



Who is Autism Camp Australia?

Autism Camp Australia (ACA) is a registered Australian charity whose mission is to improve the health and wellbeing of Autistic young people and their families. We create supported spaces where the Autistic community can connect, celebrate their identity and enrich their lives. We aim to enhance life skills through neurodiversity affirming and relationship-based practices, therapies and education focused on supporting health and wellbeing. Our mission and vision are aligned with the NDIS's ILC national strategy.

ACA's first camp took place in January 2020 filling a critical gap in services identified in the ILC Policy and outcomes framework. We now run over 40 camps a year across four States supporting thousands of Autistic young people and their families.

ACA participants are young people aged 7-14, diagnosed with ASD levels 1, 2 and 3 under the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) diagnostic criteria, their parents/carers and siblings. Many participants have coexisting disabilities including Intellectual Disability, Global Developmental Delay and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

ACA is Autistic-led - we pride ourselves on having significant neurodivergent representation at every level of the organisation, are informed by lived experience and engage in positive lived-experience role modelling. We listen, engage and uplift Autistic voices, constantly evaluating and improving to be the best we can be for all Autistic and neurodivergent people. We support, listen to and learn from both individuals representing the global Autism community, and individuals from marginalised and under-represented intersectional groups within our Autistic community.

Our camp program takes an authentic strengths-based approach to the health and wellbeing of Autistic young people and their families. At camp, we celebrate neurodiversity, embrace difference and nurture individuality. We want our young people to develop confidence and independence, increase their social connection, develop new and lasting friendships and celebrate their Autistic identity.

"The camp is such a supporting, loving and nurturing experience for the entire family. The friendships and connections made here are heartfelt and genuine, the staff and Carers are beyond amazing. Never in our lives have we experienced such a sense of love and support. The benefits of attending camp last a lifetime just like the memories we hold dear. ACA worked with our kids to expand their social world and skills development in ways we couldn't dream of achieving otherwise."
David Lund, parent

"I would recommend this camp to anyone and everyone. The confidence, resilience and growth it builds is truly amazing in such a short period of time. Seeing my son smile again and get back the spark inside him was amazing. I am truly grateful for your helping him see the good in himself again."
Melissa Giuliani, parent



Our Theory of Change

ACA's experiential learning camp program helps form an initial engagement for many isolated Autistic young people and works as a stepping stone to mainstream inclusive social and community participation. We recognise neurodiversity as a way of thinking that supports our young people to grow into confident and happy adults. We use a one-to-one carer/Autistic young person care-based model, building confidence and self-belief in the participant within a 'safe' ACA camp environment. Our vision is self-reliance, independence, social connection and community inclusion for Autistic young people and their families.

High Social Exclusion Rates for Autistic Young People

Social exclusion, loneliness and a lack of friends are a major factor in the life of Autistic young people. From the very first recorded cases of Autism, scientists have recognized that a lack of social interaction is a central part of the condition. In his 1943 paper, Leo Kanner interpreted the behaviour of Autistic children as being governed by 'the powerful desire for aloneness and sameness.' For decades after, scientists and clinicians supposed that Autistic people do not have friends and are not interested in forging friendships. A study of Autistic youth made in 2011 found that 55.4% had never gotten together with a friend and 63.9% had never been called on the phone by a friend in the 12 months prior to the survey (Liptak et al. 2011). Not surprisingly, differences in social communication were associated with an even lower likelihood of social participation. Autistic young people also fare significantly worse than young people with other disabilities. Solish et al. (2011) found that half of their sample of Autistic children and adolescents had no friends, compared with less than one-quarter of adolescents with an intellectual disability. Although the association is not clear, Gilmore & Cuskelly (2014) suggested that the ramifications of loneliness and social exclusion could potentially contribute to the known mental and physical health inequalities that further exacerbate social exclusion. More recent research has forced a rethink of those long-held beliefs. Autistic people overwhelmingly report that they want friends. And they have shown that they can and do form friendships with both allistic and Autistic peers, even if their interactions sometimes look different from those among allistic people.

