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AIID INFORMATION SERVICE

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ABSTRACTIONS

The abstracts below are taken from journals, the contents page of which are included in this month's Information Service. These abstracts are provided as a response from Information Service members who have asked us to provide more information about the articles contained in our contents' page.

Neuropsychological predictors of everyday functioning in adults with intellectual disabilities

Background Very little is known about the neuropsychological correlates of adaptive functioning in people with intellectual disabilities (ID). This study examined whether specific cognitive deficits and demographic variables predicted everyday functioning in adults with ID.
Method People with ID (n = 101; ages 19–41 years; mean education = 11 years; 34% women; 54% competitively employed; 41% with mild ID) completed a comprehensive neuropsychological battery grouped into four cognitive domains: processing speed, verbal memory and comprehension, visual perception/constructive function, and executive function. In addition, parents completed an 89-item rating scale developed to assess a wide range of independent living skills.
Results Confirmatory factor analysis results confirmed a correlated four-factor model of cognitive function and a unidimensional model of everyday functioning. Furthermore, structural equation modelling results supported the predictive relationship of verbal memory/comprehension and employment status (standardized regression coefficients 0.45, 0.22, P ≤ 0.01 for each) to measures of everyday functioning. The two variables together explained 35% of the variance in everyday functioning.
Conclusions Both general cognitive dysfunction and specific verbal memory and comprehension deficit impair daily functions in people with ID. These findings have implications for predictive models of adaptive functioning, and for cognitive rehabilitation and deficit compensation strategies for this group.

Psychological variables as correlates of adjustment in mothers of children with intellectual disabilities: cross-sectional and longitudinal relationships

Background Existing research studies suggest that parenting a child with intellectual disabilities (ID) can be a stressful experience. However, there are few data addressing the question of how or why parents might experience considerable distress. In the present study, psychological variables (acceptance, mindfulness, avoidant coping) are explored that may explain some variance in maternal distress.
Method Questionnaire data were gathered from mothers of children attending special schools at two time points, 18 months apart (n = 91 at Time 1; n = 57 at Time 2). In addition to measures of the child’s functioning, the questionnaire pack included: a measure of acceptance of unwanted thoughts/feelings; a measure of attention to the present (mindfulness); a measure of active avoidance coping; measures of maternal anxiety, depression and stress; and a measure of mothers’ positive perceptions of their child.
Results In cross-sectional analysis, acceptance was negatively associated with maternal anxiety, depression and stress, such that mothers who were generally more accepting reported fewer psychological adjustment problems. Longitudinal analysis showed that acceptance is bidirectionally related to anxiety and depression. Mindfulness was not significantly related to maternal distress, and avoidance coping was positively cross-sectionally associated with depression only. There were no associations between psychological variables and maternal positive perceptions.
Conclusions These data suggest that acceptance, in particular, may be a construct that explains some variance in maternal distress. Further research could focus on the utility of acceptance-based
interventions (e.g. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) in the support of families with a child with ID.

The effectiveness of mood stabilizers and antiepileptic medication for the management of behaviour problems in adults with intellectual disability: a systematic review
Journal of Intellectual Disability Research Volume 52 Part Two February 2008 pp.107-113

Background Psychotropic medications are used to manage behaviour problems in adults with intellectual disability (ID). One group of psychotropic medication are mood stabilizers such as lithium and some antiepileptic drugs.

Method A comprehensive systematic review was performed to determine the evidence base for the effectiveness of mood stabilizers in the management of behaviour problems among adults with ID. Electronic searches of PsycInfo, Medline, Embase and Cinahl databases were conducted, as well as a thorough hand search for relevant literature. We reviewed primary trials relating to adults only that satisfied strict inclusion criteria.

Results One randomized controlled trial (RCT) relating to lithium use and two non-RCTs, one on lithium and the other on carbamazepine, were revealed. In addition, one prospective non-controlled trial on sodium valproate and three retrospective case series studies were discovered, of which one considered the efficacy of lithium, one valproate and one topiramate.

Conclusions The current evidence lends some support for the use of lithium and some antiepileptic mood stabilizer medication for the management of behaviour problems in adults with ID. However, because most studies reviewed here are riddled with obvious methodological constrains, the findings have to be interpreted with caution.

Incidence, types and characteristics of aggressive behaviour in treatment facilities for adults with mild intellectual disability and severe challenging behaviour

Background Inpatient aggression in treatment facilities for persons with intellectual disability (ID) can have aversive consequences, for co-clients and staff, but also for the aggressors themselves. To manage and eventually prevent inpatient aggressive incidents, more knowledge about their types and characteristics is necessary.

Method In four facilities, totalling 150 beds, specialized in the treatment of adults with mild ID or severe challenging behaviour, aggressive incidents were registered during 20 weeks using the Staff Observation Aggression Scale-Revised. Characteristics of auto-aggressive and outwardly directed incidents and differences in their incidence in male and female clients in these facilities were compared.

Results During the observation period of 20 weeks, 639 aggressive incidents were documented. Most of these (71%) were outwardly directed, predominantly towards staff, while most of the remaining incidents were of an auto-aggressive nature. Of the 185 clients present during the observation period, 44% were involved in outwardly directed incidents (range per client 1–34), and 12% in auto-aggressive incidents (range per client 1–92). Auto-aggressive and outwardly directed incidents differed regarding source of provocation, means used during the incident, consequences of the incident and measures taken to stop the incident. The proportion of men and women involved in each type of incident was comparable, as well as the majority of the characteristics of outwardly directed incidents caused by men and women.

Conclusions Although approximately half of all clients were involved in aggressive incidents, a small minority of clients were responsible for the majority of incidents. Therefore, better management and prevention of aggressive incidents for only a small group of clients could result in a considerable overall reduction of aggressive incidents in treatment facilities. Comparability of aggressive behaviour in these facilities shown by men and women and differences in characteristics of auto-aggressive and outwardly directed incidents are discussed.
Foster Care: Are There Differences in the Cognitive and Psychiatric Characteristics of Young Children With Developmental Disabilities in Kinship vs. Non-Kinship Homes?
Mental Health Aspects of Developmental Disabilities January/February/March 2008 Volume 11 Number 1 pp.1-9

This study compares developmental, psychiatric diagnosis and global assessment of functioning of 82 young foster children who present for evaluation of a developmental disability from kinship and non-kinship homes. The children in kinship homes (n=42) had been with their foster parents longer (3.2 yrs. vs. 1.2 yrs. p<0.001) before being referred for evaluation. There were no significant differences regarding types of developmental disabilities, psychiatric diagnosis or global assessment of functioning between the groups. There was a wide spectrum of psychiatric disorders. Children with developmental disabilities in kinship homes may be as emotionally and developmentally involved as children in non-kinship homes.

