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Parents, politicians seek awareness, understanding of autism

By Erica Jacobson
Free Press Staff Writer

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Tristan Timpone started having health problems just weeks after he was born, according to his mother, Angela MacDonald-Timpone of Montpelier.

The baby had chronic ear infections and intestinal problems, MacDonald-Timpone said, which spurred a series of visits to physicians.

"You're trying to be seen by anyone who knows anything," MacDonald-Timpone said. "His doctors sometimes forgot to ask me the developmental questions because we were so busy."

When Tristan didn't start talking, a doctor diagnosed the boy as autistic.

MacDonald-Timpone was one of several parents at a news conference held Monday morning by Rep. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., to acknowledge April as National Autism Awareness Month. Surrounded by parents wearing laminated photos of their autistic children, Sanders called on government to address concerns regarding early diagnosis and support in dealing with the developmental disorder of autism.

"We don't know the cause of the problem," Sanders said. "We don't know the cure of the problem."

"Clearly, this is an area that needs a lot more focus."

According to statistics released in 2004 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in every 166 children is diagnosed with autism and diagnosis rates have been growing at double-digit percentages. The disorder can cause mild to severe behavior; communication, play and socialization problems; and gastrointestinal issues. More than 700 Vermont children have the disorder as do an unknown number of adults. In families, a child diagnosed with autism can throw work schedules, daily routines and finances into crisis.

"We do, very often with each child, have to reinvent the wheel," said Dr. Steve Contompasis, a pediatrician at the Vermont Children's Hospital at Fletcher Allen Health Care and a consultant to the Vermont Department of Health's Division of Children with Special Health Needs and the Child Development Clinic.

MacDonald-Timpone told Sanders how having an autistic child changed her life. In addition to therapists coming in and out of her home, MacDonald-Timpone frequently ferries Tristan to Boston for appointments with specialists.

"I literally had to stop working to manage his program," MacDonald-Timpone said. "Both parents can't work."

Sanders pledged to back legislation aimed at autism awareness, support and educational resources. Rich Tarrant, a Republican hopeful in the U.S. Senate race this fall, also called for early diagnosis, intervention and understanding.

"It's important that all Americans know that living with autism can be lonely for the child or adult who suffers from disease," Tarrant wrote in a release. "It is also important that during the month of April -- and all year round -- we remember the families and caregivers who give comfort to those with autism."

Contompasis and parents said part of the struggle to demystify the disorder rests with the public.

"Get to know some of the kids," Contompasis said. "Get to know some of these families."

Lynn George, mother of an autistic child and founder of the Autism Support Daily group, seconded that idea. George said she tries to distribute autism information to libraries and other venues and asked for understanding of the situations parents of autistic children sometimes face.

"It's not bad parenting," George said of children's outbursts, "it's just a child who's having a real bad time with the environment he's in at the moment."

"We want our kids to fit in. We're not staying at home because of our children."
Contact Erica Jacobson at 660-1843 or ejacobso@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com.