

# ANNUAL REPORT

## Autism Advisory and Support Service



*2013-2014*

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Front page: The cute Sophie enjoys the AASS therapy play area.

## Executive Summary

Autism Advisory and Support Service (AASS) was established in 2007 by a group of parents from South Western Sydney to fill the void in the health care sector encountered by families of children with Autism.

AASS was established as a support and network/advisory service to empower children with Autism and their families through knowledge and support, and to positively impact and influence their children's social and emotional development.

AASS has the legal status as a not for profit incorporated charity. AASS relies heavily on funding grants, donations and sponsorships to meet its operational costs. Despite these financial obstacles AASS has grown in size and been able to expand its range of service delivery. Since its inception AASS has:

- ❖ opened the AASS Community house/drop in center, located in Memorial Avenue, Liverpool;
- ❖ established, coordinated and hosted support groups in a range of languages;
- ❖ established, coordinated and hosted social group for young adults with ASD and mentors;
- ❖ established, coordinated and hosted social skills therapy group for 7-15 year olds;
- ❖ established, coordinated and hosted structured therapy play group for 1-6 year olds;
- ❖ established, coordinated and hosted an art group and drumming circle.
- ❖ run a resource library, toy library, and toy and resource shop
- ❖ established, coordinated and facilitated Australia's only 24 hour Autism hotline.
- ❖ established and expanded their Autism friendly therapy playground and sensory garden.
- ❖ hosted a range of seminars, conferences and workshops on a wide range of topics;

AASS continues to provide these services and others as they strive to close the gaps in service provision for children and adults with autism and their families.

AASS began by supporting families in South West Sydney and now has grown as a support service to families in Western Sydney and in every state of Australia. It handles approximately 250 enquiries/cases per month.



## Our Mission:

- To empower children with Autism and their families through knowledge and support
- To positively impact and influence their social and emotional development

## Our Objectives:

- To advise and assist children with Autism and their families.
- To provide support and information to parents of children with Autism.
- To do this at a free or nominal price for families affected by Autism.
- To engage relevant stakeholders that can make a valid contribution to the development of service and facilities for children with Autism and their families.
- To be a source of information of Autism services.
- To seek funding to sustain development of Autism Advisory and Support Service



From left: Brad Power, Patrick George and Chris Haves MP

## Incorporation

Autism Advisory and Support Service Inc ABN 63 073 684 085 is a not for profit incorporated association. Its members are the current Committee. Its registered office is located at 88 Memorial Ave Liverpool NSW 2170.

### Charitable status, tax concessions and fundraising

Autism Advisory and Support Service is a Health Promotion Charity (HPC). It is endorsed as an Income Tax Exempt Charity and receives certain other tax concessions and exemptions consistent with its status as a HPC which relate to Goods and Services and Fringe Benefits taxes. Autism Advisory and Support Service has been endorsed by the Australian Taxation Office as a Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR). Autism Advisory and Support Service is registered under applicable fundraising legislation as required in NSW where it raises funds as follows: New South Wales: Registration number CFN 21161





## Services

AASS relies heavily on donations, fund-raising and grants to operate their service.

Today, AASS is still run by mostly parents who all have children with Autism. These parents have a diverse set of skills and come from varied professional backgrounds, offering unique expertise to AASS. Those professions include; education, business management and politics.

In addition to the professional skill set the Executive Board members bring to AASS, as parents of children with Autism, they understand the right of the family and the individual with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), to make decisions based on what they feel is best for their situation. Individuals on the spectrum should enjoy the same rights and opportunities as their neuro typical peers.

AASS fills the gap in service provision that exists, and does so at little or no charge to families affected. This is important, as studies have shown that raising a child with a disability cost at least three times more than raising a child without a disability. Government funding focuses on early intervention, so families of children above the age of 6 need to find the money to pay for private services. This costs on average \$150 to \$200 per child per week for forty five minutes of speech therapy and forty five minutes of occupational therapy.

The main benefit that AASS provides is that we do can personally identify with the issues faced by parents accessing our service. We have all experienced the isolation and grief that a diagnosis brings; the frustration of searching for affordable and appropriate services; the battle to find a suitable educational environment for our children; the guilt connected with focusing on the child with the disability and not enough attention on other children; the burden of wondering what will become of our children when they are older.

So when a family comes to AASS for assistance, our empathy and understanding is real. We have learnt about ASD from life, not a textbook. We understand that ASD should not be approached with a "one size fits all" attitude. This unique approach brings families coming back to volunteer when they are more comfortable with their situation. We do not need to advertise our service, as word of mouth in particular from other service providers, keeps us very busy.

