

ANNUAL REPORT



Autism Advisory and Support Service



2014-2015

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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, complete with Autism friendly therapy playground and sensory garden.
- ❖ 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 a school outreach program providing therapeutic opportunities to students in Schools for Specific Purposes and Support Units.
- ❖ Provide a range of group and individual therapies including Speech Therapy, Music Therapy, Occupational Therapy and Psychology
- ❖ established, coordinated and hosted social skills therapy group for 7-15 year olds;
- ❖ established, coordinated and host structured therapy play group for 1-6 year olds;
- ❖ established, coordinated and host Art Play via an Art Therapist.
- ❖ run a resource library and toy and resource shop
- ❖ established, coordinated and facilitated the only 24 hour Autism hotline in the southern hemisphere.
- ❖ established and expanded their 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 the development of Autism Advisory and Support Service.

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, fundraising 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, some, as parents of children with Autism 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 an affordable cost to families. 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.

Chairperson's Report

Behind every challenge is a dream or hope awaiting release.

This captures the essence of the hearts and minds of those that drive the Autism Advisory & Support Service (AASS). It has been a privilege to serve with the Board, staff and volunteers at our service over this past year.

The organization has grown, redefined its goals and cemented its foundation to ensure the team can continue provide support and advice to clients into the future. The recent growth of the Service is testament to the commitment and dedication of the team and it is nothing short of awe-inspiring.

Our nation's disability support systems are in need of genuine and constructive change and the AASS team are here to help shape and inform debate to keep that conversation going.

The Boards' focus in 2016 will be to firmly position itself as an advocate of service support for individuals with Autism, both nationally and internationally and to help governments understand that the disability sector cannot continue to be pillaged without social consequence.

Nadia Licastro

Chairperson



President's Report

This past year has seen AASS continue to grow. The small amount of government funding, together with funds raised via donations and events has ensured therapies and services for more children with Autism and their families. 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. AASS successfully passed the third party verification for the NDIS meeting best practice in the industry, ensuring our ongoing services for clients in the future. 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.

AASS are called on to offer professional development and be key note speakers for various organisations, including Department of Education schools, the State Emergency Service (SES) and first responders from around Australia. It is a source of great pride that we can share our experience and expertise to ensure a more successful outcome for individuals with Autism in all circumstances.

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

Fiona Zammit is a founding member of AASS. She is currently holding the position of Vice President on the Executive Board. Her volunteer work with AASS includes assisting in fundraising events and coordinating the mobile toy shop with schools.

Fiona has a Bachelor of Education and is currently employed by the Department of Education as a Learning and Support Teacher. She is passionate about providing inclusive educational opportunities for students with additional needs.

Fiona is married with 2 children. She credits her son, who has Autism, as the inspiration behind what she does.

Nadia Napoletano

Chairperson

Nadia Napoletano is a newly appointed board member with a background in legal and governance matters. Nadia has leadership experience across the public and private sectors in executive management positions in legal services, governance, procurement, business planning and strategy, work health & safety, risk management, policy and regulation.

She has experience in leading and establishing governance frameworks in public sector environments, as well as leading and undertaking business transformation projects.

Nadia is a qualified legal practitioner and holds a Graduate Diploma of Legal Practice from the College of Law as well as a Certificate IV in Training & Assessment.



Tess Danjoux
Secretary

Tess has been an integral part of Marsdens Law Group's Personal Injury team since her admission as a solicitor in 2002. She has gained a high level of experience in all areas of Personal Injury, with a particular emphasis on Motor Vehicle Accident Claims, Total and Permanent Disablement (TPD) Superannuation Claims and Dust Diseases Claims. Tess was appointed as a Senior Associate at Marsdens Law Group in 2015. In 2008 she achieved Specialist Accreditation from the NSW Law Society in Personal Injury. Between 2007 and 2009, Tess was the president of the Macarthur Law Society. Tess is regularly involved in community and charity events. She has previously served on the boards of various local organisations, including Kids of Macarthur, Campbelltown Chamber of Commerce and the UWS School of Law Advisory Board.

On a personal level, Tess enjoys playing touch football, running, watching movies and spending time with her family. She lives in Camden with her husband and two children.

