



# Spectrum Cooking

Evaluation of cooking classes for young adults on the autism spectrum – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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# Spectrum Cooking

## EVALUATION OF COOKING CLASSES FOR YOUNG ADULTS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

### Executive Summary

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## **The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC)**

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# Spectrum Cooking Background

Preparing meals is an important, yet complex activity of daily living (Amini et al., 2014). The meaning derived from preparing and consuming meals differs between individuals but may include providing nourishment and nutrients, relaxation and enjoyment (Daniels, Glorieux, Minnen, & van Tienoven, 2012) and the opportunity to engage socially with others, by sharing a meal, conversation and company (Julier, 2013). Meal preparation requires the individual to successfully perform a number of tasks including planning, organising, cooking and serving meals (World Health Organization, 2007).

The majority of the research focusing on the food and eating behaviour of young adults and adults on the spectrum has investigated food experiences in relation to sensory differences including taste, texture and overall food preferences (Clark et al., 2013). Until recently, studies exploring food and eating behaviours for adults on the spectrum have not considered the social aspects or the physical setting. Bailey-Goldschmidt (2015) engaged a group of young adults on the spectrum in a cooking class to encourage the development of basic cooking techniques, as well as a means to increase participation and social engagement. Zale (2015) extended on these findings by exploring and focusing on the social aspects associated with food and eating. A qualitative study with five young adults on the autism spectrum was undertaken. As with previous research findings, participants experienced a range of sensory preferences with food. In particular, participants described enjoying certain textures and flavours (soft vs. crunchy; salty vs. sweet).

The development of autonomy and self-efficacy, particularly in relation to food and eating are skills which are especially pertinent to encourage at the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Therefore it is important to provide young adults on the spectrum with the opportunity to develop the important and necessary life skill of meal preparation.

## OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The overall objective of the cooking program was to provide participants with the opportunity to have pleasurable experiences with food, cooking and eating. Other objectives of the cooking program included:

- to practice cooking including following recipes and developing particular skills (e.g. kneading dough)

- to provide opportunities to try new foods
- to provide opportunities for socialising and team work

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE COOKING CLASSES

The cooking classes occurred at Putia Kitchen and Cooking School, Banyo, Brisbane, Queensland. The classes were undertaken in mid-2015 and occurred on Tuesday afternoons. The cooking program consisted of two blocks of three cooking classes.

Ms Dominique Rizzo, executive chef at Putia Kitchen and Cooking School led the classes. Participants completed a questionnaire developed by Ms Rizzo to gather information about the group's food likes and dislikes as well as participant's prior experience with cooking.

Ms Rizzo designed each class and the accompanying recipes around the three main meals of the day – breakfast, lunch and dinner. During classes participants were encouraged to work together to prepare and cook the food.

A maximum of six young adults participated in each block of classes, however, on occasion some participants did not attend a class due to other commitments. Each class was attended by two co-facilitators who provided instructional assistance to participants if they had any questions or needed modelling of techniques or skills.

# Evaluation of the cooking classes

## METHODOLOGY

Approximately 12 months after participating in the cooking classes, individuals were approached to provide feedback on their participation in the cooking classes. Key questions asked included: what participants liked about the classes; whether or not their engagement in cooking had changed since participating in the classes; whether or not they would recommend the classes to other young adults on the autism spectrum; and suggestions for other chefs seeking to create a cooking program for young adults on the spectrum.

Four young adults on the spectrum, two males and two females, participated in the evaluation. Ages of the evaluation participants ranged from 18 to 22 years. All had a diagnosis on the autism spectrum. The length of time to complete the interviews ranged from five to 16 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim before being analysed using

thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Pseudonyms have been used in reporting findings.

## FINDINGS

Overall, the majority of participants provided positive feedback on the cooking program across a range of areas. Most participants indicated that they had enjoyed the classes and that "*it was a good experience*". Enjoyment was derived from "*making delicious food*", spending time on the train to commute to and from the cooking classes and spending time with the class facilitator.

