



Flock celebrates Shepherd's 10th birthday

By Ingrid Fuary-Wager

Rarely too busy to talk, it was obvious James Rankin was on a critical mission for a piece of the birthday cake yesterday.

Once he got his hands on some, it was back to his sociable self as he showed his cake-smearred hands for all to see and announced loud and clear, "What a mess."

Three-year-old James is one of the many deaf children aged up to five who attend the Canberra Shepherd Centre and who took part in its 10th birthday celebrations.

Although the centre, which offers auditory and speech therapy for deaf children, had been operating in Canberra as a visiting service for 25 years, it opened its doors at a permanent location in 2001.

Last year its future was left up in the air because of a potential lack of government funding.

For James's mother Megan, the prospect of the centre closing last year was stressful.

"The Shepherd Centre is a real family, such a close-knit community," she said. "If that was to go, it would have been terrible."

James, who is profoundly deaf, had been attending the centre since he was seven months old, after he contracted meningococcal meningitis. After months in hospital and 14 operations, the last for Cochlear implants, he and his family began attending the centre.

Shepherd Centre director of clinical programs Aleisha Davis stressed the importance of early intervention, with children as young as four weeks old attending for therapy.

"A decade ago children wouldn't join us until at least two years of age. We are now able to start early intervention much earlier and children are meeting typical speech and language at three, four and five years of age, well before they head to school," Ms Davis said.

Aside from celebrating its achievements over the past 10 years, the centre had high hopes for the future. It recently signed a five-year lease on premises at Rivett.

Shepherd Centre chief executive Jim Hungerford was quick to identify areas for improvement, including better help for remote families, services for children who were now at mainstream schools, and a focus on children from non-English-speaking backgrounds or with additional needs.

Along with the ACT Department of Education and Training continuing to cover just more than half of the centre's costs over the next two years, some children would be eligible for the Better Start funding package from next month, which offered families \$12,000 for a child aged up to seven with certain disabilities, such as hearing and vision impairment, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome or fragile X.



WE WISH ... : Auditory verbal therapist Rachel Willis, left, helps James Rankin, 3, Angus Packwood, 3, and Genevieve, 2, blow out the candles. Photo: GARY SCHAFER