

# Family gambles on son's future

## Autistic pre-schooler benefits from intensive training program

By Carol Sanders

WHEN Marek Laczko was diagnosed with autism at the age of two, his parents were determined to give him the best start they could. They moved from Dauphin Beach to Winnipeg in the hope of getting him into a special pilot project for autistic pre-schoolers. Luck wasn't on their side.

Just 22 of the 46 children who applied for the program run out of St. Amant Centre were accepted. Marek's wasn't one of the names drawn.

"We were pretty devastated," said his mother, Martine Bonneau-Laczko. "We made the move for him." The program that uses Applied Behaviour Analysis has been proven to help children with autism, a brain disorder that affects language and communication skills, for which there's no known cause or cure.

When Marek was first diagnosed, the Laczkos contacted Manitoba Families for Effective Autism Treatment and found out about ABA, an intensive teaching regimen that helps autistic children cope and learn.

The Laczkos had to go to Quebec to find a French-speaking ABA consultant

to set up the program for Marek. It requires his parents and teaching assistants at his day care to work with him at least 30 hours a week.

Bonneau-Laczko said the program involves breaking down tasks into simpler tasks that are taught and reinforced over and over again.

"It's repeat and repeat and redo," she said.

Marek's ABA consultant has a doctorate in psychology and charges \$100 an hour plus expenses, and needs to see Marek at least four times a year to revamp his training program.

"Every time she comes, it costs \$4,000 to \$5,000 and Blue Cross doesn't cover it."

With teaching supplies she purchases out of pocket, Bonneau-Laczko estimates they're spending more than \$20,000 a year.

They were hoping to get him into the government-funded pilot program in Winnipeg this year. They quit their

jobs, moved to the city in August and found new teaching positions.

Life didn't get any easier, though. Marek didn't get in the pilot program and his parents ended up having to make two mortgage payments on a house here and one in Dauphin Beach that didn't sell till last month.

*"It was a rough time. But when you see the results, it's really rewarding"*

— Martine Bonneau-Laczko



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Bonneau-Laczko, with son Marek, says his training is rewarding.

"It was a rough time."

Bonneau-Laczko said it's been expensive and exhaustive.

"But when you see the results, it's really rewarding."

The two years of ABA have seen a huge transformation in Marek's behaviour, she said.

"He wasn't talking, he was still wearing a diaper and when he wanted something he would scream and hide in the

corner," she said. Now he's swimming, skating, going to a weekly gym class and getting ready for kindergarten in the fall.

"Life would be hell (without the ABA program)," she said. "I don't know where he'd be with another method. There's been a substantial change and lots of progress."

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## Program

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"It's motivating kids to move when they don't really want to," he said. The gym program has a circuit of different activities where children start off in small groups and make their way through it with lots of support and positive reinforcement. Gradually the kids progress toward the more-crowded, more rambunctious gym.

"They end up liking to move and do it for the enjoyment," said Molgat. Kids who wouldn't make eye contact are learning how to play with other children.

"They will enjoy socializing for the joy of socializing."

### Volunteers

More than 40 volunteers are involved — many of whom are University of Manitoba psychology students doing their practicum, he said.

They've matched some students with autistic children outside of the program for families who couldn't attend the program because of schedules.

In January, the U of M began offering a program in Applied Behaviour Analysis, and the gym program was invited to be a practicum site for the ABA students, said Molgat.

The program uses ABA principles of breaking down tasks into simpler tasks, then using positive reinforcement and repetition.

The demand for the intensive method of behaviour modification that draws autistic children out of their shell is huge, said Molgat.

A provincially-funded pilot project at St. Amant Centre treating autistic children using ABA had 46 applicants but just 22 spaces, and that program was just for pre-schoolers, he said.

There are no publicly-funded ABA programs for school-aged children who are autistic, he said.

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