Bassema Ghaznavi

Cert IV in Employment Services (Disabilities)

Diploma in Disability

Diploma in Case Management

Currently in the final stage of completing a Bachelor of Social Science (Social Welfare) degree

Bassema is a founding board member of AASS. She has 4 years' experience working as a disability employment consultant within Disability Employment Services using a holistic approach in identifying and working with individuals to remove barriers from empowerment and enable job readiness. The role included marketing appropriate employers, resume building, job placements, vocational training, mentoring, and on the job support for both clients and employers.

She is currently a volunteer operator for the 24hr Autism Hotline taking calls from carers, professionals, and people on the Autism spectrum that are in need of assistance, advice and support.

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. Elizabeth is active in a variety of community sports and a strong advocate of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Young Adult Social Group Annual Report

The Young Adult Social Group (YASG) has had a wonderful year with a number of successful events. The group has transitioned nicely with the introduction of a new group coordinator and events commencing in March of this year after a few months break. The YASG has hosted a number of events across Sydney that have targeted the group's interests and provided opportunities for socialisation of group members with their peers.

Some of the events that have been held this year include; BBQ's, bowling, mini-golf, girls only 'mini-makeover' day, karaoke, museum visits and a 2 day overnight adventure camp. All of the events have been really enjoyable and had a great turn out of members. The YASG events have foster the development of each members; social skills, relationships with peers, team work skills, level of independence and confidence.

The YASG group has 16 young adults currently accessing the group on a fortnightly/monthly basis; 13 male members and 3 female members.

Michaela Sullivan

Social Group Coordinator



Art Group Report

The art group we hold every 2nd Sunday consists of the children experimenting with different art mediums, interests and themes. They get to experience different sensory materials while creating masterpieces which they can take home. What makes this group so special is they have the freedom to recreate the example provided and turn them into specific art pieces they relate to.

We usually have anywhere between 6-10 children that attend, some who are regulars and some who have recently joined. 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. An informal carers network has also formed between the parents with a supportive environment to share advice, information and cappuccinos.

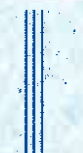
Some highlights from this year include:

- Finger Painting on Canvas
- Museum of Contemporary Art Excursion
- 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.

Veronica Pepe
Art Therapist



Social Skills Therapy Group Report

Our Social Skills & Therapy Group for children with a diagnosis of Autism is facilitated by an Occupational Therapist and Psychologist. 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.

The social skills group goals are developed in collaboration with the parents. Feedback is given to the parents following each session if they choose not to sit in on the session. The parents enjoy engaging with other parents as they reported that as their children get older they feel more isolated.

GOALS

The key areas and goals that have been targeted throughout group sessions include:

1. Understanding emotions
2. Basic interpersonal skills
3. Forming and maintaining friendships
4. Important skills in conversation
5. Perspective taking
6. Self-esteem
7. Developing confidence
8. Problem solving and decision making



Early Years Therapy and Support Playgroup Report

Early Years Therapy & Support group is for children aged 0-5 with a diagnosis of Autism and their families.

Our Early Years Therapy playgroup offers the services of an ABA trained Psychologist, Speech Therapist and Occupational Therapist and is held on Mondays and Thursdays for 1.5 hours weekly during NSW School Terms. Our Thursday group started Term 3, 2015 due to an increased number of families interested in group and/or an alternative day.

In 2015 we have introduced fruit time during the playgroup, of which has shown a lot of success. This experience exposes the children to various senses including taste and touch/texture. This allows them opportunities to model for or learn from other children. Our goal was to engage the children in a structured sit down routine while exposing them to new tastes. Our achievements so far with fruit time have been the highlight of the year.

