



Autism
Support
Louth & Meath



Project Starfish Outcome Report 2023

RTE
**TOY
& SHOW
APPEAL**





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Introduction



Navigating the complexities of adolescence can be especially challenging for autistic teenagers. Establishing connections, expressing themselves, and building self-confidence can at times feel like an uphill battle. In response to these challenges, Project Starfish emerged as a supportive haven.

Project Starfish aimed to improve the lives of teenagers by providing essential support, guidance, and a nurturing environment to help participants overcome a range of challenges and encourage personal growth. With a total of 32 teenagers taking part, the primary goal of this outcome report is to evaluate the impact of The Orange Youth Club and the Boost Programme which combine to make Project Starfish on the lives of participants, highlighting how its objectives of creating a safe space, fostering friendships and opportunities for participation, and building confidence have been achieved through tangible progress and positive outcomes.

The Youth Club understands that each teenager's journey is unique. It aims to address the fundamental needs of autistic teenagers: a place to belong, opportunities to connect, and a platform to grow. This report looks at data collected from surveys. These responses provide a clear snapshot of how Project Starfish has facilitated meaningful change and growth in the lives of its participants.

Autism Support Louth & Meath

Mission

Our mission is to support autistic individuals and families affected by autism.

We do this by facilitating and promoting education for Autistic people, providing support, information and advocacy for families and individuals, promoting a greater awareness of autism, liaising with Government bodies in the pursuit of appropriate education and all support services for Autistic children and adults and providing and facilitating social activities and activity based respite for children and families affected by autism.



About



Autism Support Louth&Meath are a self-help support group formed by parents of children with Autism in 2002. We founded the Drogheda ABACAS Special School for Children with Autism in 2003.

Our goal is to improve the lives of those living on the autism spectrum and the families that love them.



Project Starfish is an initiative led by Autism Support Louth, aimed at providing vital support to autistic teenagers. With a commitment to fostering personal growth and development, the project was made possible through generous funding from the Toy Show and the Community Foundation of Ireland. This funding played a pivotal role in shaping the project's format and facilitating the recruitment of dedicated staff members.

Central to Project Starfish is the Orange Youth Club. A space for teens to meet weekly in a supportive and empowering environment to engage in diverse activities and build meaningful connections.

Another dimension of Project Starfish is The Boost programme, which operates under the Project Starfish umbrella. This programme is designed to create a supportive environment, allowing participants to flourish and reach their full potential. By offering a secure space, facilitating meaningful connections, and nurturing self-confidence, Project Starfish's Orange Youth Club and the Boost programme combine to make a profound and lasting impact on the lives of participants.

Through this initiative, a positive ripple effect is being created, influencing not only the lives of the teenagers involved but also the families and the broader community supporting their journey of growth and self-discovery.