A Case of Obsessiveness Induced by Levetiracetam in a Patient With Epilepsy, Intellectual Disability and Pervasive Developmental Disorder
Mental Health Aspects of Developmental Disabilities January/February/March 2008 Volume 11 Number 1 pp.22-25

We describe an individual with mild intellectual disability, pervasive developmental disorder, and childhood-onset epilepsy with primary generalized seizures. In the period following initiation of treatment with levetiracetam, one of the newer anticonvulsant medications, this individual experienced the onset of symptoms of obsessiveness. Following our speculation regarding a possible association between the symptoms and the medication, the levetiracetam was tapered and eventually discontinued. The symptoms dissipated as the levetiracetam was reduced and discontinued. We believe that this is the first demonstration of an association between levetiracetam and symptoms related to obsessive-compulsive disorder.
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NCID Media Statement

January 2008

Australian Disability Ministers to meet in Melbourne as Australia is shown to be a cruel place for thousands

Tomorrow, Friday 1 February 2008 the Australian Disability Ministers gather in Melbourne to begin a new future for 27,000 people with disability and their families who are in crisis.

This unique moment may be the once in a lifetime chance for these families to get the support that they need and deserve. Without the genuine commitment by the Commonwealth, States and Territories of additional funding (to that already promised) thousands of people will be condemned by the Ministers to ongoing stress and needless suffering.

In 2007 the Governments commissioned a report from the Australian Institute on Health and Welfare (AIHW) on unmet need for disability support. The Ministers’ Report identified that 27,000 people with profound disabilities were in urgent need.

That so many people are in dire need when governments have such huge budget surpluses is a disgrace and makes a lie of Australia being a fair and civilised country, NCID President Mr Allen said.

NCID calls on all governments and oppositions to make 2008 the year in which this national failure is fixed and to ensure that planning immediately takes place, so that the next AIHW report does not identify anyone in serious need.

This will only happen if the Ministers meeting tomorrow were genuine in commissioning the AIHW report and they now respond with the political will to make a difference, and demonstrate this with a substantial allocation of additional funding to some of Australia’s most vulnerable families.

Contacts:
Mr Rob Allen, President – 0407 823 107
Mr Mark Pattison, Executive Director – 0407 406 647

National Council on Intellectual Disability
PO Box 771 Mawson ACT 2607
ncid@ncid.org.au 02 6296 4400
www.ncid.org.au
Residents flee fire in disability home
February 02, 2008
The Australian

THREE people have been admitted to hospital in Darwin after fire ripped through a home for the disabled at Karama in the city's eastern suburbs.

The alarm was raised around 10.30pm (CST) last night and emergency services arrived to find the home well alight.

The three residents had been safely evacuated by their carer, an emergency services spokeswoman said.

Northern Territory Fire and Rescue Services brought the blaze under control while the residents were taken to Royal Darwin Hospital as a precaution.

Investigators will examine the scene today to determine the cause of the blaze, which is believed to have started in a bedroom, badly damaging the building.
'New era' for disability co-operation

Dewi Cooke
February 2, 2008
The Age

THIS time, at least, nobody walked out.

Instead a meeting in Melbourne of federal and state disability ministers yesterday was hailed as a "new era" of co-operation in tackling the needs of the disabled, an area that has been stymied in recent times by politicking between governments.

Meeting for the first time with their state and territory counterparts, Family and Community Services Minister Jenny Macklin and parliamentary secretary Bill Shorten identified as a top priority the needs of older Australians with a disability or who care for a disabled person.

"It was our first meeting and very productive, and a terrific opportunity for us all to get together and agree on the priorities for the new Commonwealth State Territory Disability Agreement (CSTDA)," Ms Macklin said.

It was a different situation last year, when ministers walked out of a meeting with then community services minister Mal Brough after half an hour.

That 2007 meeting was an example of "bastardry" and the "contempt" in which governments have held people with disabilities, said the Victorian Advocacy League for People with Disability's Kevin Stone.

"We've been watchdogging this process for the last 15 years, coming along to meetings like this, trying to get state and federal governments to work together constructively," he said. "Sometimes it's been like trying to referee between (boxers Mike) Tyson and (Evander) Holyfield."

Victorian Council of Social Service chief executive Cath Smith said
governments appeared to be daunted by the scale of the problem in disability funding, which, in Victoria alone, VCOSS has projected will fall short by $76 million by 2011.

"I think there also might be a view that it's a very small percentage of the population that they should be worrying about and they're going to focus on more mainstream issues, without understanding the extent to which it impacts on mainstream communities," she said.

But as the general population ages, so too do people with a disability and their carers. It is an issue that support services have long identified and one that husband and wife Matthew and Dawn Dunlop contemplate daily.

The Dunlops are primary carers for their 50-year-old daughter Gayle who has profound intellectual and physical disabilities. At 78, Mr Dunlop is concerned about what will happen to his daughter when he and his wife cannot care for her.

"Our house is Gayle's house, and we're concerned that if anything happens to myself or my wife that Gayle's got a home to live in," he said. "There's nowhere else for her to go."

Other priorities raised in yesterday's meeting included moving towards a national system of population benchmarks for services and providing support for indigenous people with disabilities. Federal Labor's plan for a national disability strategy was also discussed.

The CSTDA expired last April, but has been extended until the end of June. Ministers will meet again in March to begin negotiations.
Disabled women used in bombings

February 2, 2008
The Age

Militants strapped a pair of mentally disabled women with explosives and blew them up by remote control in two Iraqi pet bazaars, killing at least 73 people in the deadliest day since Washington began pouring extra troops into the capital last (northern) spring.

Brigadier General Qassim al-Moussawi, Iraq's chief military spokesman in Baghdad, said the women had Down syndrome and may not have known they were on a suicide mission. The tactic would support US claims that al-Qaeda in Iraq may be increasingly desperate and running short of able-bodied men willing or available for such missions.

US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker said the bombings showed that a resilient al-Qaeda has "found a different, deadly way" to try to destabilise Iraq.

"There is nothing they won't do if they think it will work in creating carnage and the political fallout that comes from that," he told The Associated Press in an interview at the State Department.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said the bombings in Iraq prove al-Qaeda is "the most brutal and bankrupt of movements" and will strengthen Iraqi resolve to reject terrorism.

The first bomber was detonated at about 10:20am in the central al-Ghazl market. Four police and hospital officials said at least 46 people were killed and more than 100 wounded.

Local police said the woman wearing the bomb sold cream in the mornings at the market and was known to locals as "the crazy lady''.

The weekly pet bazaar had been bombed several times during the war, but with violence declining in the capital, the market had regained popularity as a shopping district and place to stroll on Fridays, the Muslim day of prayer.
But this Friday offered a scene of carnage straight out of the worst days of the conflict. Firefighters scooped up debris scattered among pools of blood, clothing and pigeon carcasses.