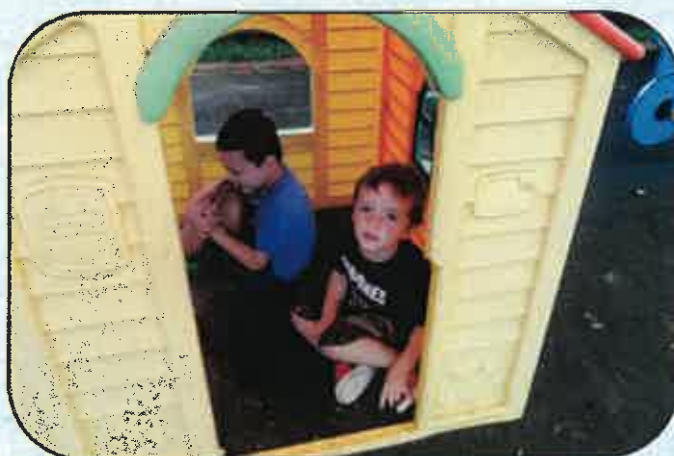
Early Intervention and Support are given to children and families through this program.

We are able to support the children's learning with activities and other structured experiences that affect either the child or families outcomes.

During our structured playgroup, children 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.

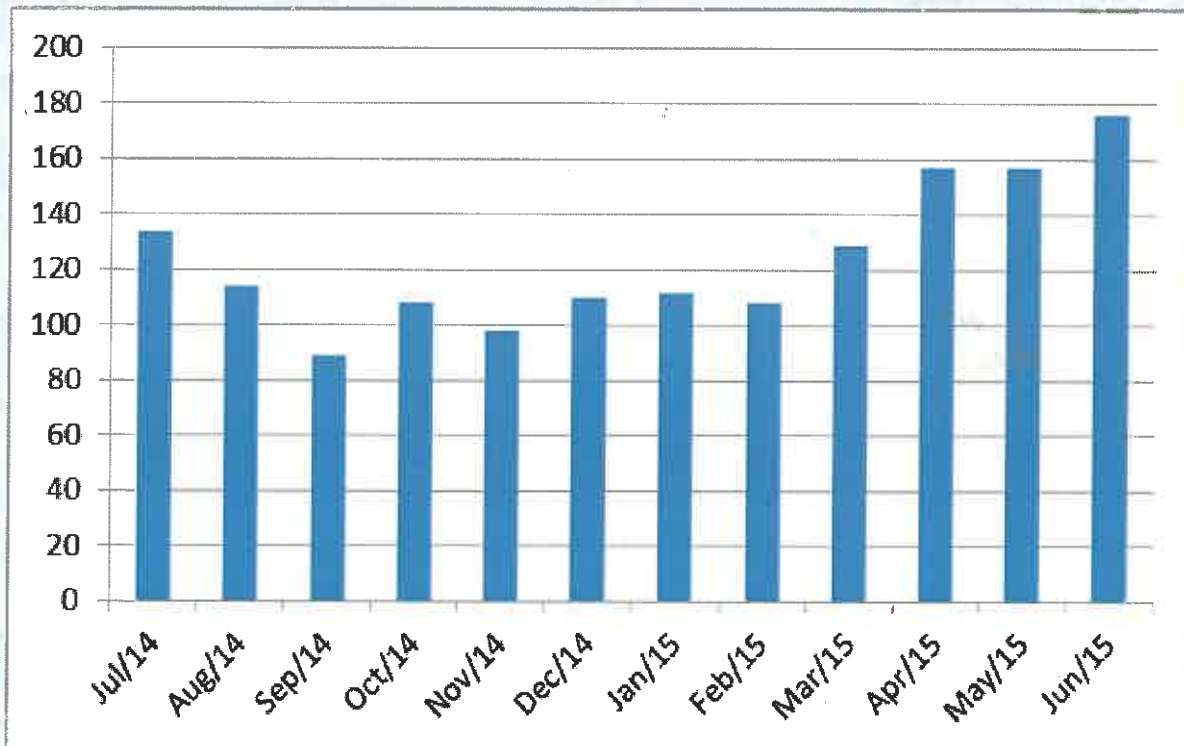
The group allows parents and caregivers much needed support and the opportunity to develop valuable friendships, relationships and make connections with their community.

With the introduction of Art Folders and End of Year DVDs the parents are given the opportunity to see the growth and development of the children throughout the year to take home, keep and reflect on in years to come.



24 Hour Autism Hotline Report

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 contact AASS from around Australia, where we listen, support and offer guidance to the community.



