



# COMMUNITY

## Now's the time to educate about autism

*Still a general lack of understanding about the condition, says mother of autistic boy*

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**M**iltonian Tracy Reigel knows what it's like to have judgmental people silently take in her son's apparent temper tantrums and wonder what kind of a mother she is.

It happens in the mall, in restaurants, in the hospital.

But what those people don't know is that five-year-old Connor is autistic.

His occasionally aggressive behaviour doesn't stem from a desire to get what he wants, but from a desire to communicate and an overwhelming sense of frustration when he can't seem to do that.

With April being Autism Awareness Month, it's Tracy's quest to help educate local residents about autism.

Fortunately, people seem to be far more aware than they were five or 10 years ago, but — as the above incidents suggest — there's still a long way to go.

After a few years of becoming incredibly upset when people confronted her about Connor's behaviour, Tracy came up with a unique solution.

### Aims to educate

She now takes out her wallet and hands the individual an 'autism awareness card.'

On one side are the words: "My child's behaviour may seem surprising to you." On the other are facts about autism.

"It raises awareness and I don't have to get into a big verbal explanation," she said.

According to Autism Ontario, autism is a neurological disorder that impacts typical brain development in the areas of communication and social interaction.

Recent research has found one in 165 people have autism, says the Autism Ontario website. In Ontario, there are about 70,000 people with the disorder — some high functioning, some not.

Tracy and her husband, Andrew, knew something wasn't right with their son quite early on.

For the first year of his life, everything seemed fine. But soon after, things seemed to change, Tracy said — common of autism, where children who appear to develop normally can regress.

There was a real lack of communication — vocal and otherwise — and eye contact. Connor didn't respond anymore when his name was called.

His parents initially thought he was hearing impaired, but tests came back normal.

Looking back, Tracy said there were other signs they didn't pick up on, including repetitive behaviour.

Other symptoms of autism, according to Autism Ontario, are limited social interaction, having sensitivities to the five senses, a lack of spontaneous play and anxiety or confusion.

The Reigels received the official diagnosis when Connor was two years old.

The doctor was less than optimistic. He told the parents Connor had severe autism and that he'd probably never speak.

"When your child is first diagnosed, it's devastating because you don't know what the future holds," Tracy said.

She and Andrew believed that early intervention would be key in Connor's development.

Unfortunately, the waiting lists for government-funded Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI) are long.

So the Reigels decided to do all they could on their own as they waited.

### Arms herself with knowledge

Tracy read every book she could find on the subject and attended every workshop she could.

"There's no time for waiting," Tracy said.

She and her husband hired a private therapist and also enrolled Connor in daycare when he was two to help with his social interaction.

Adapting to daycare wasn't easy for Connor. He screamed and cried, and so did Tracy, she admitted.

"But we knew as hard as it was, it was the best thing for him."

