

## Low funding hits children

By TINA LAW - The Press    Last updated 05:00 19/01/2010

Speech therapists are concerned Kiwi children are missing out on vital help through a lack of funding.

Some children have to wait more than two years to get state-funded speech therapy, and in the meantime may struggle to communicate, possibly leading to behavioural issues, experts say.

Parents were frustrated that their children had been identified as having a problem but could not get treatment because there was no funding, New Zealand Speech-Language Therapists' Association spokesman Dr Dean Sutherland said.

Data suggested up to 20 per cent of children needed help in the first five years.

But the funding targets were much lower, Sutherland said. Children with severe problems tended to get help, but those with mild problems missed out, he said.

The association wanted a review of speech-language services.

Education Ministry special education acting deputy secretary Jill Bond said speech-language therapy services were being covered as part of a review of special education this year.

However, there were no additional resources available, Bond said.

Education Ministry figures show between 11,000 and 13,000 children aged up to five receive speech-language therapy each year. Bond said \$28.4 million was spent on early-intervention services and speech language therapy was a part of that.

She said resources were allocated to each region based on the child population.

Professor Thomas Klee, of Canterbury University's communication disorders department, said children with language and speech problems ended up having difficulties in such areas as social relationships if they did not get help.

"If the foundation skills for language aren't there, it's going to put kids behind from day one," Klee said.

There was also evidence many young offenders had communication difficulties.

Auckland mother Marie Cutler had to pay for private speech therapy for her son, Jack, after being told it would take two years to get state-funded help.

She noticed something was not right with Jack's speech when he was two.

"He didn't make any sense, but he desperately wanted to tell us things.

"Most of the time it [his speech] was just babble."

Jack was assessed by the Education Ministry's special education services, which diagnosed a speech delay.

Cutler said she was told Jack needed more help and was advised to get private speech therapy because the state waiting list was two years long.

The cheapest private speech therapy cost \$50 for a half-hour session.

She estimated Jack had 40 sessions over two years.

State funding came through just as Jack finished his private sessions and no longer needed help.