

# Autistic Identity and Connection Program 2023: Evaluation report

## Executive summary

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# Autistic Identity and Connection Program 2023

## Evaluation Report

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- Hayley Clapham, Sylvia Rodger Academy alumni
- Kathy Isaacs, Sylvia Rodger Academy alumni
- Dr Olivia Gatfield
- Tammy McGowan, Sylvia Rodger Academy alumni
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- Abby Sesterka.

## Autism CRC

Autism CRC is the independent national source of evidence for best practice in relation to autism across the lifespan and the spectrum.

We provide the national capacity to develop and deliver evidence-based outcomes through our unique collaboration with autistic people, families, professionals, services providers, researchers, and government. Together, we are addressing agreed needs and co-producing outputs with these stakeholders for the benefit of the community.

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## A note on terminology

We recognise that when referring to individuals on the autism spectrum, there is no one term that suits all people. In our published material and other work, we use the terms 'autistic person', 'person on the autism spectrum' or 'person on the spectrum'. The term 'autistic person' uses identity first language, which reflects the belief that being autistic is a core part of a person's identity.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is diagnostic terminology used by the healthcare sector and is used in the context of a person being 'diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder'.

# Executive Summary

## Background

The Sylvia Rodger Academy, an initiative of Autism CRC, has as its mission to provide programs, pathways and networks that create communities where autistic people fully contribute and influence policy, practice and culture in partnership with their peers.

In line with this mission, the Autistic Identity and Connection Program, developed and delivered in 2023, was designed to provide autistic people with an opportunity to explore autism and autistic identity, develop skills in wellbeing and self-advocacy from an autistic perspective and connect with other autistic people and community. The Program was offered to autistic adults residing in low socio-economic areas within New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania, in two streams – online only (n=30) and online and face-to-face (n=15).

This document provides a summary of the evaluation for the 2023 Autistic Identity and Connection Program. The full report, including descriptions of the Program elements, can be viewed at [autismcrc.com.au](https://autismcrc.com.au).

## Evaluation

To evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of the Program, quantitative and qualitative methods were used. This included semi-structured focus groups and fit-for-purpose surveys administered through Qualtrics at two time points.

## Summary of Findings

### Program overall

Before engaging in the Program, the majority of the participants reported feeling isolated from the autistic community, a lack of knowledge or skills to improve their wellbeing and having a limited knowledge of autistic experiences and identity. On Program completion, the majority indicated the Program helped them to feel more confident and comfortable, indicating that they had experienced an increased sense of connection with other autistic people and developed both knowledge and skills to improve their wellbeing, and an understanding of autistic experiences and identity. Analysis of the focus group data revealed three themes, as described below.

### **Theme 1: “...not something I've ever had” – included, accepted and connected with community for the first time**

This theme indicated the Program was an opportunity for participants to connect with other autistic adults, many for the first time. The participants spoke about gaining a sense of belonging to a community, feeling welcome and included.

### **Theme 2: “helped me feel more confident in a lot of things” - more confident, self-accepting and can advocate for self and others**

This theme encompassed participant discussion that the Program helped them build confidence, become more self-accepting and develop advocacy skills. Participants noted that this was not only beneficial to them individually and spoke about using the knowledge and skills gained from the program to benefit others in the autistic community.

### **Theme 3: “I am not alone”- validating identity and experience**

This theme illustrated that participants gained validation of their own autistic identity by hearing others and sharing their experiences with other autistic individuals. Participants also discussed gaining insight to the diversity of the autistic experience as they were exposed to experiences that also differed to their own.

## **Modules and online sessions**

The majority of participants reported having read some or all of the modules and attending a minimum of three online sessions. These elements were rated by participants as either ‘good’ or ‘excellent’.

Results from the open-ended questions revealed that participants found the online modules to be beneficial as they provided them with an increased knowledge of autism, an understanding of self and a foundation for self-care, advocacy and life skills. The online sessions were identified as beneficial as they provided a safe space that facilitated connection with other adults, allowed them to hear others’ experiences and share their own experiences. Having the sessions online was indicated as increasing participant capacity to focus, participate and use their preferred communication methods. The recordings of the online sessions were noted as helping increase access and ability to process the content.

## **Residential workshop**

With the exception of one participant who rated the workshop as “good”, all other participants rated the residential workshop as ‘excellent’. In their responses to the open-ended survey questions, participants reported that the residential workshop had been beneficial, providing them the opportunity to experience autistic space, make connections with other autistic individuals, deepen their self-understanding; and enhance their self-image and self-acceptance by developing a positive autistic identity.

## Recommendations

The evaluation data indicated successful and appropriate delivery of the program in line with the program objectives. Recommendations for future delivery are:

- additional learning activities for participants to do in their own time
- additional supports to aid participants to learn and engage in the content, including visuals and audio recordings
- more topic focused prompt questions, given in advance, for online sessions; and preparation activities for masterclasses
- additional content including: the history and evolution of language use and preferences; “coming to terms with” being recently diagnosed and late diagnosis; masking/ camouflaging in navigating life tasks
- more diverse representation and experiences (including non-speaking).

## Our values



### **Inclusion**

Valuing lived experience



### **Innovation**

Solutions for long term challenges



### **Evidence**

Truth in practice



### **Independence**

Integrity through autonomy



### **Cooperation**

Capturing opportunities together



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