Youth Club

Events and Activities

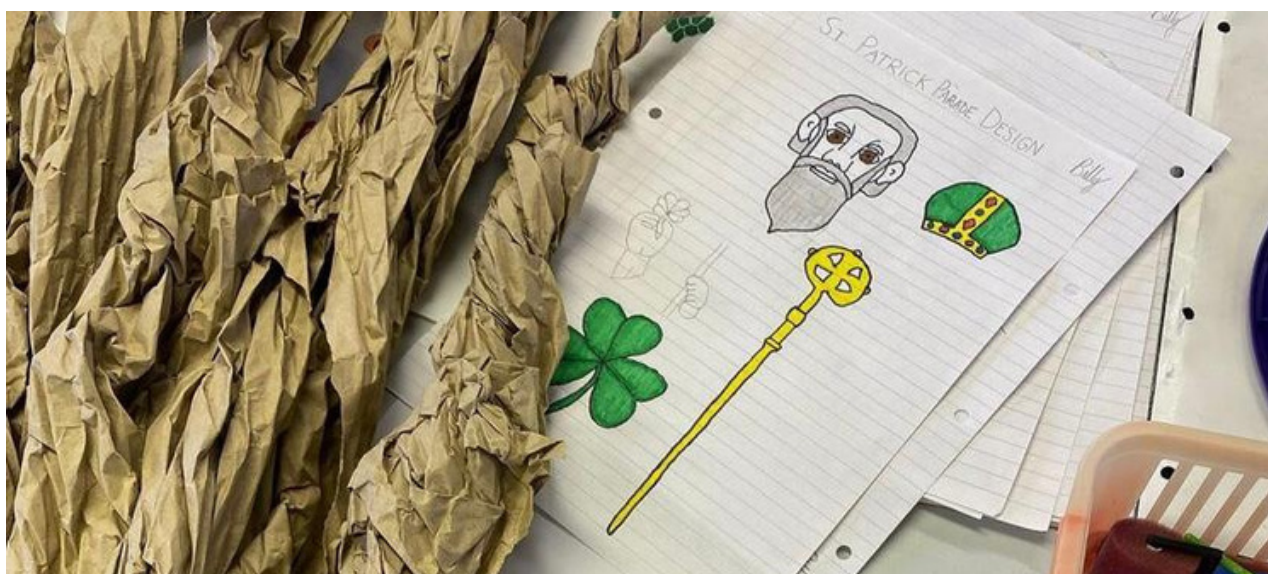
Over the past eighteen months, the Orange Youth Club has met every Saturday along with 2 two week summer camps and additional days out. Our approach is centred around tailoring experiences to individual interests, enabling participants to pick the activities and events that resonate with them. The diversity of events mirrors the experiences and activities chosen by the participants.

These include day trips to Emerald Park, the Game of Thrones Museum, and Skerries, along with attending live shows and exploring local festivals. Our teenagers have enjoyed bowling, movie outings, and ice cream adventures. They've participated in crafting workshops, drumming sessions, and cooking classes, creating everything from pizzas to brownies. Notably, the club embarked on a creative journey by designing and crafting giant puppets and costumes for Drogheda's St Patrick's Day parade, proudly representing young autistic people. In particular, the gaming club provides a space for video game enthusiasts to connect and engage online and in person.



St. Patrick's Day 2023

Over a period of 10 weeks before Drogheda's St. Patrick's Day parade, the Orange Youth Club met weekly to work as a team and build large puppets. Initially there was trepidation amongst some of the participants, but over the 10 weeks confidence was built and there was great participation in the designing and creating of the puppets. All the hard work paid off as our teens proudly walked in the parade, raising awareness and celebrating their unique perspectives.





OUR OBJECTIVES

The three fundamental objectives of Project Starfish were thoughtfully designed to address the crucial needs of young autistic teenagers. Firstly, establishing a safe space was essential to providing a nurturing environment where they could freely express themselves, fostering a sense of belonging and security. Secondly, creating opportunities for participation and friendship-building aimed to counter social isolation, enabling them to forge meaningful connections and develop social skills that extend beyond the club. Lastly, fostering confidence was a pivotal goal to empowering participants to embrace their unique abilities and navigate the challenges they may encounter.

1

Objective 1- A safe space

Our first objective focused on establishing a safe space where teenagers could find understanding, and acceptance among peers and staff.

2

Objective 2- A space for participation and opportunities to make friends

The second objective aimed to create an environment conducive to participation and friendship-building,

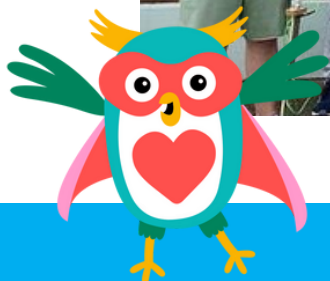
3

Objective 3- Build confidence

To build confidence among the teenagers, nurturing their sense of self-worth and independence through skill development and a supportive atmosphere.

Our Survey

We developed satisfaction surveys to gather feedback and insights that would help inform future services, measure our impact and the achievement of our objectives. The surveys consisted of several questions covering areas such as overall wellbeing, relationships and interests in new hobbies or activities. The parents of the teenagers from the youth club, participants and staff members were sent the survey, and we received a high response rate indicating a good level of engagement from the respondents in providing feedback.



