

Children on autistic spectrum has tripled over past decade - ALUT

'Special needs must be made a national priority,' chairman says

• By LIDAR GRAVÉ-LAZI

The number of children on the autistic spectrum has tripled over the past decade and Israel is unprepared to deal with this growing population group, The Israeli Society for Autistic Children (ALUT) said on Monday.

According to the organization, one in every 100 babies is diagnosed with autism each year and statistics show that the numbers will only continue to grow.

In the wake of these findings, ALUT is holding its annual donation day on Tuesday. Thousands of children are planning to knock on doors throughout the country, asking for contributions to the organization.

"Autism and special needs must be put back on the list of [national] priorities," Amos Shapira, chairman of ALUT told *The Jerusalem Post*.

Shapira said that the rapid increase in the number of children diagnosed with autism and the lack of preparedness by the State has caused a situation in which existing educational frameworks are overflowing and do not allow for proper care of children with special needs.

Under his leadership, the organization has called to formulate a national plan for autistic children in the special education system - currently its "main mission."

"It is unfathomable that a child with autism who is starting first grade

will not know where he will go [to study] one week before the start of the school year," said Shapira.

He explained that the reality today, sees countless children having to attend schools up to an hour and a half away from home or attending frameworks that are not suited to meet their needs. Worst of all, he said, there are many children who are forced to stay home with one of their parents since no suitable educational framework is provided for them.

Additionally, he said that the Education Ministry had set a limit of 80 pupils per school for autistic children, though in reality enrollment often exceeded 100 pupils.

According to ALUT, there is to date

a need for some 25 additional schools dedicated solely for children with special needs to meet the growing demand for educational frameworks.

"Special needs is always pushed from the list of national priorities," he said. "The way the education minister speaks about the reforms in English and in Math, why can't he talk that way about special needs?"

Shapira, a leading businessman and former president of The University of Haifa, said he believes in a realistic and practical approach to resolving the lack of educational frameworks.

As such, he has called on the Education Ministry to immediately present a plan and set goals for special education in Israel.



FRIENDS OF ALUT attend a concert with violinist Ruth Fazal at the Leah Rabin Home for Life, in Holon last week. (Courtesy)