

Home education

An Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) funded, developed and implemented research project.
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Executive Summary

Background

In 2013 Aspect published the We Belong Too report (Aspect, 2013) which highlighted the aspirations and needs of adolescents on the autism spectrum. One of the most striking issues from the findings was that three quarters of the adolescents who participated in the national study reported having difficulties with their school studies and were dealing with ongoing bullying and discrimination from their peers. The results from the study drew attention to the fact that students on the autism spectrum need significant support to achieve positive outcomes and feel safe and supported at school. A summary of the report can be found on the Aspect website: autismspectrum.org.au/content/we-belong-too.

As a result of the We Belong Too report, and through anecdotal accounts from some families who described their struggles when they withdrew their child from mainstream education, Aspect commenced an investigation to find out what contributes to a parent's decision to educate their child/young person on the autism spectrum at home. A literature search revealed a lack of Australian data on how many families educate their child on the autism spectrum at home, and what happens to these families once they leave the traditional school

setting. The aim of the study, therefore, was to learn about family experiences of making the change to educating at home, to find out what supports they access and to identify their plans for their child. The study surveyed 67 parents across Australia who had withdrawn their child from school in order to educate them at home. The results showed why parents made that decision and provided an insight into the challenges they encountered. Based on the parents' responses, Aspect is developing services and resources to support families who are educating their children on the spectrum at home.

The main findings were:

- Most children who are educated at home have been withdrawn from mainstream education
- Reasons for home educating their child included:
 - bullying
 - mental health issues
 - lack of funding for additional support
- Parents were concerned about transitioning their child back to mainstream
- Most students were not registered with a distance education program so they did not have access to support or resources from their state department of education
- Financial stress was often reported by parents as many had reduced their work hours to provide their child's education

The study

The Australian Bureau of Statistics calculates that there are in the order of 81,200 children of school age who are on the autism spectrum (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014), many of whom succeed in a variety of educational settings including mainstream classes, specialised education programs and home education.

Aspect schools and customer service often receive requests from parents who are educating their child/young person at home about where to access appropriate educational resources and supports. As a result, it became apparent that there are limited opportunities for families who have disengaged from the traditional school systems to find suitable educational materials and support.

Recently, Aspect conducted a national survey to determine what support parents require in order to provide a quality education at home. This study sought to learn more about the experiences of families, the reasons they decided to home educate and their long term aspirations for their child. To undertake this study we advertised the online Home Education Survey through the Aspect website, Aspect Facebook, Aspect email distribution lists and through Australian home education network websites and publications.

Sixty seven families with a child on the spectrum, from metropolitan, regional and remote areas across Australia participated in the study. Seventy percent of the families who responded said they had a boy that they were home educating and 78% were aged between 5-12. The majority of the children (70%) had average or above intellectual ability.

What the families told us

Why do I home educate my child?

The results from the survey showed us that most of the children who were home educated had previously been in a mainstream school setting (78%). Many had tried different schools, negotiated with teachers and principals, but the parents could see that their child was not learning, or happy, in the regular school environment. More than half of the parents told us that they had no alternatives available to them other than to home educate.

'I had no choice...I do not think home schooling is in my child's best interest. The isolation is detrimental to their wellbeing. Although I am intelligent I do not think I have all the skills needed to provide a well-rounded education.'

The reasons for choosing to educate their child at home were varied and included:

- » Bullying
- » Mental health issues of the child
- » School/parent relationship breakdown
- » Limited school understanding about autism
- » Positive Behaviour Support plans not being implemented
- » Individualised programs not working
- » Physical environments at school inappropriate or unsafe
- » Lack of funding for additional support

Some of the parents were contemplating transitioning their child back to a school environment, but the majority (76%) of the parents stated that they did not want their child to return to the problems they had faced. For some parents, the issue of transitioning back to school at a later stage was still an open discussion point, as they realised that their child may wish to return to school at some time in the future.

'I ticked No to the question about transitioning back to school one day, ultimately that will be his decision.'

How have things changed at home since starting to home educate?

Choosing to home educate a child on the spectrum may release the child from the daily stressors of the school classroom and playground. But, how does this decision affect the family as a whole?

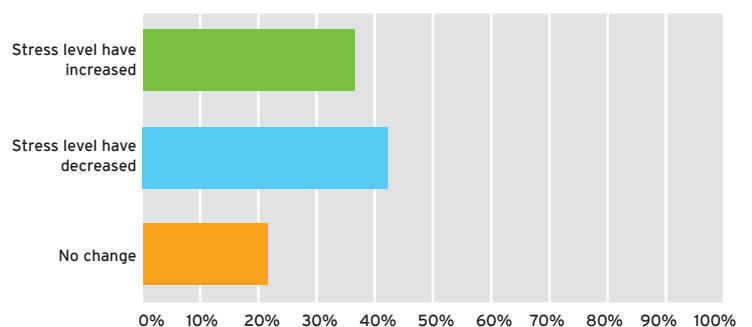


Figure 1 Family stress since commencing home education

When asked about their experiences of home education, parents informed the researchers of a range of issues they were facing and the foremost discussed issue was the stress on the family (Figure 1). In this study 36% of the parents found that their family was under increased stress as a result of the decision to home educate. On

the other hand, 43% of the parents stated that they believed the family stress levels had decreased since starting to educate their child at home. For other families, the stress in the household had not changed (21%).