Meaningful One-on-One Engagement

It's important to note that social inclusion can be described as not only being present in a community, but also having meaningful social connections and participating in fulfilling social activities (Cummins & Lau 2003; Hall 2005; Overmars & Marx et al. 2013). It is not enough to simply turn up at a social and community activity. One must also have the confidence and skills to participate. Shattuck et al. (2011) agreed that the majority of Autistic adolescents experience major obstacles to social participation, and went on to note that experiences with peers are more likely to occur one-on-one. The social overwhelm of group-based activities combined with anxieties around trying new things can be a major roadblock.

Creating Autistic Community

A study by Crompton and colleagues (2020) described the social experiences of twelve Autistic adults. Findings showed that the Autistic adults' own communication styles differ substantially from non-Autistic communication styles, and the differences required a high amount of mental energy and effort. Particularly effortful in navigating the communication gap were the tasks of reading facial expressions and determining and pre-empting unspoken social rules. A common experience was increased feelings of anxiety in advance of spending time with non-Autistic family and friends, and subsequently experiencing exhaustion and emotional fatigue. In contrast, when they interacted with Autistic family and friends, they described increased feelings of comfort and ease because communication styles were similar. They were on the same communication 'wavelength' and felt less need to mask or camouflage and felt more acceptance of their Autistic behaviour and ways of interaction. A commonality was finding a sense of belonging and being allowed to be their authentic self.

A Pathway to Social Inclusion

Friendship and interpersonal relationships are a normal and expected necessity of life; friendship provides companionship, assistance, emotional support and fosters self-esteem and wellbeing (Hartup & Stevens 1999). Opportunities for synchrony will emerge more readily between two Autistic young people than between an Autistic person and an allistic person. If we build Autistic community and a safe Autism friendly environment where Autistic identity is celebrated, we create opportunities for growth. Connection, communication and similarities with Autistic peers can help build confidence. When an Autistic person's environment is safe and nurturing, and truly Autistic friendly there is very little need to teach social skills or manage behaviours.

Structured Teaching

Structured teaching refers to a group of strategies that are used to create an environment where Autistic young people can operate with increasing independence (Bennett, Reichow, & Wolery, (2011); Hume, Loftin, & Lantz, (2009). The framework is suitable to use with individuals of various ages and capabilities (Mesibov & Shea, 2011). Mesibov, Howley & Naftel (2016) and Hume (2015) have highlighted four key elements of structured teaching: a) physical structural arrangements of the environment b) visual schedules c) systems d) visual structure. The refined package may be viewed as an eclectic approach (Kasari & Smith, (2013) which realistically aims to support Autistic young people to become confident in mainstream inclusive social and community participation.

A Strengths and Interests Based Model

A series of case studies by Lanou et al (2011) presents strategies which capitalise on the students' authentic interests and strengths as a way of meeting their school-based challenges. Through these passions, the authors were able to tap into students' own motivation and true abilities, laying the foundation for success. The baseline results of 52 parents of Autistic youth participating in a 3-year longitudinal survey study were explored, with results showing that according to parents the program positively impacted participants' sense of belonging, confidence and self-esteem, health and well-being, social relationships and interactions, and activities and participation. Strengths-based programs, focusing on developing skills in a supportive environment, will enable Autistic young people to more effectively prepare for mainstream inclusive social and community participation.



How Camp Affects Families

Since January 2020 we have supported the following participants

896 Autistic Young Persons Program

411 Siblings Program

1186 Parents Program

195 Siblings outside of programs

A total of 2688 people supported

Autistic Young People

- 91% agree taking part in the AYP Program helped them feel calmer and happier
- 82% made lots of friends on the AYP Program
- 83% feel better able to tackle day-to-day challenges after attending camp
- 87% agree the new stuff they learnt made them feel more confident and more able to stick up for themselves at school, home and in the community
- 90% feel strong, fit and full of beans
- 91% feel like grown-ups listened to them

Siblings

- 93% agree taking part in the Siblings Program helped them feel calmer and happier
- 90% made lots of friends on the Sibling Program
- 77% feel better able to support their Autistic sibling(s)
- 95% had a break from looking after their Autistic sibling(s)
- 71% agree the Siblings Program helped them to understand their sibling's disability
- At each camp participants are requested to complete an evaluation survey. These results have been recorded by the quantitative data collected at our camps over the last 4 years.

