

## **NLASLPA Autism Special Interest Group Report**

### **Annual Meeting of Members- 2018**

The Autism Special Interest Group has continued to meet on approximately a monthly basis over the past year. Meetings are typically held by teleconference. The members of the committee are as follows:

Ann Marie Vatcher (acting chair)  
Ashleigh Noel (chair-about to return following maternity leave)  
Michelle Delahunty  
Terri Kennedy  
Dianne Snow  
Sarina Barker  
Colette Blanchard  
Sandy Crowley

We are in the process of arranging a webinar by Nicole Smyth and Brenda Bishop to update interested members of NLASLPA on what is happening with JASPER in the province.

As well, our committee recently provided the following questions and concerns, which will be shared by NLASLPA executive at the upcoming meetings with the Ministers of Education and Health. These points highlight our current areas of focus.

**1.** Oral language is the foundation for academics. For instance, children with oral language impairments are 4 to 5 times more likely to have reading difficulties. At least 5% of school-aged children have a speech and/or language disorder. Furthermore, the prevalence of autism in NL is 1.8 percent or 1 in 57 children and youth, which is higher than the national average. The number of school-based Speech-Language Pathologists has not increased in over 20 years, despite the increase of children diagnosed with ASD. S-LPs are extremely over-extended in the school system in our province, resulting in insufficient time and resources to adequately service children, including those with Autism. As such, services must often be consultative in nature, or conducted in groups, leaving students, parents, teachers, and the Speech-Language Pathologists themselves frustrated and dissatisfied. Unlike certain other professionals working in education, Speech-Language Pathologists do not have an allocation formula specifying the number of speech-language pathologists which should be hired for a given number of students. The Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists & Audiologists (CASLPA), now called Speech-Audiology Canada (SAC), has recommended a caseload size of at most 40 students. However, the majority of S-LP's in the province have caseloads of 70-90 students, and some have caseloads of over 100. We noted that the 2018 budget included \$ 3.1 million dollars for reading specialists, learning resource teachers, and instructional assistants. Is there a plan to hire more S-LPs in education in the near future?

**2.** Given the money the government of NL continues to invest into providing evidence-based intervention programs for children with Autism, it is well recognized by NLASLPA that government values the importance of S-LP services for children who have a diagnosis of Autism. However, to avail of these programs children are required to have a diagnosis of Autism. Current wait times for diagnosis in this province are growing, which have resulted in children waiting for an assessment for diagnosis in some areas up to 18 - 19 months after referral. Consequently, they have not been able to avail of the

intervention programs that would provide the best outcomes for them. Recognizing the value of early intervention, it seems that having to wait longer for the intervention programs that would provide the best outcomes because of having to wait for assessment for diagnosis is contradictory to early intervention strategies.

**3.** Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists within the province of NL currently have a licensing body to monitor their conduct. Is there currently a licensing body within the province that guides the scope of practice of Child Management Specialists / Behaviour Management Specialists / Senior Therapists? Who would receive challenges pertaining to this particular group of health professionals?

**4.** The current education system supports the *inclusion* of children with special needs within the classroom setting, as much as reasonably possible. The teachers of our province work extremely hard to support the diverse needs of these students within their classrooms, however limited inservicing is provided to support teachers who have students with Autism within their classes. Difficulty with communication and social language skills are especially challenging for those on the spectrum. Speech-Language Pathologists specialize in communication and social language skills. We serve an extremely important role in guiding teachers and providing therapy to students with ASD. Open dialogue with parents, Instructional Resource Teachers, and IEP meetings are important to gain information about students. However, with more children coming into the school system with a diagnosis of ASD, or receiving the diagnosis once in school, *NLASLPA advocates for improved education for teachers themselves, so that they can better understand and support the ever-changing needs of students with ASD.* This could be achieved early in a teacher's training through a mandatory course at Memorial University in order to meet the requirements for an Education degree.

**5.** Children who are diagnosed with ASD can obtain great benefit from the social experiences they receive from daycare, especially given the inherent deficits in social communication that occurs with this diagnosis. As such, families have been encouraged to avail of the Inclusion Supports Program (offered through the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development) as a means to support their child's functioning within an inclusive child care setting. Unfortunately, limited qualified daycare staff are available for hire, and daycare staff present with limited training/experience in working with children with disabilities, such as Autism.

*We ask that government support Early Childhood Educators by providing further education at their initial level of training (i.e. college level). Further education is needed in the areas of typical child development, how to support the speech, language and social skills of children through play within childcare settings, and how to support children with special needs.*

One recommended program is The Hanen Centre's *Learning Language and Loving It*. This 12-week course was designed to provide early childhood educators with practical strategies for helping *all* children in the classroom build language and social skills, no matter what their learning profile. This program is offered by a Hanen Certified speech-language pathologist who can lead the program to a group of up to twenty educators. The content and layout of this particular program also lends itself to working as a semester-long course at the College level. Such coursework would provide a solid foundation for ECEs, and is one that is supported by NLASLPA should government consider increasing education requirements for ECEs.

**6.** The province of NL currently has a well-established, high-quality program in place to provide early intervention to preschool and school-aged children (up to grade 3) who have been diagnosed with Autism. As each year passes, we are seeing increased numbers of children who no longer qualify for pediatric services, and are now looking to avail of SLP services as an adult and / or are seeking a diagnosis of Autism as an adult. S-LPs play a vital role in assisting adults with Autism to work towards becoming productive members of our society. Is there a plan in place to address this increased demand in SLP services for adults with Autism? Also, will SLPs be provided with opportunities for professional development to ensure that they are providing a high-quality and effective service to this particular demographic?

**7.** The current government continues to invest money in the training and provision of JASPER across the province to support children up to age 8 years with a diagnosis of Autism. NLASLPA is very pleased to see that the government is supporting evidence-based approaches such as JASPER, alongside other therapies, that families can receive. However, little information has been shared about the current plan to provide this treatment to children across the province. As front-line staff who work directly with preschool and school-aged children with Autism, NLASLPA members seek to learn more about JASPER intervention, the phases of it's roll-out across the province, and how it will fit into the current treatment model (namely alongside the current ABA program/model). Updates to keep involved professionals abreast of new information is needed to support our clients and families.

**8.** The complex needs of children with Autism are best met with a coordinated team of professionals. Unfortunately, communication and coordination between Regional Autism Services/Intervention Services and the various team members, including Speech-Language Pathologists, is often lacking. We would like to work towards a more collaborative approach and welcome ideas on how to achieve this. For example, could a broadcast email system be used to share general information?

Our committee is actively seeking an S-LP to join our committee from Western NL, which would then give us representation from all regions of the province. If interested, please contact Ann Marie Vatcher at [ann.vatcher@bellaliant.net](mailto:ann.vatcher@bellaliant.net). If anyone has questions, comments, or suggestions for our committee, feel free to pass them on to any member.

Respectfully submitted,

Ann Marie Vatcher (Acting Chair)