provinces community of practice. The site will be launched in spring 2012.
 - Research-based Information Papers were developed on topics including Service Dogs and Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Evidence-Based Practice. These papers will be made available in both official languages through the APSEA and Department of Education websites.
 - More than 140 educators attended a one-day workshop in Nova Scotia with Dr. Hanna Rue, Director of Evidence-Based Practice at the National Autism Center in Massachusetts. Dr. Rue presented on the topic of Evidence-Based Practice and Autism in the Schools.
- Department of Justice staff met with Autism Nova Scotia and the Autism Society of Cape Breton to discuss safety needs.
- Sixteen ground search and rescue teams have been trained on Project Lifesaver, and 12 are now fully operational. Eight teams are scheduled for training over the next year.
- The Nova Scotia Education Leadership Consortium (NSELC), a partnership with the Department of Education, offered modules on ASD during the past two school years.
- Discussions have taken place with the Department of Labour and Advanced Education's Post-Secondary Disability Services division on providing ASD information sessions for the disability resource facilitators at the Nova Scotia Community College.
- The Nova Scotia Community College will offer an advanced diploma in Behavioural Interventions beginning in September 2012.

- The Department of Health and Wellness provided the Provincial Autism Centre with \$8,000 through regional development grants to support a two-year implementation of the Summer Camp for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Funding is focused on supporting physical activity for children with autism in three ways:
 - developing a toolkit for campers’ families
 - providing educational sessions for families on keeping active beyond the camp experience
 - acquiring specialized equipment designed to meet the physical activity needs of children with autism



Transition into school

School transition process meetings put your mind at ease so you know that everybody knows your child is coming, and you learn what the school will be able to offer your child. It makes me feel better knowing (the school) has a good idea of what my child needs for support. This process is a big help.

—Parent

Right from the beginning of transitioning to school, all were prepared knowing who our son was and what challenges would be present. These meetings allowed us to structure his day with the best possible chance for success. Planning with the autism consultant and the program planning team has been a plan with expertise... and it is working.

—Anne, parent of a Grade 1 student

Project Lifesaver

It was a great ending. My daughter came home with a few scratches and bug bites. I feel so lucky... Anything could have happened to her. I'm so happy we got this bracelet. I'm so grateful, beyond words.

—Mother of an autistic daughter who wandered away from home while wearing a Project Lifesaver transmitter bracelet.