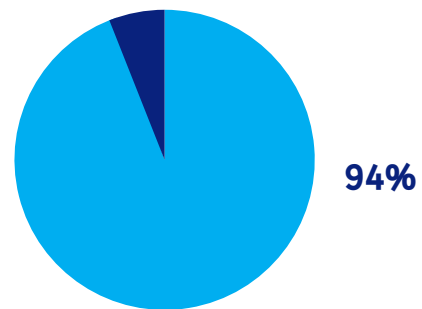
Objective 1: A Safe Space

Youth
Club

“It means a lot of fun. You get to talk to people who are autistic like me and I really enjoy it.”

94%

94% of parents felt that the youth club created a secure environment where their teenagers could express themselves freely without judgment.

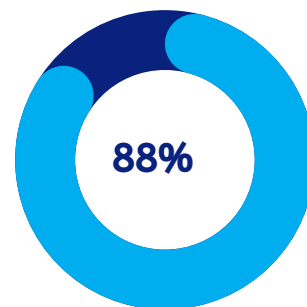


81%

81% of parents found that the club provided a safe space for their teenager to interact with peers and engage in activities.

88%

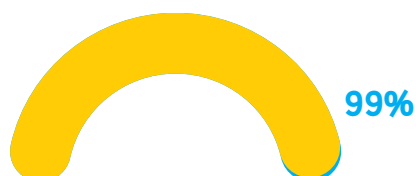
88% Of parents observed that the club's activities and outings offered a safe and controlled setting for their teenagers to experience new situations and places.



“I love going to the club because I can get to express who I am and I can express my Autism”

Objective 2: A Space for Participation and Opportunities to Make Friends

Youth
Club

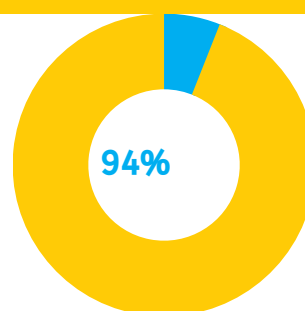


99%

99% of participants mentioned that they either enjoyed spending time with friends at the club or said the club helped them meet new people and build friendships.

94%

94% of parents felt that the youth club positively impacted other aspects of their teenager's life.



94%

94% of parents observed positive changes in their teenager's ability to form and build friendships.

100%

100% of the parents mentioned that their teenagers enjoyed a wide variety of activities, suggesting that the youth club provided a space for participation and skill development.



“I love spending time with friends and chatting about my favourite things with others who have the same interests”

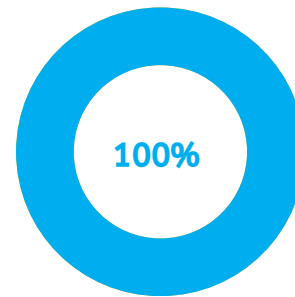
Objective 3: Build confidence

Youth
Club

“I enjoy going each week and meeting with friends and talking to helpers. There does be a good range of activities to try out.”

100%

100% reported that their teenagers expressed specific skills, interests, or hobbies that they have developed or explored through their participation in the club.



81%

81% of parents felt that the club had created a welcoming atmosphere that helped their teenagers feel comfortable and accepted

81%

81% of parents noted that the youth club had positively impacted their teenagers' self-confidence, allowing them to navigate social interactions more confidently within the secure space provided.

81%

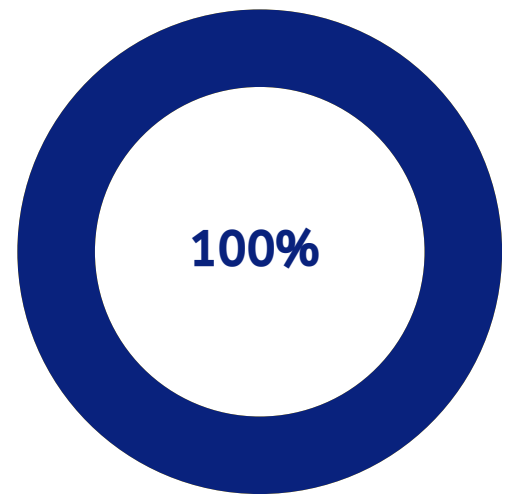


“It helps people who find it hard to talk to other people and makes it easier to talk in large groups. It gave me a chance to meet new people and have new experiences.”