A pigeon vendor said the market had been unusually crowded, with people taking advantage of the day off to be outdoors on the pleasantly crisp and clear winter day. January had been unusually cold and rainy.

"I have been going to the pet market with my friend every Friday, selling and buying pigeons," said Ali Ahmed, who was hit by shrapnel in his legs and chest. "It was nice weather today and the market was so crowded."

He said he was worried about his friend, Zaki, who disappeared after the blast about 40 metres away.

"I just remember the horrible scene of the bodies of dead and wounded people mixed with the blood of animals and birds, then I found myself lying in a hospital bed," Ali said.

About 20 minutes after the first attack, the second female suicide bomber was blown apart in the bird market in a predominantly Shi'ite area in southeastern Baghdad. As many as 27 people died and 67 were wounded, police and hospital officials said.

The attacks were the latest in a series of violent incidents that frayed a gossamer of Iraqi confidence in the permanence of recent security gains.

The US military in Iraqi issued a statement that shared "the outrage of the Iraqi people, and we condemn the brutal enemy responsible for these attacks, which bear the hallmarks of being carried out by al-Qaeda in Iraq."

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani confirmed the death toll was about 70 and said the attacks were the work of committed by terrorists motivated by revenge and "to show that they are still able to stop the march of history and of our people toward reconciliation."

But Navy Commander Scott Rye, a US military spokesman, gave far lower casualty figures - seven killed and 23 wounded in the first bombing, and 20 killed and 30 wounded in the second.
He confirmed, however, both attacks were carried out by women wearing explosives vests and said the attacks appeared coordinated and likely the work of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Associated Press records show that since the start of the war at least 151 people have been killed in at least 17 attacks or attempted attacks by female suicide bombers, including today's bombings.

The most recent was on January 16 when a female suicide bomber detonated her explosives among men preparing for the Ashoura holiday in a Shi'ite village near the Diyala provincial capital of Baqouba.

While involving women in such deadly activity violates cultural taboos in Iraq, the US military has warned that al-Qaeda is recruiting women and young people as suicide attackers because militants are increasingly desperate to thwart stepped-up security measures. Syria has also reportedly tightened its border with Iraq, a main transit point for incoming foreign bombers.

Women in Iraq often wear abayas, the black Islamic robe, and avoid thorough searches at checkpoints because men are not allowed to touch them and there are too few female police.

While astonishingly brutal, the use of the mentally disabled in suicide bombings is not unprecedented in Iraq. In January 2005, Iraq's interior minister said insurgents used a disabled child in a suicide attack on election day. Police at the scene of the bombing said the child appeared to have Down syndrome.

Many teenage boys were among the casualties in the al-Ghazl bombing today, according to the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorised to release the information.

In Late November, a bomb hidden in a box of small birds exploded at the al-Ghazl market, killing at least 15 people and wounding dozens. The US military blamed the November attack on Iranian-backed Shi'ite militants, saying they had hoped al-Qaeda in Iraq would be held responsible for the attack so Iraqis would turn to them for protection.

The US military has been unable to stop the suicide bombings despite a steep
drop in violence in the past six months, but today's blasts were the deadliest in the capital since an April 18 suicide car bombing that killed 116 and wounded 145.

AP
MEDIA RELEASE
February 5, 2008

Jobsupport - for those who choose work
A world leader in taking research, putting it into practice, and achieving real jobs for jobseekers with intellectual disability

Today, Jobsupport is celebrating a milestone of successfully assisting 100 jobseekers with intellectual disability get jobs via the NSW Transition to Work program. These are people who traditionally have found it difficult to move from school to employment, but want to work.

Jobsupport, since the mid 1980s, has continued to serve as a model demonstration of training and supporting people with intellectual disability to work in real jobs in the community for real pay.

Jobsupport continues to show the way - to shine a light on the meaning of our core values and laws, and make real our promise of social inclusion for all.

Jobsupport’s record speaks for itself:

Commonwealth employment program: Over 480 people in jobs; average of 22 hours and $317 in wages per week; 60% employed since 1986 still employed; rated by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations as a 5 star service.

NSW Transition to Work program: Now 100 people in jobs; job placement success rate of 73%; average of 19 hours and $253 in wages per week; 60% earn full award wages; the top rated transition to work service in NSW based on the number and percentage of employment outcomes.

These outcomes are simply outstanding and reflect the commitment and professional competence of Jobsupport to excel in this field.

The National Council on Intellectual Disability (NCID) would like to publicly congratulate the director of Jobsupport, Mr Phil Tuckerman, and his staff led by Mr Russell Baker, Manager of Jobsupport Community Work Options, on such an outstanding achievement.

It would be remiss of NCID not to take this opportunity to mention the political leadership that has provided the opportunity for Jobsupport to enable young people
with intellectual disability and their families to enjoy the success of work and social inclusion.

We, therefore, would like to congratulate the Hon. Kristina Keneally MP, NSW Minister for Ageing and Disability Services, and the NSW Government, for having the commitment to provide an employment pathway for school leavers with intellectual disability.

The results being celebrated today confirm the direction that the government is taking. It confirms that if we invest in evidence based practices of employment assistance our society has the capacity to include and welcome all adults who choose work.

We hope the Minister uses these results to continue to expand the NSW Transition to Work program by considering “what works” and growing a quality sector based on outcome performance.

NCID also considers that the Commonwealth should take these results into consideration – particularly as it ponders how it should action its social inclusion policy of an equal opportunity for all to secure a job.

It is thus incumbent on State and Commonwealth leaders to ensure that we look at administrative and funding arrangements that allow all Australians with intellectual disability to access and benefit from quality employment assistance – as demonstrated by Jobsupport.

Finally, NCID wishes to congratulate all 100 employees, their families, their employers and co-workers on a remarkable personal and community achievement. This is social inclusion, and we salute you!

Mark Pattison
National Council on Intellectual Disability
0407 406 647
mark.pattison@ncid.org.au
Child carer payments 'need an overhaul'

February 7, 2008
The Age

Carer payments should be overhauled to better support people caring for children with severe disabilities and medical conditions, an inquiry has recommended.

The report of the federal task force examining child carer payments, calls for a new process for assessing those eligible for support after evidence some are being knocked back despite qualifying for assistance.

"Many carers are precluded from receiving the (child carer) payment even though their caring responsibilities may be as great as those of carers who qualify for the payment," it said.

"The task force is strongly of the view that the current eligibility criteria are too restrictive and consequently the payment is not effectively achieving its intended purpose."

The task force urges the Rudd government to develop a national action plan for carers, many of whom are struggling financially.

It also calls for the government to review the costs of caring for the disabled and severely ill and provide extra support to carers wanting to get back into the workforce.

Carers can receive the child carer income support payment if their caring role renders them unable to do much work.

