

The West Australian

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DESCENT**

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New autism headquarters to get the kids smiling

Tasha Alach, early intervention services manager at the Autism Association of WA, knows the importance of the right learning environment for children such as (clockwise from front) Caleb, 6, Zach, 5, Joseph, 5, Aiden, 5, and Caitlin, 5. A Lotterywest grant will pay for new State headquarters for the association. **Report, P5**

Picture: Rod Taylor



Autism centre to help children communicate

STEPHANIE PAINTER

Tasha Alach knows more than most about the value of a single smile.

As manager of early intervention services at the Autism Association of WA, she routinely sees newly diagnosed, "quite terrified" children struggling to communicate and make sense of the world.

After intensive treatment measured in years rather than months and involving speech pathologists, occupational therapists and psychologists, the children learn language and social skills.

"They look at you and they smile and you can see that they've changed because you understand them and their needs," Miss Alach said. "If they can't use words to communicate we understand that they need skills and teach them and the parents."

Autism is a neurological developmental disability affecting communication, social interaction and behaviour. Association chief executive Joan McKenna Kerr said rates of autism had increased in the past 15 years. About 300 WA children were diagnosed each year.

An early intervention centre will be built in Shenton Park with the help of a \$4 million Lotterywest grant, increasing the number of children treated a year from 200 to 300 and eliminating waiting lists.

"So when a child is diagnosed and a family is really distressed and upset, they have an immediate place where they can come and not have to wait to have the service delivered at a really difficult time in their lives," Mrs McKenna Kerr said.

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