



Zajac Ranch: Autism Spectrum Disorder Support Project Report

OVERVIEW:

Due to the ongoing restrictions & changes, Zajac Ranch for Children ran Family Camps during summer 2021. During this time, Zajac developed their ASD Support Project funded by The Laurel Foundation and developed and implemented with Michelle de Beer from Happy Heart Parenting. It was Zajac's aim to implement changes to their camp that would allow autistic children attending have the support they need, greater engagement/participation in the activities, and their best camp experience. An additional aim was to reduce the stress/anxiety that parents of autistic children may experience when their child is attending camp.

DESCRIPTION:

The Zajac Ranch ASD Support Project 2021 encompassed the following areas:

- 1) Resources
- 2) Programming
- 3) Mealtimes
- 4) Staff Training
- 5) Preparation

1) Resources

The grant facilitated the purchase of autism-friendly resources:

A) Support/Accommodation Materials — Materials were purchased that could be used as supports or accommodations for children

- Headphones
- Time timers
- Variety of fidget toys
- 'Breathing boxes' were created from a variety of materials that children can utilize proactively for regulation or to 'de-escalate' when needed

Games & activities - Games & activities were purchased with specific aims and intentions

- Books were purchased specifically targeted to the ASD population (including fact



books, colouring books of all ages, many camp related books to give prediction of camp experience, interactive books (e.g. where's waldo)

- Games purchased to facilitate interaction without the pressure of conversation (fooseball & ping pong table), board games, dominos (with numbers & without), variety of card games

- 2022 - Boardmaker will be purchased to make visual schedules

2) **Programming**

Zajac Ranch ran family camps in 2021 due to the ongoing covid restrictions and changes to operations. To optimize family's experiences in family camps, our project intentionally created goals and opportunities for families to bond during the family camps. For example during Arts and Crafts art projects were set up where everyone could work towards a common goal instead of only opportunities to make solo crafts. This 'team goal' approach was also applied to other activity areas when possible.

*This aspect of the ASD Support Program may not be replicable in future years of the project when the camps return to sleep away camps just for children.

3) **Mealtimes**

Mealtimes were anticipated to be times which may be challenging for children and families with different settings, routines, and food items. A number of changes to the regular camp mealtime were put in place to alleviate some of the potential challenges for children and families.

a) A meal board was purchased

b) Daily menu - Menus were prepared in advance and families were able to see the daily menu on the meal board outside of the eating hall

c) Changes to menu/food items - Changes to food items were made to make the food more appealing to autistic kids. The main dish was simplified, more options were offered in terms of colours and textures

d) Alternate menu - Alternatives were made possible such as the typical 'go to foods' for those children who found it difficult to eat food different to home or the meal options provided.

4) **Staff Training**

The grant allowed for a vital part of the ASD Support Program, training on autism for staff. The training was developed by Michelle de Beer (Happy Heart Parenting) in collaboration with Zajac Ranch in regards to topics and format. Small training modules were created with different subjects and ran by Michelle. They were comprised of informational training, question and answer as well as small groups for group work. We also intentionally sought staff's feedback after the trainings, taking the opportunity to figure out what worked best for the staff in terms of specific autism training AND training that is relevant to camp; both family camp and looking forward to sleep away camp next year without parents. Once camps return



to full medical camps in 2022, there will be entire camp sessions for autistic children and staff will be receiving training within their comprehensive training period. The modules and training format was been created with this in the forefront, running 2 training sessions to test it, received feedback and perfected it for next years training.