About 3,500 people receive the carer payments, which are different to the $98-a-fortnight carer "allowance".

The report revealed the financial strain under which some carers are living.

One distressed parent told the inquiry: "You are constantly on duty 24 hours a
day, seven days a week. This role will continue until the child dies, or if I predecease my daughter.

"Most intensive parenting duties decline as the child grows and matures, (but) this is not the case for a child with a severe disability. I will have to be on call 24/7 until the day I die."

After assessing 4,000 submissions, the inquiry recommended several reforms to improve the carer support system.

These included payments for short-term care situations, provision for multiple care responsibilities and new eligibility criteria that recognise the level of care required by the child and provided by the carer.

"Carers experience particular challenges in the form of financial hardship, severely reduced employment and educational prospects, lower levels of health and wellbeing, chronic grief and/or anger, and limited opportunities to build and maintain social networks," the report said.

Families Minister Jenny Macklin said the government was aware of the challenges carers faced.

"The government supports their efforts and dedication and will carefully examine the report's 32 recommendations, which propose fundamental changes to a complex area of social security," Ms Macklin said.
Parents beg for help to care for sick children
Stephanie Peatling
February 8, 2008
Sydney Morning Herald

PARENTS who are the sole carers for their severely disabled or sick children may get some relief from the Federal Government after it promised to consider a damning independent report into the support system.

The taskforce, headed by a former senior public servant, Tony Blunn, was flooded with submissions from more than 4000 carers and their representative groups, begging for reform of a system that they said failed to meet their needs.

It concluded that the system of payments was inflexible, inequitable and "not an effective safety net in capturing all carers of children with severe medical disability or medical conditions who require access to income support".

Evidence from carers collected by the taskforce found that not only did people experience financial hardship as a result of their responsibilities but reduced employment and educational opportunities, lower levels of health, and chronic grief and frustration.

Many carers also said they wanted to do some work but were unable to find suitable care for their children to allow them to work even part-time or faced employers who were unwilling to give them enough time and flexibility to look after their children.

Carers also begged for some kind of relief, many saying they were struggling to cope with having to provide care for their children 24 hours a day, knowing if they did not provide that care their child might die. About 3500 people receive a carers' payment in recognition of the work they do with their own children. This is only about 3 per cent of the total number of people receiving other types of carers' allowances.

One of the report's main criticisms was that the payment was designed only as
income support for parents whose care responsibilities made it impossible for them to work, but it was not enough to cover the cost of disabilities nor did it recognise the work parents did as carers.

It was also critical of the inflexible definition of people able to claim the payment. This ruled out thousands of people who, the task force found, should be eligible for support.

Because of the large number of people taking on caring duties, the task force called for a clearer system of payments to make it easier for people to gain support, as well as legislation recognising their role. Although it suggested this would mean more people were given financial assistance, the task force said it would be "cost effective for the Government because less time and money would be wasted administering the existing plethora of payments and would take some relief off the health system".

The report was commissioned by the previous government and made public yesterday by the Minister for Family and Community Services, Jenny Macklin.

"Carers of children with a severe disability or medical condition face huge challenges in the day to day care of these children," she said.
Qld disabled facility being investigated
February 8, 2008
The Age

A Queensland government disability care facility in Brisbane's south is being investigated over claims of abuse and staff misconduct.

Disability Services Minister Lindy Nelson-Carr confirmed the Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC), Queensland Ombudsman and state government were investigating the Loganlea Service Centre, but would not comment on the allegations.

The centre, for both mental and physically disabled people, is run by Disability Services Queensland.

Ms Nelson-Carr admitted "serious allegations" had been made.

"I will say that any allegations of abuse or harm or danger to the clients, as well as if there are any allegations of staff misconduct, they'll all be fully investigated," she said.

The allegations, according to media reports, included claims clients would sleep in their own faeces and that the centre did not provide toilet paper for them.

Staff also allegedly ignored hygiene issues, including allowing a male client with hepatitis to share his toothbrush and razors, and were pressured to cover up problems in the centre in a bid to pass an accreditation audit.

Ms Nelson-Carr said no staff member had been stood down during the investigation, but anyone found guilty of misconduct could face disciplinary action.

"These are very serious allegations and obviously they need to be investigated," Ms Nelson-Carr said.

"But anyone who has behaved inappropriately or in a manner that is worthy of
this investigation will be disciplined."

Ms Nelson-Carr said the Loganlea Service Centre was a cluster of seven homes. Nineteen people live in the houses, each allocated a carer.

Ms Nelson-Carr said one person had complained about the centre to the CMC late last year.

The complaint was sent back to the misconduct prevention unit in the Department of Communities and the Queensland Ombudsman, which investigates complaints about the decisions and actions of state and local government agencies.

The investigation is being overseen by the CMC.

Disability advocate Di Toohey said she was not aware of the allegations, but had heard other complaints about poor supervision of the centre's intellectually disabled clients.

"They inferred that they were abusing other residents (and) that there was resident-to-resident abuse," she told ABC Radio.

Opposition disability services spokeswoman Rosemary Menkens said the allegations were "enormous", but the government was taking the appropriate action.

"If these allegations are true it's appalling, because there are some huge unmet needs in the disability section," Ms Menkens said.

Anyone with concerns about the centre was urged to come forward.
That'll teach you — student wins payout
Bridie Smith
February 8, 2008
The Age

REBEKAH Turner, the student who won a landmark discrimination case against the Education Department, has been awarded more than $80,000 compensation in a tribunal ruling likely to spark a flood of claims.

A Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal judgement, handed down by the tribunal's deputy president Cate McKenzie yesterday, has already led to calls for a review of government funding for students with speech and language difficulties.

In addition to compensation, the Education Department was ordered to provide 16-year-old Rebekah, who has a severe language disorder and learning disability, with a full-time teacher's aide, remedial tuition and an individual learning plan for the rest of her time at school. The assistance must be in place by February 21.

Rebekah said she was thrilled with the result, adding that having a classroom aide to take notes for her would allow her to listen more closely to teachers as she embarks on her VCE.

"Getting the help at school is really important because already this year work is starting to pile up because I don't understand it," she said. "Having the help in the classroom will be the best bit as they will be able to help me with what is to be done and what the teacher has said."

Rebekah plans to complete her VCE over three years and hopes to train as a special education teacher.

Last May the tribunal found the Education Department discriminated against Rebekah, now in year 11 at Ringwood Secondary College, by failing to provide a teaching aide and other classroom assistance, which she had applied for since...
1999 but never received. The department appealed against the decision, but it was dismissed.

Yesterday's finding was also critical of Ringwood Secondary College, which the tribunal said continued to discriminate against Rebekah, even after last May's judgement.