Parents

- 89% agree the self-care day activities helped them achieve improved capacity and resilience in emotional and behavioural functioning
- 82% agree they achieved improved social and practical skills to enable them to function better day-to-day
- 90% achieved a boost to confidence, self-esteem, mental and physical health and increased resilience
- 96% achieved rest and recovery and temporary relief from caregiving leading to a greater ability to maintain informal supports of their Autistic young person(s)
- 87% reduced their social isolation and enhanced their social networks



"The quality of the support staff on the ground is exceptional. I felt 100% confident leaving my child in the care of a qualified, capable and experienced team. The matching process for child to Carer was considered and spot on! The connections made and goals achieved with ACA have been valuable."
Elizabeth Shepherd, parent

"Camp has been a life-changing experience for our family and we can't wait to come back!"
Megan Illmer, parent

"This experience is life changing, our family has been challenged to try new things and in turn we ourselves so fiercely. The staff and Carers at ACA are genuinely invested in the success of our Autistic small humans and the families who support them. We leave here today stronger as a unit hopefully for our future and readying to try and book our next camp. Thank you ACA."
Kayte Luscombe, parent

"We have had an incredible, wholesome experience at camp, and we can't wait to come back again. Watching Max grow and explore in so many ways has been a very heartwarming and emotional experience that I will carry with me for many years to come. I have enjoyed meeting other campers and interacting with their children and creating bonds that I hope will continue to develop once we leave. I have watched Max grow and flourish in this amazing environment and I can't wait to see how he implements his new skills in his day to day life."
Rachel Bannon, parent



The Outcomes for Camp Participants

Short Term Outcomes

- Participants experience a 'safe' environment alongside other Autistic families and supported by specialised team members. They share stories and experiences with people who have lived experience of Autism or are living within an Autistic family.
- Participants feel a sense of relief from social isolation and form new valuable and reliable social connections with people from their Autistic community.
- Participants are able to 'just be' while at camp. The neuro-normative expectations of day-to-day mainstream life are put to one side, and they are encouraged to celebrate their Autistic identity and Autistic culture. Participants engage with positive role models and experience inclusion, acceptance and autonomy.
- Participants are engaged in therapies, education, skills development and peer-to-peer support as part of the program. They benefit from increased knowledge, understanding and training.
- Participants in the programs build capacity in confidence, self-reliance, independence and self-advocacy skills.

Medium Term Outcomes

- Participants form long and lasting friendships. They meet with, and talk with new friends, and reach out to other members in their Autistic community. They have increased social supports. They foster a strong sense of belonging and increase their social cohesion, connection and functioning within their 'safe' Autistic community.
- This new sense of inclusion, acceptance and autonomy is empowering for participants. Their new approach is transformative, reducing anxiety and building self-worth. Participants experience an improvement in their mental health.
- Autistic young people are able to participate more at school. Their new found confidence helps them navigate the often confusing idiosyncrasies of neurotypical behaviour and social situations become easier.
- Siblings have a greater ability to maintain informal support of the Autistic young person, to advocate for, and support them to participate and contribute to community and enjoy an enduring and mutually sustaining relationship.
- Parents experience an increase in confidence and this enables them to explore new opportunities like volunteering, work placements, training and apprenticeships, as well as practical assistance and supports.

Long Term Outcomes

- With their new Autistic family friends, participants feel supported to try new things. They have much higher engagement and participation rates in mainstream social and community activities. This results in a much stronger sense of connectedness in their broader community, and in turn, gives them the confidence and connections to access support networks, community services and other new opportunities of social, civic and economic participation.
- Participants experience a sustained increase in self-worth and wellbeing and improvements in mental and physical wellbeing. They regularly engage in self-care and are better able to care for and support themselves and their family members.
- Participants experience a cumulative increase in confidence, community connection, skills, knowledge, training and independence improving readiness for economic participation, employment and education. Reduced levels of welfare dependency in the long-term.

Ultimately, all of these factors will impact on life expectancy, which best-case scenario, based on three international studies, is currently 53 years of age.