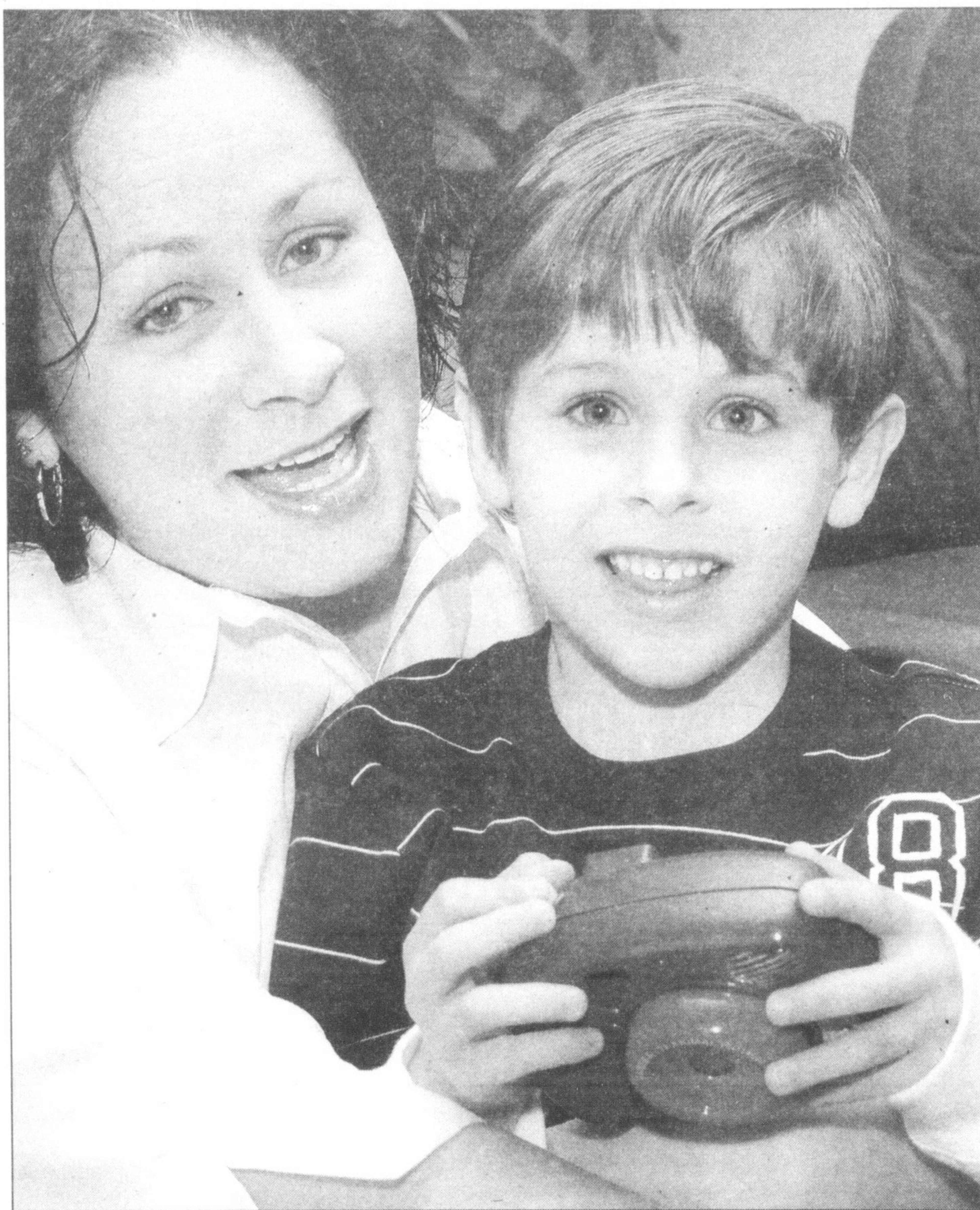
After about a year, Connor was accepted for government-funded IBI-based therapy, and he flourished.

Although people often assume kids with autism don't show any emotion, Tracy explained that in Connor's case, he simply needed to be taught.

This past summer, Connor hit a milestone when he told his mom for the first time — without hearing it first — that he loved her.

Connor has come a long way. He speaks in 10 to 12-word sentences and is learning to read. He socializes with other kids and is classified as having mild to moderate — not severe — autism.

"Yes, Connor has autism, but autism



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**APPLE OF HER EYE:** Tracy Reigel gives five-year-old son Connor a hug as he hold his camera.

doesn't have him," his mom said.

He's continuing to develop his language skills, although there will be a point when he plateaus, Tracy said.

Two days a week he goes to Hawthorne Village Public School, where he's in senior kindergarten, while the other three he goes to therapy.

"Connor is an energetic, happy, lovable kid," Tracy said.

She believes her son is where he is today because of the early intervention and the way he's worked so hard at the various treatments.

Although challenges abound, there's also a lot of good, Tracy explained.

"Connor has taught me a lot. He's taught me to appreciate the little things in life."

She added it's also brought their family closer together. Connor's sister, eight-year-old Ashleigh, is great with her little brother and has adapted well, Tracy said, adding, "It's been quite the journey."

Tracy hopes families in similar situations will be encouraged by Connor's story.

"I want parents to know that autism isn't the end of the world... I remember when Connor was diagnosed saying to my husband, 'I don't want pity or people saying they're so sorry, because there's nothing to be sorry about.' I wouldn't change Connor — he's brought us so much joy."

For more information on autism, visit [www.autismontario.com](http://www.autismontario.com).

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