The department was ordered to pay Rebekah $82,000 in compensation for failing to provide assistance, which "limited her participation and access to the curriculum … and diminished her opportunity to obtain successful education outcomes".

The decision is a blow to the Government, which is battling to defend its language support program after changes were made to eligibility criteria in 2005.

The Education Department's own figures show that thousands of students with language disorders, who had received individual funding before 2005, now miss out.

In 2005, 6760 students were funded under language disorder categories. That number fell dramatically to 208 in 2006 and increased only marginally to 219 last year. The department yesterday said it could not say how many students were funded under language disorder categories this year, as funding now went directly to schools rather than students.

But while critics concede that the 6760 students who received funding in 2006 reflected a blow-out, serious concerns about the severity of the new requirements remain.

Speech Pathology Australia yesterday called for an urgent review of funding for speech pathology services, with several thousand Victorian students struggling with speech and language difficulties.

Shadow education minister Martin Dixon said Rebekah's case represented "a systemic failure rather than an individual one" because not one of the four state schools she attended granted her the assistance she needed.

"Rebekah is unfortunately one of a number of students let down by the State
Government in Victorian schools over a number of years," he said. "But there's no time for excuses now."

He said yesterday's finding would likely spark a rash of complaints against the department, with the decision likely to be regarded as a precedent by thousands of families who have a child with a disability.

Access Law anti-discrimination consultant Julie Phillips, for Rebekah, said yesterday's result was bittersweet for her.

"Even upon winning her case at VCAT last May, support from the department has not been forthcoming … However, she is very excited at the prospect of receiving the help she needs and she starts her VCE this year absolutely determined to succeed."

Education Minister Bronwyn Pike yesterday referred comment to Early Childhood Development Minister Maxine Morand. A spokeswoman for Ms Morand said she would not comment while the case was subject to appeal.

The Education Department said it was considering its response to the decision. Last year the department allocated more than $33 million to support students with language difficulties.
A is for autism
Denise Ryan
February 11, 2008
The Age

After years of neglect, services are being boosted to help children diagnosed with the mystifying condition - but there's more to be done. Denise Ryan.

WESTERN suburbs school principal Val Gill has been doggedly fighting for 28 years to achieve a better deal for some of Victoria's most vulnerable young children.

Every summer, makeshift classrooms would be hastily constructed in primary schools to provide space for her growing number of tiny charges.

"The conditions were terrible," Ms Gill says, recalling holes in classroom floors and noise levels that would upset any child.

But Ms Gill's students are the least able to cope with such chaos. As young children diagnosed with autism, they are extremely sensitive to sudden changes and loud sounds.

Ms Gill and her team slogged to transform a motley collection of buildings at campuses in Niddrie and Deer Park into the now well-regarded Western Autistic School. Still, with the numbers of children needing help rising steadily each year, they were determined to find a new base.

That's why Ms Gill can't quite believe that the years of just making do may soon be over. The State Government is building the school a new state-of-the-art campus in Laverton next year.

This largesse partly recognises the school's program, but more importantly, it indicates the sheer number of children diagnosed with autism in recent years.

While most people have heard of autism, the neurodevelopmental disorder is not well understood, mostly because every child with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has very different symptoms.
Children with ASDs can range from those with extremely severe symptoms and an intellectual disability (regarded as autism) to those with a more standard IQ and less extreme but still debilitating symptoms, which is usually diagnosed as Asperger syndrome.

Bruce Tonge, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Monash University, says it is impossible to generalise. Some autistic children do not speak and are extremely socially aloof, while others talk but can be rigid and obsessive, engaging in repetitive behaviours such as rocking when stressed. Then there are the children with high-functioning autism or Asperger syndrome who can have serious difficulties making friends and interacting socially but who can learn to disguise their problems so that the disability is not immediately obvious.

For the parent of a child at either end of this spectrum, a diagnosis of an ASD means a wearying, expensive and life-long search for help, says Autism Victoria chief executive Alison Byrne.

It starts with big waiting lists to have the child assessed by specialists and then long waiting lists to receive limited help.

But parents are no longer battling alone. In 1980 the official figure for Australian schoolchildren with an ASD was one per 2500 people; now it is greater than one in 160 children. For reasons unknown, autism is five times more common in boys than girls.

Experts attribute the growth in numbers partly to previous generations often being undiagnosed, with Asperger syndrome proving difficult to diagnose until recently.

Autism is due to abnormalities in brain function, says Professor Tonge, which has been proven through brain imaging research. Recent international research has discredited earlier claims that immunisation and lactose intolerance may somehow have contributed to increased rates, he says.

"Autism is a genetic disorder, but there are up to 10 genes involved. There is also often a family history of depression, learning, language or social difficulties," he says.

Seventy per cent of autistic children have an intellectual disability, which makes
them eligible for government funding. In an anomaly that no one who works in the sector fully understands, the remaining 30% - who may be diagnosed with high-functioning autism or Asperger's - attend mainstream schools and by doing so usually receive little help.

Victoria's early intervention centres and special schools for children with autism have been struggling to cope with the rising demand. The Western Autistic School, for example, had 119 young children on its waiting list for this year.

But for the first time in years, professionals such as Val Gill and Alison Byrne are feeling hopeful. The Victorian Government has been working with Autism Victoria to develop an autism state plan, with a summary of feedback from the first round of community consultation to be available next month.

The Federal Government committed to spending an extra $190 million to boost autism services before the election, and the Rudd Government has honoured this. Tenders for a slice of this funding closed two weeks ago.

Such action is not before time. Ms Byrne says she met "many angry, upset and exhausted parents " at the consultative forums held to develop the state plan.

It is not surprising that mothers of children with ASDs have higher levels of depression than any other group of parents, including parents of children with other disabilities, according to research by Monash University. As well, up to 80% of marriages fail in households where a child has an ASD.

Meredith Ward, the parent of a 12-year-old with high-functioning autism, understands the pressures only too well. "There is no wheelchair so the disability is invisible. How do you explain that a normal, gorgeous-looking child is behaving in unacceptable ways?"

And it doesn't help, she says, that parents are constantly criticised by others. "Some parents hold up a card saying: 'Please excuse my child. Don't stare. It is bad enough without you judging me'. Parents experience constant grief and anger."

Ms Ward understands how lonely it can be. Her own marriage ended when her son was younger.
In her role as president of the Autistic Family Support Association, she aims to build alliances between the 60 parent support groups in Victoria so that parents don't feel so isolated.

They can also join forces to demand more help. The Western Autistic School, which takes children with an ASD from prep to grade 3, demonstrates the growth. It has tripled in size, from 88 children in 2000 to 242 now, forcing the State Government to limit enrolments for the first time this year.

The school aims to give students a "head start" before going to a special or mainstream school, says Ms Gill. "Some students only come here for six months but they wouldn't manage without it. We teach them things that other kids understand. The child has to learn, for example, that both they and the teacher have a name," she says.

