



ENHANCING SOCIAL CONNECTION, FITNESS AND WELLBEING IN AUTISTIC YOUTH

BACKGROUND

Young Autistic people have poorer health and wellbeing and are more socially isolated than their non-Autistic peers. Additionally, Autistic youth experience lower physical quality of life compared to their peers, and this appears to decline over time (Lawson et al. (2020)).

Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference that affects social communication and interaction, as well as engagement in non-social differences such as repetitive behaviours, intense interests, and/or unusual sensory experiences.



AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT*

~300K

Report an autism diagnosis

3-4%

Estimated prevalence

35%

Of NDIS participants

THE GAP

There is a significant gap in the availability of evidence-based, suitable, inclusive physical activity programs for young Autistic individuals. Despite clear evidence showing the positive impact of exercise on health and social outcomes, many young Autistic people are unable to participate in recommended levels of physical activity due to a lack of accessible programs. Existing research highlights the necessity of one-on-one support to overcome barriers such as poor motor skills and feelings of insecurity in gym environments.

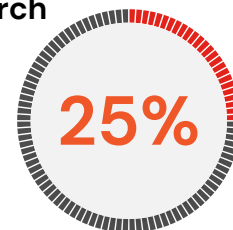
THE SOLUTION

Our world-first, evidence-based, 12-week community exercise program.



We are closing the gap with FitSkills, a non-competitive, routine exercise program pairing young people with disabilities and mentors at local gyms. Our approach supports sustained engagement in exercise and up-skills mentors to develop a better understanding of and a more positive attitude towards disability.

Our research shows a



increase in exercise



...it allows me to keep things off my mind and get out stress by coming to the gym and exercising.

AIMS, PROGRESS AND TIMELINE



To enhance fitness and wellbeing through a supportive and inclusive approach



To develop and evaluate FitSkills using a large randomised controlled trial (NHMRC/ Perpetual Foundation 2016–2019)



Winner – Active Recreation Initiative of the Year – Victorian Health (2020)



Winner – Leading Health Promotion Research Award – Victorian Health (2021)



To pilot test the acceptability of FitSkills to youth with a disability (2023)



To complete focus groups with young Autistic people and members of the autism community on exercise facilitators (2023)



Translate to practice FitSkills for Autistic youth aged 13 to 25 as a not-for-profit, fee-for-service at the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre



INVESTMENT

FitSkills has proven successful in improving health, wellbeing, and social connections through mentor-supported exercise. Your investment will expand this impact, driving positive change in public health and building an inclusive community.

2025 –2028

Seeking funding of \$100K per year for three years to set up a fee-for-service FitSkills program for Autistic adolescents and young adults



POTENTIAL FOR IMPACT

- **Increased social connectedness** through opportunities for social interaction, fostering friendships, reducing social isolation and increasing exercise confidence and autonomy
- **Improving understanding and awareness** by training mentors on autism, disability and gym exercise
- **Improving quality of life** through consistent exercise and improvements in physical and psychological wellbeing
- **Reduced long-term healthcare costs** through greater participation in physical activities and reducing sedentary behaviour
- **Broad policy and community change** by scaling up successful inclusive programs, we can inform public health strategies, influence broader policy changes and promote greater inclusivity in community recreation spaces.

RESEARCH TEAM



**PROFESSOR
NORA SHIELDS**

Lead researcher
OTARC Research Director



**DR RACHEL
KENNEDY**

OTARC Research Fellow



**DR GEORGIA
MCKENZIE**

OTARC Knowledge
Translation Fellow

CONTACT US:



N.Shields@latrobe.edu.au



+61 3 9479 5852