For parents and carers waiting for a formal assessment and diagnosis, looking for the right intervention and joining the long waiting lists can be extremely overwhelming, confusing and frustrating. AASS provides unbiased advice, encouragement, guidance and support.



From left: The Hon. John Ajaka and Grace Fava

## Presidents Report

This past year has seen AASS grow in leaps and bounds. The small amount of government funding, together with funds raised via donations and events has ensured therapies and services for more children with Autism. AASS, along with the rest of the disability sector is trying to progress through the implementation of the NDIS. While there is still much uncertainty about the funding for individuals with Autism, we are determined to ensure no one will fall through the cracks and remain with no services. Our lobbying continues and we will try and keep our clients and relevant stakeholders up to date with the latest progress as it is announced.

Our programs continue to assist many families in need, even reaching out to assist newly arrived immigrants whose residential status is in question.

I am proud to report on the success of the Ipad grant, where more than 50 iPads with the communication app Proloquo 2go were granted to non verbal youth and young adults with severe autism. It warmed my heart to see the photos and read the letters of thanks from the parents and carers of the recipients to see how their lives have changed in a positive way.

Next year is shaping up to be even bigger, busier and more exciting than the last. I look forward to sharing our progress with you.

Grace Fava CLO JP

President



## The AASS Executive Committee

### Grace Fava CLO, JP

Founder and President

Certificate IV Frontline Management, Adjunct Fellow Faculty of Health Sciences at University of Western Sydney, Board Member with Catholic Cemeteries Trust

Grace has worked in many diverse fields including Pharmacy, Office Administration and Accounts receivable for various organisations. Her passion for Autism was ignited when searching for services for her two boys who both regressed with Autism and Global Developmental Delay.

Grace is responsible for the day to day running of AASS and overseeing all aspects of the organisation.

### Fiona Zammit B Ed

Vice President, Secretary

Fiona has a Bachelor of Education and has worked for the past 17 years as a Primary School Teacher.

Fiona is a founding member of AASS.

Fiona is responsible for all banking aspects of AASS and is an integral part of all AASS fundraisers.

### June Young OAM JP

Treasurer

Business Owner – Stage Struck (NSW) Pty Ltd for 23 years.

Member of Quota International of Liverpool, Rotary Club of Liverpool Greenway, NSW Justices Association, National Council of Women, Fairfield RSL Women’s Auxiliary President

Past South Pacific Area Director of Quota International in Washington DC, USA

Business Person of the Year for Liverpool, Liverpool Australian of the Year

Awarded the Federal Centenary Medal for Service to Liverpool Community

Awarded the Order of Australia Medal for “Service to the community through a range of Women’s, local government, business and ex-service organizations”

### Bassema Ghaznavi

Certificate IV in Community Services (Employment Services) with a focus on Disabilities, Diploma in Disability, and Diploma in Case Management

Bassema is a founding member of AASS.

Bassema currently coordinates and mans the AASS 24 Hour Autism Hotline.



**Craig Kelly MP**

Craig Kelly became the 1077th Member of the House of Representatives in August 2010, representing the seat of Hughes.

Craig entered Parliament with a unique set of experiences and who, along with his wife Vicky, care for his son Trent, who was born with Downs Syndrome and later diagnosed with Autism. Craig carries a drive and determination to make a real difference in the disability sector.

Craig said in his maiden speech that caring for Trent "has made me a better person. It has made me fully appreciate that each individual has a real value of their own, and the dignity of every individual must be respected. But most importantly it has awakened me to the fact that as a nation we need to do more, much more, for children with a disability and their carers."

**William Johns**

Bachelor of Business (applied finance, financial planning), Master Disability Studies (Medical), Certified Financial Planner, Certificate iv credit and consumer lending.

**Elizabeth Dadd**

Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Teaching

Elizabeth is a high school teacher in the Catholic Education System and is a welcome addition to the AASS Board in 2014.



Brodie was a recipient of an iPad for communication from AASS. Here she interacts and communicates with her sister.

## Young Adult Social Group Annual Report

2014 was a fantastic year for the Young Adult Social Group. This year we boasted 12 fun filled activities. All the activities proved to not only entertain and excite the attendees but also challenge them and teach them new skills.

We have approximately 40 clients registered with the program. Of those 40, we regularly see an average of 10-15 clients on an outing. We also have a good pool of regular volunteers who attend. This year we have extremely successful recruitment of new volunteers through a good working relationship with the Liverpool Volunteer Resource Centre.