A large proportion of students don't speak when they start at the school. Kicking the teacher in the shins or throwing food across the room may be the way they communicate, says Ms Gill.

"The child doesn't know how to request something. They will take your hand like a pair of pliers to get something or will help themselves. If they were feeling sick they would get help by throwing a tantrum. It might be outlandish behaviour but they have no other means to tell us what is going on. Our staff know how to listen and interpret a child's behaviour."

Students like the school because it has a predictable and highly visual schedule. Pictures on the wall depict daily activities such as eating morning tea.

"From the moment children with an ASD wake, they often feel anxious. They can't project themselves through the day to know what will happen. They have difficulty with sequencing, which means poor organisational skills. Structures such as life diaries help," she says.

The school has five separate play areas where students are taught how to play.

"They cannot filter. Everything bombards their senses. They hear every sound . . . the truck or the lawnmower, which they may be terrified of," says Ms Gill.
Children are taught to hand the teacher a hat, for example, if they want to go outside. Later they use Picture Exchange Communication books, whereby they can point to a picture of themselves, then the words "I want" and then, for example, a picture of food. Parents are also shown ways to help their child. Ms Gill says most children have not had any early intervention help before coming to the school.

But this is changing thanks to a parents education program developed by Professor Tonge and fellow Monash University researcher, Dr Avril Brereton.

More than 300 families have taken part in their 20-week program, which organises individual sessions and group meetings for parents of children newly diagnosed with autism. Parents who participated were less stressed, had better mental health and were coping better with their children after two years than those who had no help, according to a randomised control trial.

The researchers also have a State Government contract to train maternal and child health nurses, GPs and early childhood workers and teachers to pick up signs of autism in very young children.

The nurses have been taught to identify early signs of autism, which can be evident by 12 months of age, such as problems with pre-language, not responding to being spoken to and not pointing at things, says Professor Tonge.

The Monash team is researching the effects on 300 families of their child's path through the most difficult transition points, which are when moving from primary to secondary school and on leaving secondary school.

Professor Tonge is particularly concerned by the number of 16-year-olds with Asperger syndrome who drop out of school from year 9 but are not eligible for adult services as they do not have an intellectual disability. Even young people with an intellectual disability must wait until they are 18 before they can get help. "Many fall through the gap, spending the years from 16 to 18 refusing to come out of their room to eat, becoming aggressive with their parents who in turn become more and more stressed. It does not let up."

An acute shortage of support for older children has led the Western Autistic
School to expand its programs well beyond helping infants. Children with autism in years 4 to 9 in mainstream schools can attend an arts program at the school one day a week.

The school runs a social club for children aged 6 to 18 with Asperger syndrome and also holds "old boys" pizza and pottery nights.

These are some of the few places that a young person with Asperger syndrome can share the difficulties they face in mainstream high schools.

Ms Gill says most teachers have little understanding of the learning needs of young people with ASDs. Her staff became so concerned that they founded an Autism Teaching Institute offering vocational postgraduate training. This year the institute will train 60 experienced teachers to work with students with an ASD.

The Western Autistic School also runs baserooms, such as the one in the Niddrie campus of Essendon Keilor College. The "baseroom" is a quiet place in a mainstream high school where students with ASDs can retreat from the playground. Teachers adapt the curriculum or run an alternate program for the students. Ms Gill says there is an urgent need for more baserooms in secondary schools.

That's because most teachers have no understanding of what a day is like for a young person who can't understand the social rules, she says.

"These young people are exhausted by the end of the day. If we see someone walking towards us and can't remember their name, we can at least in a flash read whether they are upset or happy. We know to say hello. There are lots of neurones firing to do that.

"If you have autism and have learnt about greetings, you have thousands of neurones firing. First you ask yourself, 'Do I know them?' Then you have to remember their name. You have to remember to make eye contact. You think, 'There is something funny with that person' (they are crying). This creates huge anxiety. Every social situation can be fraught."

It is hardest for those kids who want friends but can't seem to make them. "They
become aware of their difference. They know they fail all the time and they have to come to terms with themselves," says Ms Gill.
BAFTA row over freak film
February 11, 2008
Sydney Morning Herald

THE British Academy of Film and Television Arts, which was to present its
annual awards in London last night, has been drawn into a bitter row with the
organisers of a disability film festival after refusing to screen a documentary
about a group of disabled artists.

The disabled British film-maker behind The Last American Freak Show,
Richard Butchins, admits his road movie-style documentary is challenging, but
says he is furious with the academy for backing out of an agreed joint screening.

Instead, the academy had suggested screening the feel-good American comedy
Lars And The Real Girl, about a mentally ill young man who falls in love with a
blow-up doll.

Peter Kinkead, co-director of X’08, the disability film festival, said The Last
American Freak Show was about disabled people reclaiming their identity.
"They are proud to be freaks," he said.

As for the suggestion of screening Lars And The Real Girl, Mr Kinkead said, "I
was appalled. It's completely inappropriate. It makes fun of mental illness.
That's appropriate?"

Richard Butchins said the academy's head of events, Corinna Downing, had told
him the film was "too demanding … inappropriate for this kind of event … too
explicit and created too many questions" and that the academy wanted "more
easy fare for our members".

Guardian News & Media
AUSTRALIAN cinema had its first moment of glory at the Berlin Film Festival on Friday night when *Black Balloon*, a film about a family coping with an autistic child, opened the section for teenagers. The largely young audience, after watching the film in English without subtitles, clapped enthusiastically throughout the credits and cheered when the director, Elissa Down, came on stage to answer questions.

*Black Balloon* was selected from about 800 films to open Generation 14plus, the section aimed at young people between 14 and 18. The story centres on Tom, a high-school student trying to fit into a new school, played by *Home And Away's* Rhys Wakefield.

Down said the film was inspired by her own experience; she has two autistic brothers. "Growing up was quite strange at times: embarrassing but also funny and full of love. I thought this could be an interesting story to tell other people, to be both entertained and walk in someone else's shoes for 97 minutes."

Tom is protective of yet embarrassed by his autistic older brother, Charlie, played by Luke Ford, whose antics include running around the streets in his underwear and, in a moment of stress, spreading his excrement over the carpet. Toni Collette, who plays the boys' mother, was also an executive producer, but she wasn't in Berlin for the premiere. Neither was the model Gemma Ward, who plays Tom's girlfriend in her first role in a feature film.

Rehearsals for the two actors included days in character in public, where Ford was openly mocked for his apparent disability. "Seeing the ignorance of an apparently aware society blew my mind," he said.