Music Therapy Report

Music therapy is the planned and creative use of music in order to engage and make meaningful connections with an individual. Our Registered Music Therapist has recently joined the team at AASS on a permanent basis. She has been running music therapy groups within schools in our outreach therapy program as well as individual sessions within the new portable building located at the AASS house. Our outreach Music Therapy program is funded to service children between the ages of 0-12 and has been well received this past year. The program is currently supporting just over 90 students across 6 schools within the South-West Sydney region. We are currently piloting a music therapy outreach program within the Nepean/Blue Mountains NDIS catchment and servicing schools within Mount Druitt and Lalor Park.

In the short period that individual and group music therapy sessions have been advertised, we have signed up 4 clients and have 3 children ready to begin a group. The method of measuring the outcomes is done via a qualitative record keeping and quantitative scales that evaluates a client's response to music and levels of engagement. In particular, we have seen a vast improvement in increasing joint attention with the clients through music making, developing social skills such as turn taking, sharing, eye contact and listening, and an increase in attention span and focus. The use of humour and play with a musical framework has also played a pivotal role in expanding relationships between the therapist and clients and achieving successful outcomes. We look forward to continue providing music therapy services to our families of children with Autism, both within the outreach therapy program and individual/group therapy fee service business model.



Toy Store Report

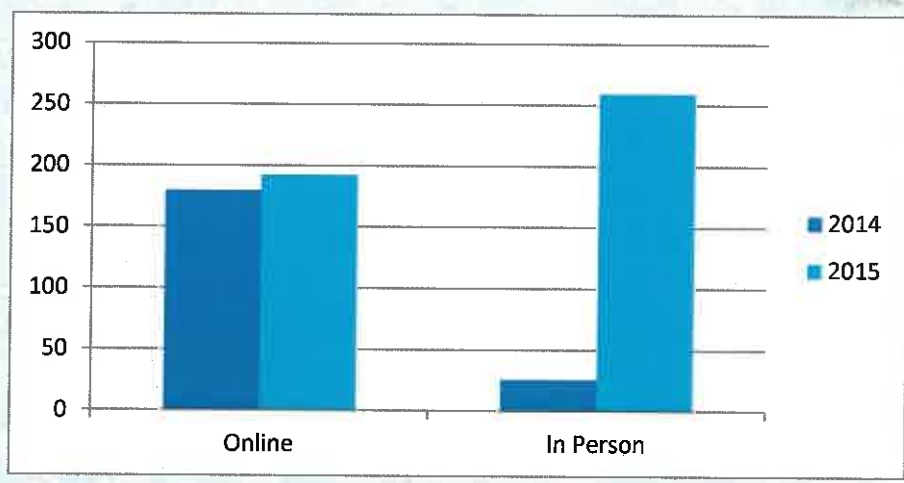
Over the past 11 months the AASS Sensory Toy Store has expanded greatly. Compared to 2014 online sales, the number of orders has slightly increased; however, the amount of in person sales is where the major change has occurred.

As we continue to network with schools, our teacher sale have increase along with the need to hold Open Days during school holidays so that teachers can access the store. Our first Open Day during the September/October holidays was a huge success and another day has been scheduled for January 2016.

A sample of sensory toys and resources from the store has been taken out to several schools to not only promote the store but to allow teachers to place an order for the goods which are then delivered within a two week period. New stock aimed at teachers has been added to the shop along with a new selection of sensory toys and resources.

AASS continue to attend expos and local events to create awareness of the service and the store with many online and in person sales resulting in our attendance.

Toy Store Sales



Special Thanks

AASS wish to thank the following families and organisations for their support:

Adriano Coluccio Funeral Services	D Leonello Deemhire Pty Ltd	Quota International R and B Real Estate
Blanca Rags	Department of Foreign Affairs	RoCan Stephen Stewart
Butcher Boy	Grace Romano J and J Vella	Suzana Katic Sydney Airport Ladies Association
Cabramatta Leagues Club	Josie Skott Judith Birkett	The family of the late Angela Leonello
Cabra-Vale Diggers Club	Laurie Ferguson Maria Strangio	The family of the late Giovanni Varchione
Chep Pallets	Pina Pisano Puglia Soccer Club	Wattle Grove Lions Club Woolworths Plumpton
Chris Smith		
Clint Windsor		
Collaborate for a cause		
Craig Robinson		
Craig Wheele		

