

Taking it in their stride

By SHARON LABI

LIKE most parents of autistic children, Andrea and Peter Werner knew nothing about the condition until their son was diagnosed.

Harry was just 15 months old when they noticed his lack of speech. They swiftly found a speech therapist but, after three months, were told there were “underlying issues”.

Harry, now 13, was one of the lucky ones. At 18 months, he was enrolled into an early intervention program with Autism Spectrum Australia and the formal diagnosis came around his third birthday.

These days, there is at least a 12-month wait.

“It was a slow and gradual process for us which in some ways made it easier,” Mrs Werner said. “We did a program called Building Blocks which taught us how to teach Harry to play, to speak more, not to get too set in his ways.”

The pair invested a lot of time and money on speech

therapy and occupational therapy but, now that Harry is a teenager, services are scarce and private health insurance covers just a fraction of the cost.

Despite Harry’s obsession with sport, his attendance at a special-needs school and his often mild-mannered behaviour, life for the Seaforth family can be challenging.

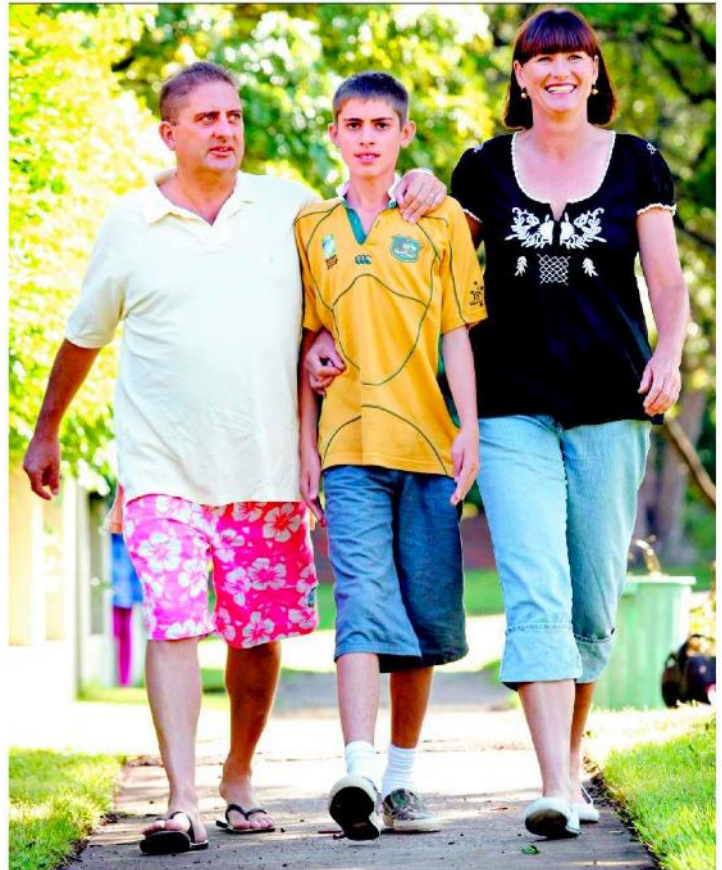
“He doesn’t have very many antisocial issues and is usually pretty well behaved but I don’t want to sugar-coat it: he likes his routine and it can be a real pain,” Mr Werner said.

The Werners also have two daughters, Melanie 15, and Sophia, 7.

They were conscious of not depriving Melanie of attention when she was little and waited several years before having Sophia.

Mrs Werner said, “We don’t want people to feel sorry for us. We hate that.

“We’re lucky to have all our children.”



Slow and gradual process: Peter and Andrea Werner with their son Harry at their Seaforth home

Picture: Sam Rutlyn