Two more Australian features, Peter Carstairs's *September* and Cathy Randall's *Hey, Hey, It's Esther Blueberger*, are showing in the young people's sections this week, along with three Australian shorts. *Son Of A Lion*, a film set in Afghanistan directed by Benjamin Gilmour, shows in another section, Forum,
as does Ben Hackworth's drama *Corroboree*. 
Life in the goldfish bowl

Denise Ryan
February 18, 2008
The Age

Young, autistic school leavers are cut off from help too soon. By Denise Ryan.

HOW did you know to greet the person at the front desk? Did you notice the goldfish or the bowl of flowers?

Tracel Devereux, the chief executive of Alpha Autism, is deftly explaining the difference between how most of us might react on entering her workplace and how a young adult with autism might regard the same situation.

Most people wouldn't notice the goldfish, she says, but a person with autism sees everything as relevant.

"From age two or three, most people can read society's unwritten rules, but those with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can't," she says. For an adult with autism, a simple decision such as buying toothpaste at the supermarket can mean hours of stress. "Autism is about not being able to filter out the irrelevancies. But if you told a person with autism that they would like a particular brand, then they can do it."

Ms Devereux and her team of 56 are experts at helping adults with autism cope with everyday life. This neurodevelopmental disorder is not well understood, mostly because every person with an ASD has different symptoms. The autism spectrum ranges from those diagnosed with autism and an intellectual disability, who are eligible for special schools and continuing government-funded support, to those diagnosed with high functioning autism or Asperger syndrome, who also have debilitating symptoms but do not get much funding simply because they have a more standard IQ.

Alpha provides day programs and respite services for adults with autism and an intellectual disability. Many are helped to develop life skills, while others can be helped to find work.
With increased diagnosis of ASDs in recent years, Alpha - as the largest specialist provider of services for adults with autism - cannot meet demand for those autistic adults for which it is funded.

Yet it also has an army of "unofficial" clients for which it receives no funding. More than 180 adults with Asperger syndrome or high functioning autism have turned up on Alpha's doorstep seeking help.

These adults also have serious problems making friends and interacting socially but are expected to cope with living independently. Many withdraw, spending their lives at home watching television or on the computer. "Eighty per cent of those on the spectrum suffer from depression, which is not surprising, given most feel they don't fit in every day of their life."

Ms Devereux says the extra $190 million in Federal Government funding promised during the election campaign for autism services is only for children. School-leavers have again been overlooked.

"From age 15 onward, the support simply drops away to such an extent that a number of people fall through the net completely," she says. But, when helped, adults with autism can have meaningful jobs. They often have a particular interest, which may be used in a job.

"Some excel at tasks that require focus and consistency, so they could get jobs at the Bureau of Meteorology analysing weather data, for example, while many work in IT because they have a very good grasp of systems and processes," Ms Devereux says.

In many ways it is easier for adults with an ASD to attend university because of the anonymity and because it is acceptable to focus on a particular interest. "You can wear the wrong clothes and nobody cares. We see an exceptional number of people with PhDs here, but they can't transform it into a real job."

To help its 180 "informal" clients, Alpha has set up social groups and builds family networks. Staff offer support in their spare time. For example, one staff member taught a young man with Asperger syndrome how to collect supermarket trolleys. "Once they grasp the job they are excellent. There is something about the autism spectrum that makes people very approachable."
Yet the public does not seem to realise this. Ms Devereux says there is resistance to establishing neighbourhood adult autism services.

That means parents of adults with autism get little respite. "Most cannot work because of their carer role. Poverty and under-employment is a huge problem," says Ms Devereux. "When they get old it's 10 times harder because there is the fear of what will happen to their child. The pressure never stops."
Firms 'should not fear' mental illnesses

February 19, 2008
The Age

Business needs to get over a fear of employing people with mental illness, the federal government says.

Of the 7,012 people receiving a disability support pension, only 10 per cent are participating in the workforce and almost one quarter have a mental illness, parliamentary secretary for disabilities and children's services, Bill Shorten, said.

He said the government was committed to lifting the number of people with a mental illness in the workforce.

"The challenge is to deal with employer-phobia about employing people with mental illness," Mr Shorten told ABC Radio.

"Some people think that if you employ someone with a mental illness in a workplace that they will be dangerous, or some people think that other staff will get upset.

"The reality is that people with mental illness are capable of participating and holding down work and contributing, and we have just got to get over the phobias."

Mr Shorten said he would talk with business to allay employers' concerns.

The most important part of that was ensuring mentors were available to provide assistance, he said.

Meanwhile in the ACT on Tuesday, Mr Shorten will launch the 100th MyTime (MyTime) Peer Support Group for parents of young children with a chronic medical condition or disability.

"As anyone who has had children with disabilities knows, it's a stressful
experience - it is a loving experience but it's stressful," Mr Shorten said.

"So the opportunity for families to get together - for their kids to be together but also for parents to be together to get the sense you are not on your own - I think it's fantastic."

In 2006-07, the Howard government committed $9 million during four years towards the MyTime program.

"The budget contains some money for four years of funding," Mr Shorten said.

"Obviously the government is very committed to fighting inflation.

"On the other hand, the government also understands that programs like this are very effective for their dollars."

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A judge has attacked the Victorian government over law changes which allows intellectually disabled or mentally ill offenders to be released back into the community without rehabilitation.

Judge Elizabeth Gaynor launched the tirade during a hearing in the County Court in Melbourne on Wednesday for an intellectually disabled man, John Kilmartin, who pleaded guilty to one count of attempted child stealing.

Jane Dennis, from Forensic Services Victoria, told the court that under the new Disability Act, which came into force in July 2007, Kilmartin was no longer automatically eligible for a supervised rehabilitation program.

Ms Dennis said Kilmartin would have to be found guilty of a more serious offence, such as kidnapping, to qualify for such a program.

Before the law changes, offenders like Kilmartin would have been placed on a Community Based Order (CBO) and automatically given treatment and monitoring, the court was told.

Judge Gaynor said the community was being put at risk because people who needed rehabilitation were not getting it.

"If you are intellectually disabled and a criminal offender there is literally nowhere for you to go," she told the court.

"It is just appalling. The situation is dire.

"I am continually appalled at the hurdles put in the way of courts such as this.

"(It is) a short sighted change in the legislation."

Judge Gaynor said even if she sentenced Kilmartin the services available in jail for a person with an intellectual disability would be "hopelessly inadequate".
"Since I have returned in 2008 (from annual leave) I have dealt with at least one person a week who is suffering mental illness or an intellectual disability," Judge Gaynor said.

"Anything I do today is inadequate because this court is restricted.

"How are courts able to undertake the important task of protecting the community?"

"He (Kilmartin) has been sitting on remand for 19 months.

"That is 19 months wasted."

Judge Gaynor made headlines in May last year when she said a bid to keep intellectually disabled arsonist and thief John Maltman behind bars because there were no other options was "barbaric".