One of the highlights of this year included a stay overnight at Calmsley Hill City Farm. This outing was held in May and proved to be rather chilly. Despite that, the clients who attended were able to participate in all of the duties of a real working farm. From milking cows, to collecting eggs, to feeding horses and even cleaning up after the animals. The group sat around the campfire at night toasting marshmallows and playing a very entertaining game of charades. Even though much fun was had and everyone was tired, the whole group awoke to see the sunrise from the tower at the farm. Something which was a first time event for almost everyone.

More recently the group learnt some useful work/life skills by running a Café for a day at Prairiewood High School. The School kindly donated a staff member and their community kitchen for us to learn how to make excellent Barista standard coffee, smoothies, wraps, sandwiches and yummy raisin toast. This event was extremely well attended and the feedback from clients and parents was overwhelming. Some clients are now even considering including hospitality in their subject choices for high school, whilst others now have the confidence to tackle some of these options at home. Not only was it useful for teaching hospitality skills, but the clients also served one another at tables and found a different way to interact and socialise. This day was such a huge success that we look forward to including it again as part of our schedule in 2015.

**Leanne Stanton**

**Social Group Coordinator 2014**



The Social Group at their overnight camp at Calmsley Hill City Farm

## Art Group Report

The Autism Art Group continues to grow in size and capacity. There continues to be an excellent turnout of regular participants and we continue to welcome new members to the group. The group works as a pseudo social group for participants, with many directly addressing their peers and interacting. Children and parents worked together to complete the art work which was a very supportive environment for the group.

Parent feedback has been fantastic, with many commenting on the way the group is facilitated and the progress that they see in their children e.g. longer concentration times, forming of friendships, improved concentration. An informal carers network has also formed between the parents with a supportive environment to share advice, information and cappuccinos.

Some highlights from this year include:

- Finger Painting on Canvas
- An excursion to the Museum of Contemporary Art
- Tissue Paper Butterflies
- Easter Baskets
- "Feelings" Mandala
- Clay Pots
- Face Masks
- Sponge Painting

I am looking forward to another year of interaction and artistic expression amongst the group.

Suzana Katic  
Art Therapist



Outing at the Museum of Contemporary Art



## Social Skills Therapy Group

Our Social Skills & Therapy Group for children with a diagnosis of Autism, facilitated by an Occupational Therapist and Psychologist, is held fortnightly during NSW School Terms at the Whitlam Centre Liverpool.

We currently have 23 Registered Clients aged between 7 and 15, in 4 small groups of up to 6 clients each. Each Term, our clients complete a program developed by the therapists, to teach new skills to use in social situations. Feedback from clients and parents has been extremely positive.



## Early Years Therapy and Support Playgroup

Designed for pre-school aged children with a diagnosis of Autism, our Early Years Therapy and Support Playgroup is one of the first, and most important, networks for families. Our Playgroup offers the services on an ABA trained Clinical Psychologist, Speech Therapist and Occupational Therapist and is held for 1.5 hours weekly during NSW School Terms.

We currently have 20 registered clients (5 girls and 15 boys) an increase in the number of participants by 100% on the previous year.

The children who attend Playgroup, have access to games, creative activities and opportunities to interact, allowing them to learn, share and most importantly, to have fun under the guidance of our qualified therapists. Parents and carers are offered positive, personalised strategies to use with their child through play therapy.

Our Playgroup also provides parents/carers, with much needed peer support and the opportunity to develop valuable friendships and make connections with their communities.

Parents and carers are reporting that along with their child, they are enjoying the social and educational experience provided by the staff and therapists and appreciate the support from AASS Staff.





## iPad Grants

Through the generosity of the Honda Foundation and a few fundraisers, AASS were able to donate new iPads downloaded with the communication app Proloquo 2go to over 50 non verbal individuals with Autism from around Australia. The feedback was heartwarming and inspirational.

From The Liverpool Champion :

### At 37, this man 'finds' his voice

By Natalie Pilato

Nov. 12, 2013

FOR the first time in his life, Jimmy Richardson, 37, has a voice.

Mr Richardson, who has autism, lives in a group home with four other people. He is non-verbal, and cannot read or write. But that's all about to change.

Mr Richardson is one of 50 candidates who received an iPad 2 from Liverpool's Autism Advisory and Support Service last Thursday.

This not-for-profit organisation donated iPads to non-verbal children and adults with autism.

The iPads were donated to children over the age of 12 as their parents were unable to access the government autism package.

The iPads were equipped with 12 apps suitable for people with autism including the app Proloquo2Go, which costs \$230.

The Autism Advisory and Support Service provided these iPads after it held fund-raising events and received a grant from the Honda Foundation.

Founder Grace Fava said the iPads would not only provide participants with a new way to communicate but would also help to improve their lives.