5) Preparation

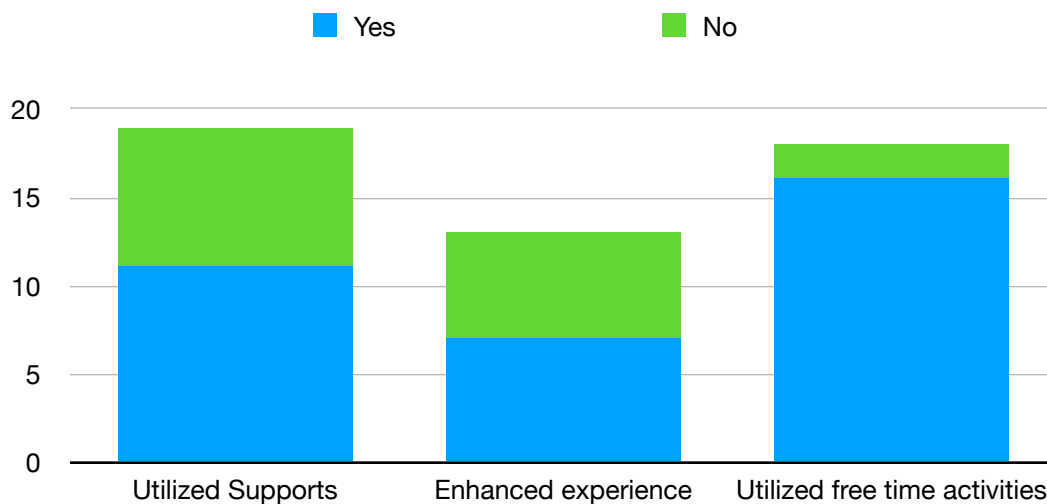
The grant funded the hiring of a professional videographer to create a video of Zajac Ranch parents could use to prepare their child for camp. The video is to show aspects such as where they will eat, sleep, etc to reduce unpredictability. Both parents and children can experience anxiety with going away to camp, and this can be more prevalent for autistic children who may find change difficult.

SURVEY RESULTS & FEEDBACK:

A parent survey was provided to parents in order to measure the effectiveness of the variables put in place. We received 20 survey results & these are discussed below.

Resources:

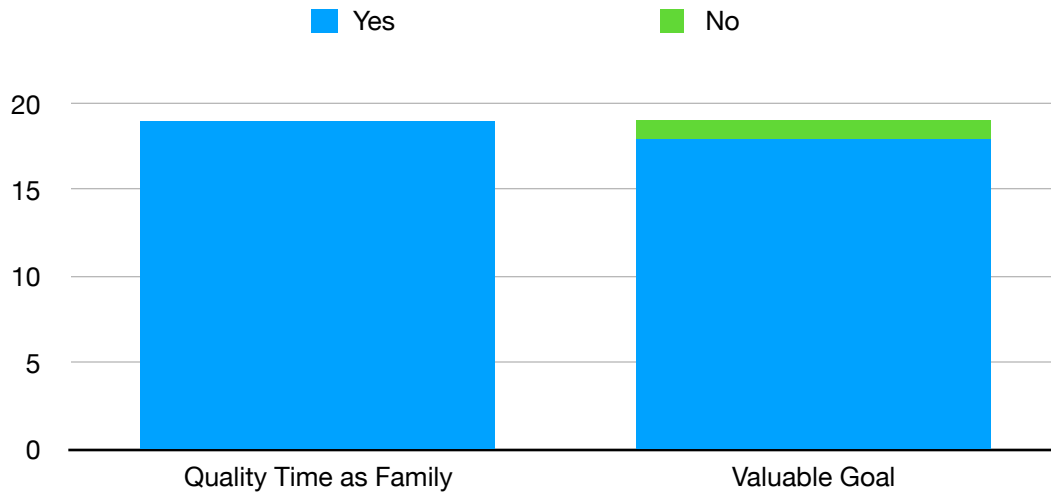
Of the parents who responded, parents responded positively to the resources provided with over 50% reporting their children utilized both the support resources and free time activities. 57% of parents reported their children used the support resources. 53% of parents who responded reported these supports enhanced their child's experience or participation and on a scale of 1-5 for their child (1 = using during 1 activity, 5 during all activities) there was an average of 3.71. 89% of parents reported their child utilized the free time resources provided as part of the project.