Staff Survey Results

Youth
Club

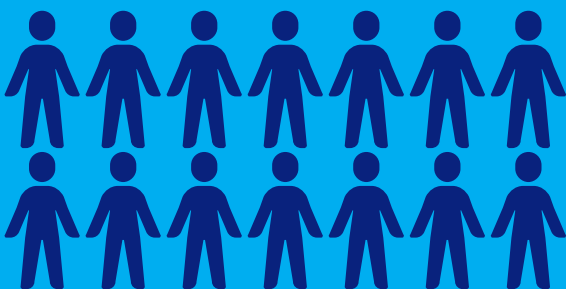
100% Of the staff members noted moments where they saw the teenagers grow in confidence



"One girl who was particularly shy, recently sang a song during karaoke in the hall and was very proud of herself afterwards".

"An example of collective confidence was when the whole group decided to play a prank on the staff by placing clothes pegs on the staff members clothes. Everyone was on board and in on the fun"

Successes



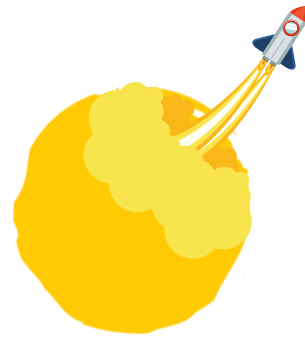
EVERY STAFF RESPONDANT NOTICED NEW FRIENDSHIPS AND RELATIONSHIPS DEVELOPING AMONGST THE TEENS



ALL THE STAFF NOTED THE TEENAGERS ENGAGING IN NEW ACTIVITIES, DISCOVERING NEW TALENTS AND DEVELOPING NEW SKILLS.

BOOST PROGRAMME

TEEN WELLNESS AND EMPOWERMENT

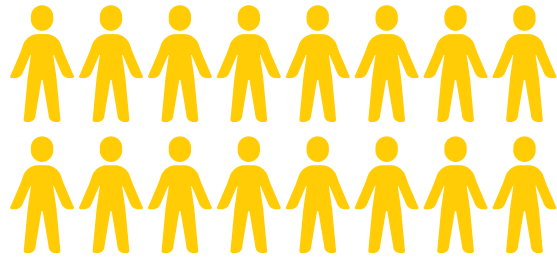


WHAT IS THE BOOST PROGRAMME

The Boost programme comes under the umbrella of Project Starfish. It is an individualized wellness and teen empowerment programme. The programme involved a series of one-on-one sessions with a trained counsellor. These sessions took place on WhatsApp video. The counsellor collaborated with the teenager and their parent to set up weekly 45-minute Zoom meetings. These sessions covered a wide variety of topics, allowing the teenager to identify any issues they wanted support with. A separate survey was conducted with the participants of the Boost programme. These findings have been included in this report as the programme comes under Project Starfish.

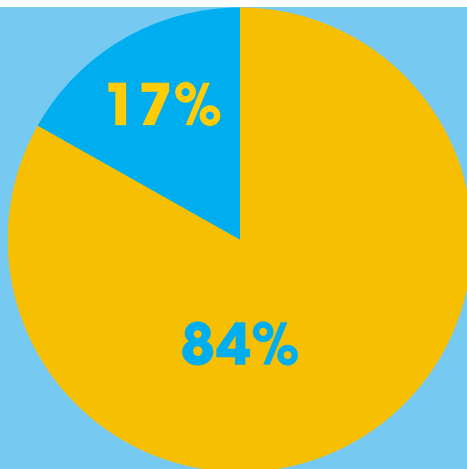
The Boost Project Key Findings

Early indications suggest it has a positive effect on personal growth.



Many of respondents stated that simply being able to talk to someone was enjoyable for their teenagers.

Moving
Forward



Want to
resume



Do not want
to resume



Benefits

The Teenagers connected with the coach and found sharing with them beneficial

The majority of respondents were eager to resume the programme and continue their life coaching sessions

Simply being able to talk to someone was enjoyable for the teenagers



“I recommended The Boost programme to my sister so she could talk about her fears. I think it would really help her.”