Five themes were identified throughout the interview transcripts: (1) Cooking class format, (2) Opportunities for socialisation, (3) Implementing skills in daily life, (4) Trying new foods and (5) Recommending cooking classes to other young people on the spectrum.

### COOKING CLASS FORMAT

Participants described aspects of the cooking class format such as the qualities of the facilitator, the venue and its location, the size, time and number of classes, the recipes and suggestions to others considering designing a similar cooking program.

With regard to the executive chef and primary facilitator, participants reported that she was very capable in leading the classes and considered the individual needs of each participant. Participants also appreciated the class size; "*it looked okay with six people*". Although for Heidi "*it did get a bit squashed in at times...but for the most part there weren't really any dramas with the space of the venue in general*". The participants reported that the location of the venue was ideal, especially given its close proximity to public transport. Participants indicated that there was "*nothing wrong with the venue*" and "*it's a nice place*". With regard to the time of day that the classes were conducted as well as the length of each class (one and a half hours).

Participants appreciated being able to take the recipes home after each class. Heidi stated that "*the recipes are really good, they are something that you can then use later on...*", whilst Jane reported that "*the recipes were very nice to follow, I really like to have recipe at home to cook with mum*". One participant identified that for young adults on the spectrum who may live independently, recipes should consist of fewer steps with more visuals to demonstrate each of the steps.

### IMPLEMENTING SKILLS IN DAILY LIFE

One of the participants reported that participating in the classes had assisted him to consider future goals in relation to further education and employment opportunities. This individual identified that since completing the classes he

had begun considering working in the service and hospitality industry and was exploring options to make this possible. Participation in the cooking classes had been identified by some of the participants as a mechanism for encouraging them to cook more at home, including for themselves or family. One participant, Dean, reported that he started to cook more at home following the cooking classes but this stopped when he went away for an extended period of time.

Another participant, Heidi, identified that if she was on her own following the recipes may be a bit challenging *"I had family members to help and everything and the recipes were usually clear enough that I didn't have trouble understanding them"*.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIALISATION

When asked if the cooking classes had provided the opportunity to develop any friendships or new acquaintances, Julie stated that *"I did develop friendships obviously"*.

## TRYING NEW FOODS

The majority of participants appreciated the chance to try new food. For example, Jane expressed a positive reaction to trying new foods after one of the cooking classes: *"...like making delicious food and uh um having a taste of it, and I was like 'woah this food is delicious!'"*. However, for Heidi, she reported that *"I think once a picky eater always a picky eater"*.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

All of the participants indicated that they would recommend other young adults on the spectrum to participate in such a cooking program. Some suggestions offered by the participants when asked about things for others to consider when designing a cooking program for young adults on the spectrum.

<b>Location</b>	Is the venue close to or within walking distance from public transport?
<b>Sensory considerations</b>	Consider things such as noise level, smells, number of people in the venue space  <i>"...be mindful of the person's needs, when it comes to Asperger's they may not like loud noises around you know, banging pots and everything, the smells might be too much or something like that." Heidi*, age 19</i>



<p><b>Classes</b></p>	<p>Keep the maximum number of participants attending to a minimum (six to eight per class)</p> <p>Up to eight classes, to include cooking techniques</p> <p><i>“I think we could have had a bit more time with the... with the cooking lessons...I reckon we could’ve done eight, at least eight days” Jack*, age 19</i></p> <p><i>“I reckon I would have preferred it to continue longer so we could actually also learn some more cooking skills” Jack*, age 19</i></p>
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## Conclusion

From the feedback obtained from the participants it would appear that they found the overall format of the classes appropriate; the design and format of the cooking program, as a whole, and the intent of each of the classes. In addition, as a result of the design of the classes requiring participants to work cooperatively, findings from half of the participant interviews identified an increase in socialisation during the classes. Although the numbers of participants in this study was small (N=4), this is an important finding from the evaluation. Engagement in programs such as these may assist in facilitating the establishment of friendships and social networks.

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