"It's a huge breakthrough," she said. "It's going to turn their lives around.

"It's really exciting to be able to give children and adults with autism a voice. It's so hard when you have someone you love very desperately and you can't make out what they want."

Libby Kinsela, a senior clinical consultant for intellectual support service Allevia, said Mr Richardson was already making good progress.

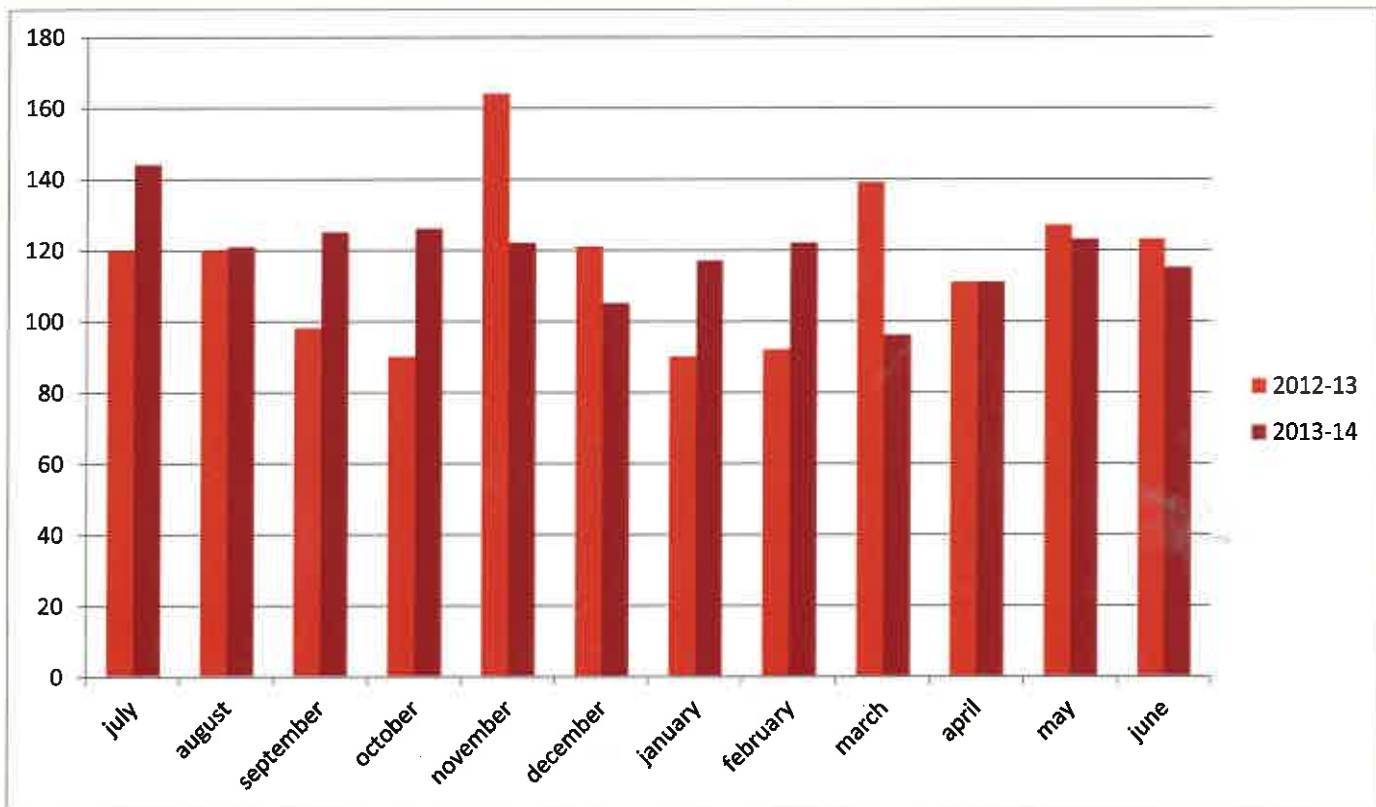
"The iPad has given him an actual voice for the first time in his life," she said. "He's learning so quickly. It's only a matter of time until he is initiating conversation.

"It's really opening doors for him — and doors he wouldn't be able to open himself."



## 24 Hour Autism Hotline

Our Hotline is still unfunded and paid for by donations and fundraising events. It is manned by volunteer parents who offer guidance, support and suggestions to a range of callers such as parents and carers, siblings and friends, Health professionals, Doctors and Police. These callers come to AASS from around Australia where we listen and support.



From left: Fiona Zammit, The Hon. Marie Ficcaro MLC,