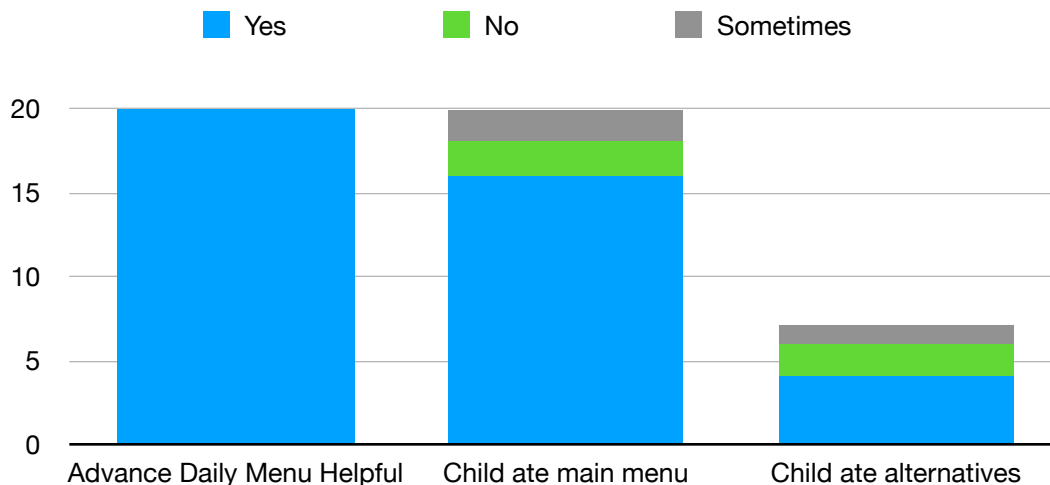
Programming & Family Time:

Of the parents who responded, parents were very positive in regards to the goal of giving families additional opportunity for bonding as a family during the family camps. 100% of parents reported managing to have quality time with their child at camp this year. 97% of parents described this as a valuable goal for their family.



Mealtimes:

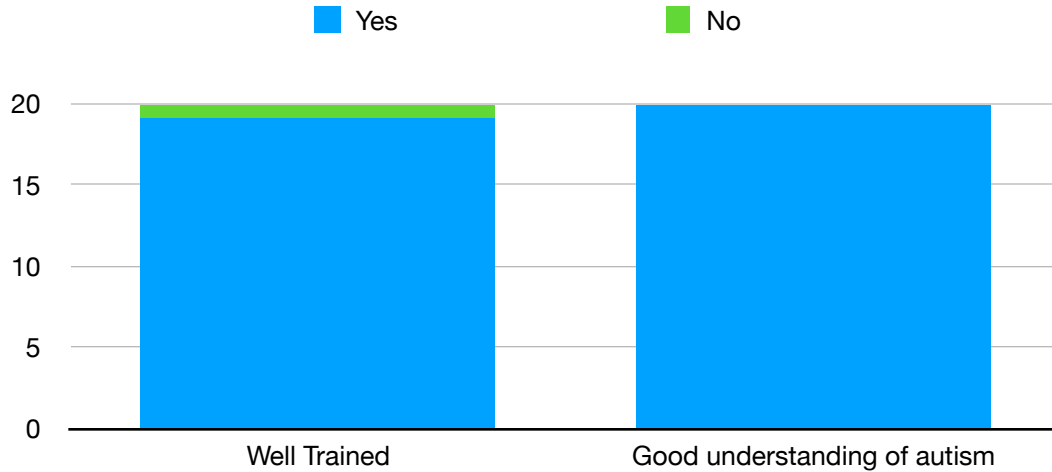
There was a high response to the parent surveys in regards to eating and mealtimes, one of the big areas of focus of the ASD support program. Of the parents who responded 100% of parents reported it was helpful to see the daily menu in advance. 80% of parents reported their children eating from the main menu, 10% reported their child did not eat from the main menu and 10% reported their child sometimes ate from the main menu. Of the children who did not eat from the main menu, 57% were reported to have eaten from the alternative menu, 29% did not eat the alternatives, and 14% sometimes ate from the alternative menu.





