

State legislature considering autism treatment bills

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TAYLOR, Ala. (AP) - Jesse and Misty Bradley are doing what good parents do - the best they can for their child.

The Bradleys' son Logan, 4, has autism and needs behavioral treatment to help him better adjust to the world around him. The most effective form of treatment - applied behavioral analysis (ABA) - isn't covered by insurance and is expensive. Alabama is one of just five states that do not require insurers to cover this treatment, and while some insurers do provide coverage, the vast majority here do not.

Misty Bradley estimated that applied behavioral analysis services typically cost about \$55 per hour, although some clinics will give discounts to patients paying cash. Misty said she and her husband spend between \$12,000 and \$15,000 out of pocket on their son's care, including ABA and other services, each year, and even that does not provide him with the optimal level of care recommended.

"Many children would benefit from 20 to 30 hours a week," said Kara Etheredge, a board certified behavioral analyst.

Requiring insurers to provide coverage for ABA would help families like the Bradleys better handle the costs of providing care for their children. Misty said providing assistance to families with autistic children now will pay dividends in the future by giving people with autism the skills they need to be independent and contributing members of society.

"If we don't give them what they need at a young age, when they get older they're going to need even more help," she said.

There are several bills in the Alabama Legislature this session that would require insurers to provide coverage for treatments such as ABA or spend state dollars on treatment. Senate Bill 57 would use \$3,000,000 from the Education Trust Fund to provide state-funded ABA services. Senate Bill 164 would require insurers to offer up to \$36,000 per year in coverage for children under the age of 9. A House bill would require insurer coverage, but does not set a ceiling on benefits.

Logan was diagnosed with autism at 18 months. The Bradleys first became concerned about Logan when they noticed he did not respond to his name. Over several months, health care professionals conducted evaluations and determined that Logan had autism. The Bradleys researched Logan's condition and found treatment for him, including a state-funded early intervention program that provided services until he was 3. Logan currently receives some speech and academic support from his local school system.

Applied Behavior Analysis uses behavioral techniques to help children learn how to handle everyday situations. Sessions take place in classrooms and everyday environments such as playgrounds and the dinner table.

Jesse Bradley said ABA has helped Logan learn how to play appropriately with others and helped him develop other skills.

"He's made excellent progress," he said.

Misty said her son's prognosis is uncertain at this point, but he does respond to his name and has developed a better vocabulary, although speech challenges remain.

The Bradleys hope that legislation to provide insurance funding for ABA passes and that society becomes a little more accepting of families dealing with autism.

"You never know what someone else's child is going through," Jesse Bradley said. "You often see people ranting on Facebook about kids' behaviors. We go to events every once in a while and need to deal with his behaviors and it doesn't feel good to be singled out and know what's going through someone's mind."

Information from: The Dothan Eagle, <http://www.dothaneagle.com>

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