

'Tragic' plight of education for autistic children

THERE are more than 450 children who have been diagnosed with autism in Cork.

Yet there is just one 34-pupil school covering all of Cork and Kerry which has the only scientifically-proven method of improving their quality of life.

The number of children suffering from autism has risen dramatically, by 138% in Cork over the last four years and by 261% in Kerry.

The Irish Autism Action organisation announced last month that they believe autism affects one-in-50 families in Ireland and that there are up to 1,500 children nationwide who are waiting to be diagnosed, as waiting lists for diagnosis can stretch up to two years.

In Cork, 34 pupils attend the Cork CABAS (Comprehensive Application of Behaviour Analysis to Schooling) school.

ABA is a method of teaching which is based on the constant analysis of the child's progress and is tailored to the individual needs of the child. It is usually one-to-one teaching but it can be taught at higher ratios.

Depending on the severity of a child's autistic condition, ABA can mean the difference between an autistic child eventually attending a mainstream school or not. For children with a more severe level of autism, ABA allows them to live as independently as possible.

However, there are too few places for too many children.

Director of CABAS, Mary Lyons explained: "There's a waiting list of 63 to get into CABAS. And because the 34 we have are legally entitled to stay here until they are 18, it means that for the foreseeable future,

'We've waited three years'

"EVERYONE is in dire need of help. These parents are desperate. Their children are getting older every day — time is ticking."

These are the words of Middleton father Brian O'Shea, whose four-year-old daughter, Sarah, is autistic and who is one of 63 Cork children on the waiting list for CABAS.

He has been lobbying the Department of Education for funding for a second ABA school in Cork for the last two years, but to no avail.

"We're on the waiting list for three years this October. We have moved from 43rd place to 27th — that's 16 places in three years," he said.

Brian and other parents like him get access to ABA via home-tuition courses, but this is expensive, working out at almost €2,500 a month. They also have to find their own ABA tutor and pay for an ABA consultant to assess the tutor, which can cost up to



ON THE WAITING LIST: Brian and Sarah O'Shea of Middleton

€75 an hour. While subsidised by the Government, the parents are only reimbursed almost 10 weeks after paying. There is no subsidy for tuition during the month of August.

"We were down €9,000 one month," said Mr O'Shea. "I know of some parents who have to take second jobs just so they can afford to pay the home-tuition costs."

He said the campaign for funding from the department had been a long, arduous one.

"If you don't get the proper help for your child early, you'll never regain that time, you can't turn back the clock.

We were lucky that we had our child diagnosed at two. It took us months to get our heads around the diagnosis but because we discovered ABA early, she has made good advances," he said.

"ABA has changed her considerably for the better, but if you don't get in early we see behavioural problems manifesting," he added.

A Department of Education spokeswoman said the application for a second ABA school in Cork was under consideration, but that an ABA-exclusive intervention was not appropriate for all students.



OLGA CRONIN

nobody can get in — it's tragic."

She said it is even more frustrating because while each child is equally important, the school does not have any opportunity to assess any of the children on the list.

"The thing is there has been a remarkable rise in diagnosis levels but once these children are diagnosed, they have nowhere to go.

"The key to intervention is early diagnosis but children can be waiting up to two years for that diagnosis.

"Parents start to see the signs of autism in a child when they reach about the age of two, when they see that their little one doesn't talk or

react quite like perhaps an older sibling does.

"But the problem is that, by the nature of autism, as they get older they develop behavioural problems and their condition can worsen," said Ms Lyons.

While every autistic child in Ireland is entitled to an education in a mainstream school, this takes place in a pre-fabricated unit on the school grounds where a special needs teacher is assigned to teach the pupil.

However, ABA is not the teaching method used in this situation.

Dr Olive Healy, who received her PhD at University College Cork in 2001, is a lecturer in Trinity College. She con-

sults four ABA schools across the country and said the difference that time makes in getting access to ABA training is crucial.

"The impact of ABA on a child depends on how much progress they make. The impact could range from being able to put a sentence together to being able to follow certain rules.

"But it's a fact that the earlier you get the children, the better the chance that they can make a better life for themselves.

"If I get a two-year-old, the results can be remarkable. The problem is that the door of these ABA schools are more or less closed because there is no expansion.

