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Local families pleased with progress following passage of autism therapy bill

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A recently passed law in Alabama will help families like the Squiers, who have autistic children, with autism therapy coverage. Although Drew is aged out and Shawn almost is from the law's cap of 18 years old, the family still appreciates the progress. From Drew Squiers, Lennie Squiers, Shawn Squiers, Laura Squiers.

Families will now have financial help pursuing autism therapy after a bill Gov. Kay Ivey signed into law May 19 that requires some insurance companies to cover applied behavioral analysis.

The law requires coverage for ABA, an intense and individualized therapy that focuses on improved communication, social skills and other behaviors, until the age of 18.

The passage of the law will help Justin and Sabrina Brown of Auburn pay for ABA therapy for their seven-year-old son Ethan, who is nonverbal and has been receiving therapy twice a week. Justin said their family should begin to receive the insurance Dec. 2018.

"We're looking forward to when the insurance does allow us to receive more," Justin said.

Ethan, who was diagnosed with autism at the age of three, has been developing life skills and learning to communicate in his therapy sessions.

"We use an iPad to communicate," Justin said.

Justin explained what he and his wife hope for the future for his son.

"We want to see him be able to graduate, find a job and live out a full life," Justin said.

Age cap brings difficulties

Opelika resident Luanne Helms expressed her appreciation for the bill, even though her son Jake, who will be 18 in a few weeks, will be unable to benefit from it.

"It's a huge step in the right direction and a win," Helms said. "Jake is homeschooled and I use ABA therapy in our lessons every single day, so I'm comfortable with his education."

Beauregard resident Laura Squiers said capping the age at 18 will prevent her 23-year-old son Drew from being covered on the bill and her 15-year-old son Shawn will only be covered for a year or two since it would not go into effect until December 2018.

"Autism is not something that you grow out of," Squiers said. "If you stop (therapy) at 18, there's a chance that they're going to regress."

Instead of paying for applied behavioral analysis therapy, Squiers pursues different ways for her children to improve their social skills.

Squiers' son Shawn takes part in jujitsu.

"It gives him his focus, self-esteem and eye contact," Squiers said.

She said he also participates in Boy Scouts, marching band and concert band.

"We try to keep him very busy," Squiers said.

Squiers' son Drew races go-carts.

"He's gotten to feel so much more at ease at the track," said Lennie Squiers, Drew and Shawn's grandmother.

Beneficial through adulthood

Lennie said ABA therapy would be beneficial for children with autism to be able to continue as they enter into their adulthood.

"The future for everybody would be so much better with ABA therapy," Lennie said. "We want them to be able to contribute to society. They want to be able to contribute to society."

Lennie extended her gratitude to Sen. Tom Whatley and his work on the bill.

"He has gone above and beyond for our families," Lennie said. "We have been very pleased."

Laura offered advice for parents who have children who will not be able to benefit from the bill.

"You have to be creative and find something that does help your child," Laura said.

Laura explained what she hopes for her children.

"I want them to be able to function in society and have meaningful relationships and (have others) understand what they mean," Laura said.

Lindy Oller