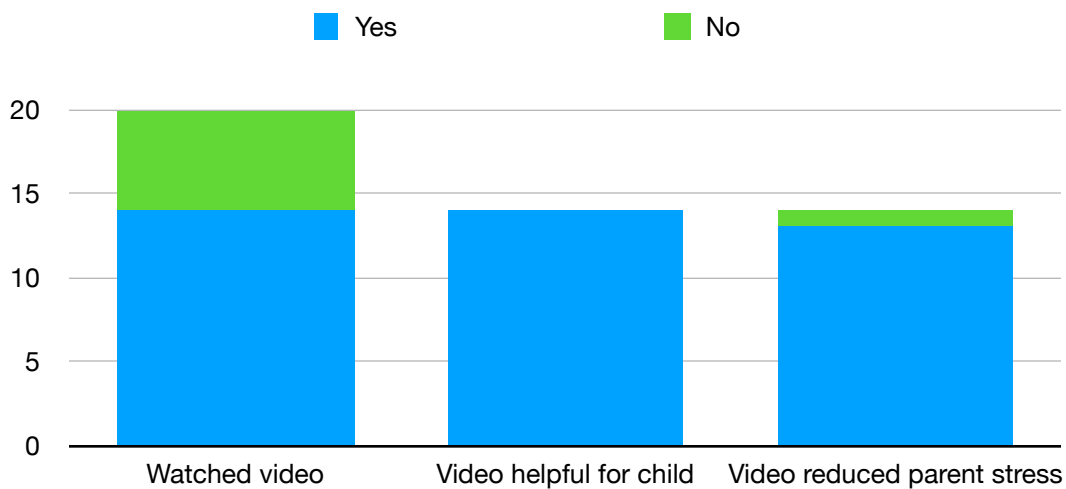
Staff Training:

We also received a high response rate from the parents surveyed in the area of staff training. 95% of parents reported staff were well trained and 100% of parents reported staff had a good understanding of autism.



Preparation:

Of the parents who responded, they reported positively in regards to the steps Zajac Ranch took to help parents with preparing their child for camp. 70% of parents watched the video with their child prior to their child attending camp. 100% of those who watched it reported it as helpful in preparing their child and reducing stress for their child attending. 93% of parents who watched reported it as helping to reduce their anxiety in helping to prepare their child for camp.



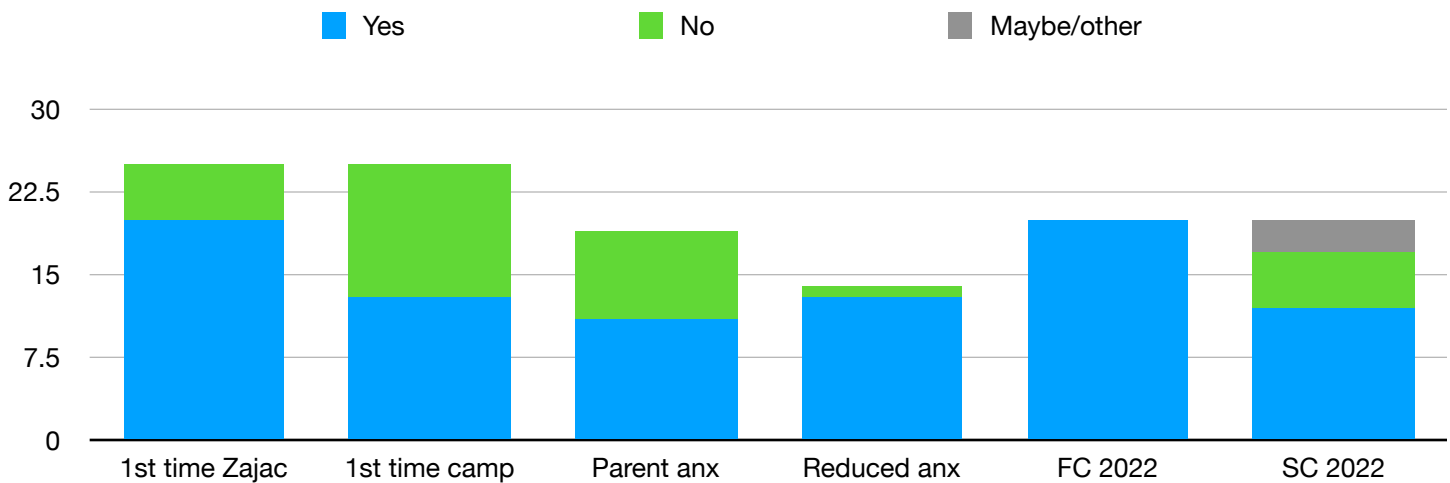


Parent Questions:

Parents were also asked a series of questions in regards to their child’s past & future attendance at camp. 80% of parents reported it was their child’s first time to camp at Zajac Ranch, and of those children it was the first time to camp for 52%.

