

York parents share resources

The Human Factor

A series exploring the struggle to provide services for a growing population

Staff writer Mitchell Brown examines child-care issues



BY MITCHELL BROWN
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On his good days, five-year-old Eric Segal remembers the steps to washing his hands, from turning on the faucet to drying his hands on a towel.

On other days, he might lick the windows in his home, make gagging noises in front of playmates, or, even worse, open the front door of his Vaughan house and wander into the street, oblivious to the dangers.

It's hard for his mother, Sharon Gabison, to describe how grateful she is those days don't happen as often as they used to, not since Eric started getting the help he needed.

"I always ask myself why," Ms Gabison says while seated in the living room of her Vaughan home.

"I often think about what I did in the first trimester. What did I breathe? What did I drink? Did I inhale substances in an old building or something?"

"I'd really like to know why because if we figure out what's causing the incidence of autism to go up so much ... I'd like to know why so we can stop it."

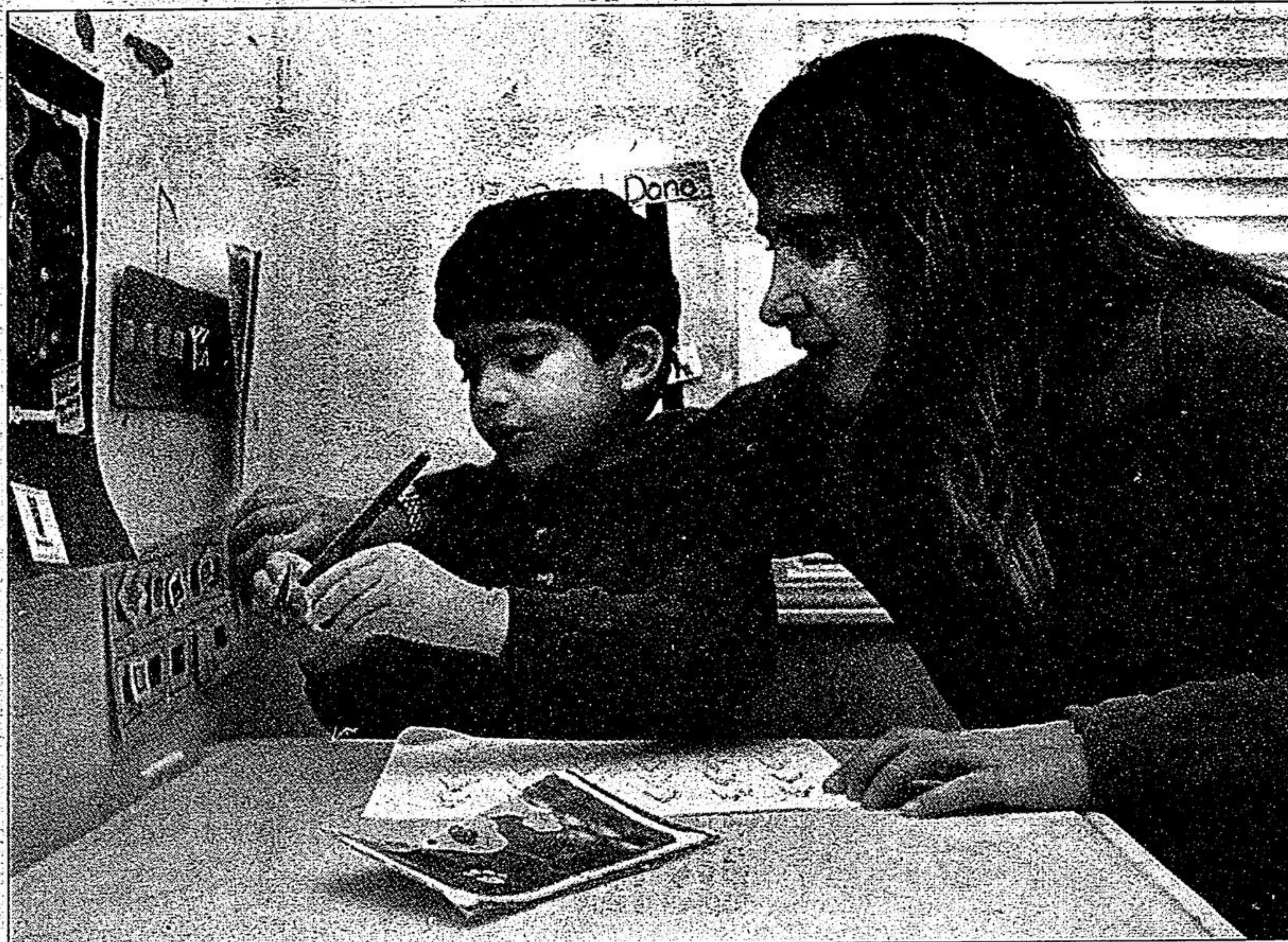
Autism affects as many as one in 200 children and about the only thing experts agree on is the number is going up.

