

AUTISM AND HOPE CONFERENCE OPENING REMARKS

By Barbara Firestone, Ph.D., President and CEO, The Help Group

Hello everyone. This is a watershed day. Our Autism and Hope meeting has convened a most distinguished panel of experts who share a collective commitment to making intensive early intervention available to all children with autism spectrum disorders. Today we begin the first of an ongoing series of autism and hope dialogues-discussions to stimulate positive and potent change that is long overdue for the children affected by autism spectrum disorders and the growing numbers who will be identified with each ensuing year.

This 'Meeting of the Minds' is called Autism and Hope for very good reasons. We are in the new age of autism, a new era of breakthrough research, earlier diagnosis, and increasingly more effective diagnosis, intervention and treatment. The evidence is clear and it is compelling - autism and hope are no longer mutually exclusive.

With as many as one in every 166 children affected by autism, the race is accelerating to find the causes and cures and interventions that hold promise for these children. It is a race that can never be fast enough for the parents who are engaged in their own marathon to find the programs and services and funding that can make the critical difference.

For three decades, The Help Group has been committed to serving children with autism. Helping reach parents and children as early as possible is a critical part of our mission. The Help Group is delighted to co-present Autism and Hope with the Brookings Institution and it is my privilege and pleasure to co chair these proceedings with Michael O'Hanlon, whose personal commitment to this mission and efforts to bring this meeting to fruition deserve our appreciation and congratulations. I join Michael in thanking all of the co-sponsors and our extraordinary group of presenters.

Over the last 20 years, early intervention regimens for autism spectrum disorders have become much more effective. Given intensive early intervention, ideally beginning before age 3, many children with ASD now have prospects for more productive, fulfilling lives. That's the good news. The bad news — and the reason we are gathered here today — is that access to intensive early intervention is limited. We must continue our efforts to accelerate awareness, early identification and diagnosis. But as importantly, we must also ensure that these services are available to all children regardless of family income and ability to pay.

Access to help is the right of all children with ASD, not just a fraction of them. Identification without intervention is incomplete and seriously flawed policy. It denies children the benefit of treatment during the sensitive window of opportunity in the early years of development. A commitment to helping all children realize their fullest potential should be at the heart of this national effort and we can forge change with the important message that early intervention will surely result in significant economic benefits for our society.

The agenda of finding causes and cures is a compelling one, worthy of all our support. Equally compelling and deserving of our efforts is the agenda for the ongoing development of evidence-based treatment approaches, the empirical validation of current approaches, the development of national practice standards, the timely delivery of quality, intensive, early intervention, and for comprehensive and innovative public policy at the national, state and local levels.

We can delay no longer. There is a generation of children who need our help now. Let us work to fill the gaps so that we may provide a seamless system of early intervention for all of the children. Autism calls for our collective attention, efforts and resolve, so let's make today a spirited and meaningful exchange of ideas, a catalyst for change.

Through the years, I have come to know many hundreds of children with autism spectrum disorders and their families. I am always inspired by the parents' dedication, tenacity and courage. And in each child I see the unique and special potential they possess, no matter how great their challenges. Let us dedicate these proceedings to the children and their families.