58% of parents reported having anxiety about their child attending camp. 93% reported the supports from the ASD Support Project reduced their anxiety and on a scale of 1-5 for the level of anxiety reduction(1 = no change/reduction, 5 = significant change/reduction) there was an average of 3.71.

In regards to attending camp next year 100% of parents reported they would attend family camp at Zajac Ranch next year if it was an option. 60% would send their child to sleep away camp while 25% of parents reported they would not, and 5% each reported maybe, unsure and only with a sibling.



Legend:

Parent and = parent anxiety; Reduced anx = reduced anxiety; FC 2022 = Family Camp 2022; SC = Sleep away camp 2022

FINAL CONCLUSIONS & PLAN FOR CONTINUATION OF ZAJAC RANCH ASD SUPPORT PROJECT:

Thanks to the grant from the Laurel Foundation Zajac Ranch was able to pioneer a program where children on the spectrum would receive autism-friendly support and resources. Specific support and training allows more children to be able to experience camp, and to do so with positive experiences having fun and creating memories.

Due to the covid restrictions camps looked different this year with family camps, but this also allowed us to trial a few things within the project for next year. It was important as part of the project to collect data and feedback from parents and staff on



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the effectiveness of the different parts of the ASD Support Program. Parents were overwhelming thankful for the excellent staff and their understanding of autism. Many heartwarming examples were seen of children trying new activities and situations at camp, and parents reporting very special times with their children in the feedback forms.

Moving forward the assumption is that medical camps will take place next year. All the variables put in place this year for the ASD Support Program will be incorporated in medical camps with the exception of the family time programming. This may be replaced with other programming to support children such as in the area of social skills and life skills (morning/evening routines), as determined by the team next year.

The planned staff training next year will be run again with Michelle de Beer with the modules that were tested and perfected with staff this year. Training will be catered to camp counsellors and any additional programming goals or strategies will be incorporated into training at this time. In addition to the autism specific training, all staff will receive training on Crisis Intervention.

Additional plans for next year have been made between Zajac Ranch and Michelle de Beer in discussion and review of this year's project as well as incorporating the feedback received from parents in the surveys.

Here is a brief description of what else is planned for continuation of this project that has not already been described above:

- Resources:
 - Boardmaker will be used to create visual schedules of the day
 - Time Timers and fidgets will be made available at each activity
 - A visual laminated guide will be made for counsellors to have at each activity with procedures for explaining the activity, as well as suggestions and tips specific at each activity
- Mealtime:
 - Sending the meal plan/schedule of food the week before
 - A comforting sign will be added in the hall "You'll never be hungry. If you don't like the food talk to your counsellor" with parents advised of this sign also so they can prepare their children
 - Visuals will be created for the tables or in the appropriate areas with the mealtime routine
- Training:
 - Staff will receive training on how and when to use the sensory room
- Preparation:
 - An Open House day will be offered next year for all those parents who wish to show camp to their children in advance of camp. For those who cannot attend, they will be reminded/shown the video available on the website



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- The names & photos of staff will be sent in advance
- Families will be made aware of the availability of the quiet/sensory room
- The possibility of an 'About me' book that could be made that children could fill in and bring with them to camp to share with their counsellors (e.g. favourite things...)

I would like to thank the Laurel Foundation for making this project possible for children in camp this year. It is exciting to add to the support available to expand opportunities for autistic children to experience camp with their family and peers. It has been an honour to work on this project in collaboration with Zajac Ranch and the Laurel Foundation and I look forward to seeing the project grow and support more children in attending this wonderful space at Zajac Ranch.

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