

NOTES FOR REMARKS: THE HONOURABLE JIM MUNSON
ONTARIO FAMILIES FOR EARLY AUTISM TREATMENT
TORONTO
JUNE 13, 2007

Thank you.

I feel very emotional about the subject of autism. It was because of a meeting, by chance, with the father of an autistic child, that I got involved in the issue. This father's name is Andrew Kavchak and he works for the federal government. At lunch time, instead of eating a sandwich, he wears a sandwich board and walks on Parliament Hill to draw attention to the need for action to help children and families with autism.

It was my emotions that drew me into the issue and made me want to work on behalf of children and families with autism, but since then, after this emotional beginning, I've learned that there are many cut-and-dried reasons to work for this cause.

First of all, there are political reasons: autism is affecting about 1 in 160 families in Canada. It doesn't discriminate and affects all groups of the population and in every region. It's a far-flung constituency, if you will, and one that is getting bigger and, as you can see, certainly getting louder.

Second, there are financial reasons. Autism is a very expensive problem to address. Treatment that is proven to work, Intensive Behavioural Intervention, costs about \$60,000 per year. But not providing treatment is even more expensive because it involves respite care, group homes, and institutionalization. A study by Harvard University puts the annual cost of autism to Canada's economy at \$3.5 billion. And this is without providing care across the board to every child who needs it. But it may surprise you to know that providing this care won't cost us more. It will cost us less. In fact, by spending on treatment, we save \$1.5 million per child, according to research undertaken in 2000.

So you see, addressing the problem is expensive, but not addressing it is even more expensive. Children with autism grow up to be adults with autism. And their devoted parents, who have repeatedly mortgaged their homes and undergone sacrifice after sacrifice to ensure treatment for their children, will one day pass away. And then it will be up to the state to look after the children they leave behind. Only five per cent of adults with autism are self-supporting. What happens to the 95% who need support? It could likely mean institutionalization – an alternative that is extremely expensive, much more expensive than treatment, and perhaps unnecessary, if early treatment is made available.

Harder to measure, but also very important, is the fact that the children who receive this treatment can show remarkable improvements that enable them to be part of society and contribute to it. It is an obvious benefit to individuals and society to treat autism rather than ignore it.

Some of you may be aware that I am also involved in the Special Olympics movement. My connection to this movement goes back many years to my first child, Timothy James

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Alexander Munson, who was born with Downs Syndrome in the late 1960s. He passed away before his first birthday. Being his father for that short time changed me. I learned first hand what it's like to be a parent to a child with special needs.

If I look back to when Timmy was born, people with Downs Syndrome were routinely institutionalized. They were not considered to be part of society. Thanks to many efforts by many people, and I think thanks in particular to the Special Olympics movement, today we don't consider people with Downs Syndrome and other mental health problems in the same way. We have come along way and we see these citizens taking their rightful place in our society.

If I look at autism today, I think we are where we were in the 1960s for Downs Syndrome. We don't support children and families with autism as we should. We don't make treatment that is known to work universally available. Without blinking, we consider institutionalization as an acceptable course of action. I'm here today to say that we must move forward and make the necessary investments in these children and their families. We can't afford not to for financial reasons and for moral reasons.