"The reality is there is a demand in Ireland for about two ABA schools in every county, if not more. The fact that we have only about 15 is terrible. I've seen parents

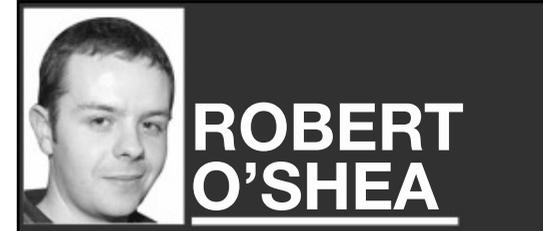
who are forced to put their children into the special pre-fabs in schools because they can't get into ABA schools and because home-schooling is too expensive.

"I've seen autistic children just sit in the back of classrooms who can't partake in anything.

"You can do an awful lot with autistic children between the ages of two and six but after that, behavioural problems can manifest. Even at four or five, anger problems begin to develop," she said.

Dr Healy said giving an autistic child the means to participate in their environment is immensely important.

"I always say it's great to have somebody who can be a part of the community but if you don't have the skills of the community, then it becomes very frustrating for you."



ROBERT O'SHEA

WHEN is somebody going to invent a pair of glasses with a ringtone?

I'm pretty sure I've been banging on about this previously in these pages but it is such an important issue, it bears repeating.

I have never lost a mobile phone. One did fly into a wall in a fit of fury and cascade into smithereens, but never has one got lost.

The simple reason being that you can ring it up and it tells you where it is.

The same cannot be said about car keys, glasses, children in a supermarket or the meaning of life. For all these you must search, fruitlessly often, for minute upon wasted minute that could be saved if they had a ringtone. I'm offering this idea free of charge to genuine inventors out there.

Eighteen months. Four pairs of glasses. That's my story.

It took me a while to admit I had a sight problem. I realised something was wrong first when reporting on matches for this newspaper. Gradually, it became harder to distinguish the numbers on players' backs.

It came to a head when one of the editors in the office said: "You see here where you wrote 'with a flick of the wrist he tapped the ball over the bar'?"

"Yep," I said, sensing I had picked the wrong player, possibly a player who was not on the pitch or retired.

"Well ... you were at a rugby game."

Then there were the buses. I'd be on the edge of the roadway squinting to see if an approaching bus had 'Middleton' written on it. Confident it had, I'd stick out my hand to flag it down and look on as a John A Wood truck sailed by.

Buses also play a part in my glasses' departures.

My fourth pair spent three months in the twilight zone of Bus Éireann Lost and Found department before a tearful reunion inside Cork bus station.

My first pair lasted a fortnight and were jettisoned in a bar where I was drinking Christmas cocktails alone.

My second pair ... well I don't know where these went. One day I just realised I hadn't seen them for some months and they must be gone.

The third pair were rolled over by a van. They were seven days old.

When I returned to my opticians (we are on

first-name terms) I do believe they thought I might be involved in some sort of glasses-smuggling ring.

The pair I have now are my lucky ones, I think.

I have sat on them on numerous occasions, they survived the Bus Éireann ordeal, the dog has tried to munch on them a few times and they were left in somebody I don't know house for several weeks.

Then yesterday I left them on another bus.

I was on the way to the Slide and Splash water park on the Algarve with my brother's family.

They just slipped out of my shorts. This is very upsetting as my eyesight has regressed a bit by now.

With my glasses, I can spot an erect nipple in a bikini top from 50 yards. Without: five.

Cue numerous occasions where I try to grab the hand of various kids who are not my nephew.

And the terrified look on parents' faces as I start leading their children off in other directions. Is it my fault that every boy aged five to seven wearing red trunks looks the same when their hair is wet?

I think we can agree that it is not.

At the water park reception they tell me that they will ring the bus driver.

As the day passes and I throw myself down numerous water tunnels, often an intercom announces another missing child. Although slightly concerned about being the number one suspect, I am also hoping each time the 'bing-bong' goes off, a voice will say: "Will Mr O'Shea come to reception as we have his glasses here." It does not.

I decide I will wait a few months before buying a new pair. Money is tight and faraway is over-rated.

If something is worth seeing, it is worth seeing up close. But when I do buy my next pair, I decide I will also buy trousers with deeper pockets, a piece of string to keep them around my neck and also to write an article about glasses and ringtones.

As I exit the water park, the receptionist calls me over. She waves something in her hand, the gold glint of my frame catches the sun. I am actually close to tears again, but this also has something to do with the chlorine.

I thank her and shove my glasses back in my shorts. We have survived another day. The cosmic ballet goes on.