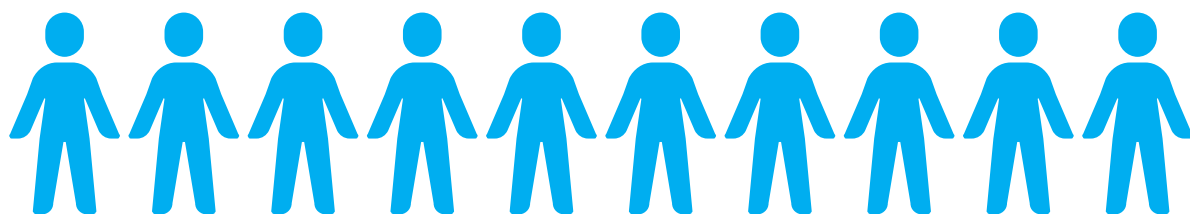
Parents Recommend it

Project Starfish's Youth Club has received glowing praise from parents who feel that it offers a safe space for their teenagers to thrive. The Youth Club also offers the parents a welcome break, giving them respite while their teens engage in meaningful activities. The club's impact extends beyond its weekly meetings, influencing school performance and family dynamics positively. Parents find solace in knowing that their teenagers are part of a supportive community where they can thrive and express themselves freely.

"I would absolutely recommend the club to other parents. The club is not only a social outlet for the teenagers but also for parents. Parents get to have a break for a couple of hours. This may be the only couple of hours they get a week. This time out is precious to each one of us to relax and recharge or just catch up on whatever jobs need doing."

They appreciate the safe and inclusive environment the club offers, enabling their teenagers to engage with peers who have similar experiences.

"The teens feel they belong there and every child should have a place where they are accepted and loved as they are in their community."



What Participants say

- "It gave me a chance to meet new people and have new experiences."

- "Cheerful and bubbly and sometimes loud but great fun especially when we go out."

- "I can play with my friends in the club and they come to my house and make videos with my toys and board games ."

- "I enjoy going each week and meeting with friends and talking to helpers. There does be a good range of activities to try out"

- "Being able to just talk with someone was nice."

- "It's a real fun place to go at the weekend. It's peaceful and all the staff are very nice. It's nice to meet new friends that are not in school."

- "I would recommend the Boost programme to any of my friends having problems."

- "I love club, being with my friends and I look forward to going every week. The week is very long before Saturday finally arrives!"



Conclusion

Youth Club

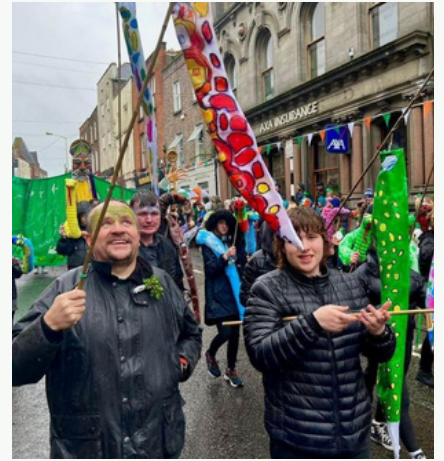
The Youth Club and the Boost programme, under Project Starfish, have brought about positive changes across various dimensions of the Teenagers' lives.

The Youth Club, in line with Objective 1, provided a safe space for social interaction, allowing teenagers to develop friendships and a sense of belonging. Through participation in activities, outings, and creative sessions, the teens' self-esteem, participation and well-being were boosted, fulfilling Objectives 2 and 3.



The Boost programme's life coaching helped teenagers address personal challenges, increasing the project's impact. According to survey responses, participants benefitted from improved communication, a platform to discuss concerns, and a safe space to boost self-esteem, all of which align with Objectives 1 and 3. These improvements extended beyond Project Starfish, positively influencing participants interactions in school, extracurricular activities, and family relationships.

Overall, the teenagers have experienced increased confidence, personal growth and a stronger sense of community. The project successfully addressed the laid-out objectives through a combination of engaging activities and supportive counselling, leading to positive changes that extend into various facets of their lives.





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