Some of the things that the parents said had changed and were causing stress within the family were:

- » Financial - not being able to earn an income or having to reduce employment hours
- » Time management
- » Lack of respite from responsibility
- » Limited availability of resources
- » Having the dual role of being a parent and the teacher
- » Not having support available for managing challenging behaviours
- » Lack of available social opportunities for their child
- » Unrelenting workload

'I am very sad to be my children's teacher and not their mother as both roles are very different. It's exhausting to be in each other's company 24/7 and I find it sad to be put in the position of wanting (actually needing) my children to leave me alone.'

What is it like to be a home educator?

When parents decide to opt out of traditional school based programs there is an opportunity to register with their State/Territory Education Department Distance Education Program and receive educational support. In this study, 69% said they were not registered with a distance education program.

Home educating a child requires many hours of lesson preparation and many more working directly with their child. This study uncovered that it is not uncommon for parents to spend more than 20 hours per week

providing direct tuition to their child. For many families this is an ongoing commitment and a third of the parents in this study had been providing their child's education for more than three years.

Finding appropriate resources for teaching was one issue that was raised by the parents. Ninety percent of the parents reported having access to the internet and this provided an avenue for locating and sharing teaching ideas and resources, especially through home education networking sites. It also provided a forum for organising socialising opportunities and outings.

The results from this study showed that almost all of the parents reported that they organised social activities with peers at least once per week, and many described meeting up with friends more often (Figure 2). Please note that some parents checked more than one response for this question.

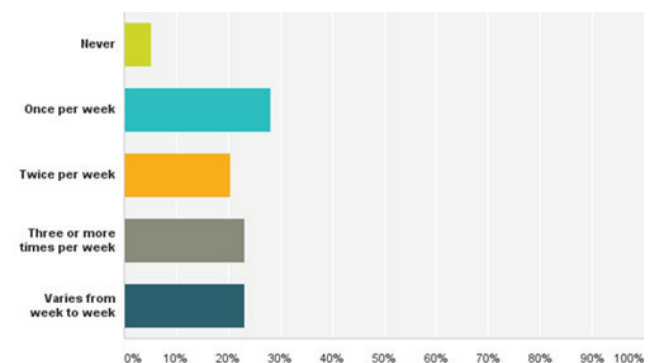


Figure 2 Social activities with peers

Parent survey comments also highlighted that although some families have broad online networks from which they can socialise and obtain resources, many desire a coordinated and accessible hub where educational materials and social networks are available. Parents reported that they would like to be able to access:

- » Educational resources
- » Networks of families who are home educating their child/ren
- » Support in how to teach their child/ren

What can Aspect offer?

The findings from this study are a snapshot of responses from a sample of home educator families across Australia. The results from the survey identified that many families do not receive support from their state education system.

Aspect currently provides evidence informed education for more than one thousand children and young people across NSW and South Australia, and operates one of the world's largest education programs specifically designed for students on the autism spectrum. As a result of this study and other investigations, Aspect is developing new resources and supports for parents across Australia. Aspect will also create educational

services that will be delivered online to parents and directly to children based on the Aspect Comprehensive Approach for Education (ACAE). The ACAE principles support all areas of a child's development and are designed to encourage the child's own learning style by providing a positive learning environment that focuses on their strengths and interests. Programs are being developed that will facilitate transition back to school for those families who wish to explore this option.

Further research is currently underway to learn more about what supports parents need to deliver a positive education for their child. If you would like more information on the Aspect Home Education program please contact customerservice@aspect.org.au or phone the education office on 1800 Aspect (1800 277 328).

Reference

Aspect. (2013). *We Belong Too*. Retrieved from Frenchs Forest, Sydney: <https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/content/summary-findings-we-belong-too>

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2014). Autism in Australia, 2012 All Persons with Autism by Age, Cat 4428D0001_2012. Canberra.

The Aspect vision for research

Aspect is committed to improving the lives of individuals on the autism spectrum through service provision and evaluation for continuous improvement. As the largest autism-specific service provider in the country and one of the largest in the world, Aspect is well positioned to facilitate and conduct such evaluation. Aspect undertakes and supports research to evaluate Aspect's and other programs, practices and interventions in order to provide improved services and interventions for children and adults on the spectrum. Aspect also promotes research at state and national levels and facilitates tertiary students' research. As our aim is to develop our knowledge of what can be done to support individuals on the spectrum, research findings will also make a significant contribution to the field of international research into autism. Aspect requires ongoing funding to support these key initiatives and is always keen to talk to potential new partners and donors.



For further information please go to the Aspect website
www.autismspectrum.org.au/research

To make a donation to the Aspect Research Program please contact
Aspect Relationship Fundraising on 1800 AUTISM (1800 288 476)