The court was told that Kilmartin, 41, whose address has been withheld, admitted to following an eight-year-old boy he had befriended in a city music store and later trying to lure him from a tram.

The court was told the boy, now 10, was not hurt in the incident.

Judge Gaynor sentenced Kilmartin to 22 months in prison, but said he would be eligible for parole immediately having already served 121 days in custody.

She said she would write to the Parole Board and ask that Kilmartin be placed in a rehabilitation program when released.

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The Iraqi Interior Ministry has ordered police to round up beggars, homeless and mentally disabled people from Baghdad's streets so insurgents can't use them as suicide bombers.

The decision came nearly three weeks after twin suicide bombings against pet markets that officials said were carried out by mentally disabled women who may have been unwitting attackers.

The US military and the Iraqi government have claimed in a series of revelations that Sunni insurgents led by al-Qaeda in Iraq are increasingly trying to use Iraq's most vulnerable populations as suicide bombers to avoid raising suspicions or being searched at checkpoints.

The people detained in the Baghdad sweep will be taken to social welfare institutions and psychiatric hospitals that can provide shelter and care for them, Interior Ministry spokesman Major General Abdul-Karim Khalaf said.

"This will be implemented nationwide starting today," Khalaf said in a telephone interview.

"Militant groups, like al-Qaeda in Iraq, have started exploiting these people in a very bad manner to kill innocent victims because they do not raise suspicions," Khalaf said.

"These groups are either luring those who are desperate for money to help them in their attacks or making use of their poor mental condition to use them as suicide bombers."

The allegations reflect warnings by the US military that the insurgents are skilled in adopting new tactics and willing to use women or children as suicide bombers as they seek to bypass increased security measures and bounce back
from losses in recent US-led offensives.

The US military said this week that attacks across Iraq have dropped more than 60 per cent since a joint campaign to cut down their influence began a year ago on February 14.

But US commanders have warned that al-Qaeda in Iraq is a resilient foe and acknowledged they have been unable to stop the group's signature suicide attacks.

While the concrete barriers have reduced the effectiveness of car bombings in the capital, a series of suicide attacks by women bombers have raised concerns.

The Iraqi claim that mentally disabled women were used in the February 1 pet market bombings was met initially with scepticism.

Iraqi authorities said they based the assertion on photos of the bombers' heads that purportedly showed the women had Down's syndrome, and did not offer any other proof.

However, the director of the separate Ibn-Rushd psychiatric teaching hospital in central Baghdad, Dr Shalan al-Abboudi, said that one of the pet market bombers, a 36-year-old married woman, had been treated there for schizophrenia and depression, according to her file.

He said she received electric shock therapy and was released into the custody of an aunt.

American and Iraqi troops later detained the acting director of a psychiatric hospital on suspicion of helping supply patient information to al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Women often aren't searched at checkpoints because men refuse to search them because of Islamic sensitivities and a dearth of female guards. Echoing the fears, police said 1,000 female officers will be deployed among the pilgrims massing in the Shi'ite holy city of Karbala for a major pilgrimage next week.

The military also this month presented videos it said were seized from suspected al-Qaeda in Iraq hideouts showing militants training children to kidnap and kill.
It was not clear how the plan could be implemented in a city of more than five million people who have grown used to maintaining a low profile and often hiding their identity during nearly five years of fighting and sectarian violence.

A bustling street life has emerged recently in some neighbourhoods as a maze of concrete walls and checkpoints and an influx of 30,000 extra US soldiers have restored a measure of calm in the capital and surrounding areas.

Women shrouded in traditional Islamic black robes and headscarves and other homeless people sit on the pavement on public squares or roam around the stalls of open-air markets to beg for money.

Laurie Ahern, the associate director of the Washington, DC-based Mental Disability Rights International, expressed concern that the report suggested Iraqi authorities were casting "an awful wide net".

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THOUSANDS of young Victorians with Asperger syndrome or high-functioning autism have dropped out of mainstream high schools and are spending their lives locked in their bedrooms watching television or on the PC, say autism experts.

These young people have serious problems interacting with others and coping with school because of their disability but receive little State Government-funded help because they do not meet the strict criteria for assistance.

Bruce Tonge, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Monash University, says many 16-year-olds with an autism spectrum disorder drop out from about year 9 but are not eligible for adult autism services because they do not have an intellectual disability.

"They can then spend years in their room staring at the computer, becoming increasingly depressed and sometimes aggressive with their parents," Professor Tonge says.

He says about 70% of autistic children have an intellectual disability and attend special schools, while about 30% are of normal intelligence but can have ritualised behaviours and serious problems with social interaction. The latter group, diagnosed with Aspergers or high-functioning autism, mostly attend mainstream schools but can find this extremely stressful without assistance.

"It is inaccurate to use IQ as the benchmark as to whether a person gets services or not. Those with average IQ may have poor ability to function in the community yet get no help," Professor Tonge says.

Meredith Ward, the president of the Autistic Family Support Association, says the Government does not want to broaden its criteria for funding to include students with Aspergers or high-functioning autism.

"The rationale seems to be rationing of services rather than meeting the
appropriate educational needs of every student."

A spokesman for the Department of Human Services, when asked why teenagers diagnosed with Aspergers do not get adequate help, said many receive services funded by the department. The spokesman said schools make decisions at a local level about how to support such students, perhaps by employing a teacher's aide or a speech pathologist.

Ms Ward, the parent of a 12-year-old with high-functioning autism and the manager of the state plan for Autism Victoria, described this response as "mischievous and inaccurate".

"High-functioning children without an intellectual disability have to prove a significant language deficit or have severe behavioural problems to get any help. Most don't qualify," she says.

More than 180 adults with Aspergers or high-functioning autism have sought help from Alpha Autism, Victoria's largest provider of specialist employment and support services to adults with autism.

But Alpha is only funded to help adults diagnosed with autism and an intellectual disability. John Lang, the president of the Alpha board, says staff help these unofficial clients in their own time out of "the goodness of their hearts".

Mr Lang, who was diagnosed with Aspergers when he was 17, says his own experience of high school - where he was bullied so badly that he later had a nervous breakdown - is replicated in many schools today.

"The school failed to diagnose me and failed to give me support. It didn't help to have a minor degree of Aspergers. I fell through the cracks. That's still the case for many people."

Young people with Aspergers are also over-represented in jails and among the homeless. Jeanette Purkis, a former client of Alpha Autism, has written a book, Finding a Different Kind of Normal: Misadventures with Asperger Syndrome, where she explains that, until she was diagnosed, she made sure she returned repeatedly to jail, partly because she found its structure easier to understand than life outside.
The Government is working with Autism Victoria to develop a state plan for autism.

Autism specialists hope this will make the funding criteria less restrictive, as is the case in WA. Other states such as NSW have more baserooms - places in mainstream secondary schools where such teens can get support - than Victoria.