No one's sure what causes it and there are varying degrees of the disease, with symptoms ranging from repetitive motions and inappropriate noises to the inability to react to external factors or cope with minor changes in the environment.

For the children who go untreated, autism can be a cage; for parents, it can be a nightmare.

In many respects, Ms Gabison is one of the lucky ones.

A physiotherapist, she recognized early her then eight-month-old son



Sharon Gabison and son Eric, 5, perform token economy system therapy in Eric's special room.

was slow to develop and so she had him assessed and tested with several specialists to find the cause.

The official diagnosis came in August 2001 and, by that time, the treatment he had already received seemed to affect his behaviour.

Part of that treatment was supplied by the Early Intervention Services department of York Region's family and children's services.

After three months on the waiting list, an interventionist came to assess Eric's case and she recommended a preschool speech and language program to help develop his communication skills.

In the meantime, Ms Gabison came to know other parents of autistic children through local support groups.

She also made the time to find out more about government programs on both the local and provincial levels that were designed to families such as hers.

"The thing is, it was very hard at the beginning," she said. "Not knowing what to do was probably worse. It felt overwhelming at first, but I don't feel overwhelmed anymore."

Currently, Eric is in senior kindergarten and Ms Gabison praises the school staff for their help in giving Eric what he needs to learn.

She was also lucky enough to get Eric into a provincial program for autistic children, one that provides funding for intensive behavioural intervention therapy for children

up to age six.

"He's getting OK," Ms Gabison said. "He's not using grammar correctly, but he's able to request what he wants."

"He still has his behavioural issues, his rigidity and his lack of safety issues, but he's a very friendly child, very affectionate."

"He still does things that are not appropriate, but we still have to work on that."

In 1996, an average of 52 children were on the waiting list for help each month; by 2001, that number had climbed to 85.

Even with the government assistance, though, she estimates it costs her about \$24,000 a year for her child's therapy. Her former husband, a doctor, helps out, but the expenses still leave Ms Gabison in debt.

"There was a news conference at Queen's Park this week where a family talked about having to sell their house to provide services for their autistic kid," she said.

"That's not too far removed from my situation. (My ex-husband and I) both work and we both have pretty decent jobs, but it's hard for any family to meet those kinds of demands."

"If I were a grocery clerk ... I don't know what I would do, especially if I was in an environment where my child wasn't being looked after properly."

She does, in fact, know people who are worse off financially than her and she can only praise services such as the region's EIS for giving parents a chance to cope.

"Just knowing exactly what he needs, that helps," she said. "I sometimes think, 'Oh my God, my life is so difficult', but you just have to go ahead and do it and that's it. You have no choice, really."

Dan Beale is happy to hear such stories. His EIS department helps about 1,200 children and their families every year, but he admits it's becoming harder to keep up with the demand for its services.

"From 1997 through to 2001, we've had a 30 per cent increase in the number of families being served," he said. "That's a significant number; we haven't had a 30-per cent increase in staff in that time."

It's more like 10 to 15 per cent, he figures.

Those numbers can easily be explained by the explosive growth of the region's population, which has grown from roughly 592,000 in 1996 to more than 729,000 in 200.

But there are other factors affecting the region's ability to provide services to its children, especially the ones most in need of help.

"We've noticed over the past

four years an increase in the number of kids entering the service who have more than one identified need," Mr. Beale said.

For example, where most children might have once needed only some speech therapy, now EIS is seeing a growing number with a combination of language delays, behavioural problems and motor difficulties.

It takes more time to assess, develop and deliver programs for these kids and so they stay longer at the expense of other children.

"The question is, if a child was referred to us in, say, January 2001, were they still in service on Dec. 31?" Mr. Beale said.

"Four years ago, 15 per cent were still in service. Last year, that number was 55 per cent. They're coming in with higher needs and you can't address those needs in a one-year period."

Staffing issues — specifically, the problem of attracting qualified therapists to fill what are often short-term contract positions — and changes in funding must be dealt with by Mr. Beale and his staff at York Region headquarters in Newmarket.

For instance, the province has increased its funding for the region's infant development programs, but it also raised the age requirement for that program, meaning more children are eligible to receive help ... and leaving the region to pick up the tab for the shortfall.

Then, of course, there's the fact more and more parents are simply aware of the program and doing what they can to help their children.

In 1996, an average of 52 children were on the waiting list for help each month; by 2001, that number had climbed to 85, a 37 per cent increase over the previous year.

That waiting list concerns Mr. Beale, because EIS is only available for children up to age six. If they don't get the help they need during those crucial preschool years, then they may never get it.

Even more troubling than the number of families waiting for help are those who don't even realize they need it.

Those 1,200 children under EIS care represent about 1.5 per cent of the region's preschool population, said Mr. Beale.

Research on special-needs children estimates anywhere from three to six per cent of the preschool population have some kind of condition, from fetal alcohol syndrome to autism; that should be treated before the child goes to school.

"So as good as the early identification is, there are still a lot of people that we're not seeing," Mr. Beale said. "It's not a totally bleak picture, but we are kind of falling behind."

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