



Media Release

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Revolutionary Secret Agent Society program wins prestigious CRC Association Awards for Excellence in Innovation for its positive impact on children's lives across the world

Autism CRC's Secret Agent Society (SAS) program is changing the lives of thousands of children and families each year with its revolutionary, evidence-based approach to helping children address social and emotional challenges. In recognition of its impact, the program was recognised at last night's prestigious national CRC Association Awards for Excellence in Innovation.

The Secret Agent Society program is distributed by the Social Skills Training Institute, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Autism CRC. The program helps kids aged 8-12 with social and emotional challenges to 'crack the code' of emotions and friendships, using evidence-based animated 'secret agent' computer games, 'helpful thought missile' action games, bully guard body armour, Challenger board game and other resources.

"It's wonderful to see our Secret Agent Society program recognised for its positive impact on children's lives. Originally designed for children on the autism spectrum, the Secret Agent Society program is now also used to help children with a range of diagnoses or just to manage general challenges in a social context, such as bullying. The program has already helped more than 15,000 children across all states of Australia (including metropolitan, regional and remote locations) as well as nine countries internationally," said Professor Rob van Barneveld, Autism CRC Chair.

"The success of our program is made possible by our international network of more than 1500 trained providers who span numerous disciplines, including health, disability and education in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors," said Kathleen Davey, Clinical Psychologist and Principal Consultant for Autism CRC's Social Skills Training Institute.

Joanne Tisdell, Principal of Aspect South East Sydney School (an independent school for children on the autism spectrum), has seen the effect the program can have on children and their families first hand.

"Families across our school who have participated in Secret Agent Society are testaments alone to the program. To see a family who has participated in so many programs on the market and finally commence their journey with Secret Agent Society is unlike any other experience.

"The empowerment and genuine belief they can finally make a difference in their child's life is remarkable. Secret Agent Society has united families and allowed families to be the best they can be," Ms Tisdell said.

"In a world where academic skills are often viewed as most important, social-emotional skill development may not always be at the forefront of many parents' and teachers' minds. However, the social-emotional challenges experienced by many children in everyday life can impact on educational, career, mental health, and general wellbeing outcomes later in life," Ms Davey said.

"Multiple university and community trials have shown the program to be effective in improving children's emotion regulation and social skills. In fact, the original Australian study for the Secret Agent Society small group program holds the most clinically significant change published in the world for a program of its kind," Ms Davey said.

The CRC Association Awards for Excellence in Innovation recognise outstanding examples of the transfer of CRC research results, knowledge and technologies that have been developed for a wide range of users of research, including the community, companies and government agencies.

"Secret Agent Society obviously has profound impact for children with social and emotional challenges. But the fact that this validated work is delivered as a commercial enterprise, making it sustainable into the long-term, was what really impressed the judges," Tony Peacock, CRC Association Chief Executive Officer said.

Jennifer Kemp, General Manager Client Services of Lifestart Co-Operative discusses their experience with the Secret Agent Society Program.

"We've been delivering the Secret Agent Society program to children throughout New South Wales since 2015 and have been very well supported by the Social Skills Training team through ongoing, customised training and resource support," Mrs Kemp said.

"Lifestart's experience with the Secret Agent Society program has not only been positive and enjoyable but has also delivered real, measurable outcomes for our organisation, Lifestart's individual facilitators and most importantly, for the children and families we support. Comments from some of our families trained in the Secret Agent Society program include:

"The SAS program has helped my son to identify his and others' emotions and given him some strategies to help him through his school and life journey. I have noticed that Tom* has been more willing to discuss his emotions with me and this has allowed our father son relationship to only strengthen."

"When my son said to me, 'Mum, I can see that you're angry' then I knew we were on a winner." Mrs Kemp said.

The Secret Agent Society program is set to positively impact the lives of even more families in the future, with a "whole of class" version of the program developed and trialed.

"We have worked closely with program author Dr Renae Beaumont, educators and other school staff to develop a 'whole-of-class' version of the program, consistent with the social-emotion skills

elements of the Australian Curriculum, for delivery to all Year 5 students in mainstream schools," Ms Davey said.

"A two-year trial program was delivered successfully in 2016 and 2017 in 17 schools, and the learnings are now being integrated into the training and program resources that will soon become available for widespread use across Australian schools, increasing Secret Agent Society's reach and impact," Ms Davey said.

"We are also adapting the program for families who live in remote areas so that it can be used with their children at home under the guidance of a trained facilitator using online telehealth facilities," Ms Davey said.

*Name changed

About Autism CRC

Autism CRC was established in 2013 and is the world's first national, cooperative research effort focused on autism. Autism CRC's vision is to see autistic people empowered to discover and use their diverse strengths and interests. Its program takes a whole-of-life view, from diagnosis and the early years to the schools years and into adult life.

Autism CRC provides the national capacity to develop and deliver evidence-based outcomes through its unique collaboration with the autism community, research organisations, industry and government. Currently, Autism CRC has 55 participant organisations and other partners based around Australia and internationally.

Autism CRC is committed to inclusive research practices and co-production of outcomes with those on the spectrum and their families. This will further ensure research provides practical and tangible outputs that benefit the community. For more information, visit www.autismcrc.com.au.

About the Social Skills Training Institute

Social Skills Training Pty Ltd (SST) was established by the CRC for Living with Autism (Autism CRC) in 2014 to commercialise research outcomes and is changing the lives of over 15,000 children and their families both within Australia and overseas. SST is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Autism CRC Ltd and holds the exclusive worldwide rights to commercialise the Secret Agent Society (SAS) program.

About LifeStart Co-operative

Lifestart Co-operative supports children and young people living with disability or delay, their families and carers in many ways, including early intervention, school age years support, specialised therapy and inclusion in the community. For more information, visit <http://www.lifestart.org.au>.

About Aspect South East Sydney School

Aspect South East Sydney School is part of a network of eight independent schools providing an evidence informed education program for children on the spectrum. Aspect's goal is to help students to become as independent as possible and to enable them to succeed in the wider community. For more information visit: <https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/>

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