



## MEDIA RELEASE

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### **A world-first program to help young people with autism**

A world-first program developed by Autism SA will use video-modelling therapy and information technologies in group sessions to help young people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (autism or Asperger syndrome) develop meaningful relationships, build self-esteem and work towards maintaining a working life in adulthood.

Supported by a \$224,000 three-year grant from the Telstra Foundation, Autism SA's iModelling Social Groups program will work with 128 young people, aged seven to 15, with an Autism Spectrum Disorder to develop social and conversation skills through the recording, watching and reviewing of specialised video-modelling educational material.

Geoff Booth, Telstra Foundation Director and head of Telstra Country Wide said that the grant would help children and young people with autism reach their potential.

"Autism SA's iModelling Social Group program offers a truly unique approach to tailoring technology to the very specific skills and needs of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders," Mr Booth said.

"The program offers young Australians with autism a way to build social connections through the creative use of information and communication technologies, and this goes to the heart of the Telstra Foundation's Social Innovation Grants program."

Jon Martin, CEO of Autism SA said, "This world-first program will tap into an autistic child's highly visual learning skills to address the three core impairments which impact the lives of people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

"Children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder can experience developmental delays in the areas of communication, social and emotional understanding. This includes initiating peer contact, making and maintaining friendships, and suffering from bullying and abuse.

"There is no known cause or cure for autism but there is so much that can be done to increase a child's quality of life through greater social contact and stronger relationships," Mr Martin said.

The iModelling Social Groups program will help teach kids with Autism Spectrum Disorders social and emotional concepts through a range of video and educational material which they can record and keep.

"We have based the program on the well-established tool of video modelling for individual therapy. This type of program has never been available to groups before due to the high technology costs. The Telstra Foundation's support has helped reduce that cost significantly for us," Mr Martin said.

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“The Telstra Foundation is pleased to be able to offer our support for such an important program that will provide vital social skills, as well as research and further insight into the educational needs of young people with autism,” Mr Booth said.

“We anticipate that Autism SA’s iModelling Social Groups program will have a significant impact on the lives of those involved and their families for years to come.”

The program was developed by Autism SA in partnership with affiliated parent-based advocacy group Parents Assisting Kids with Autism (PAKA), as well as the Catholic Education Office, and the St Ann’s and St Patrick’s special needs schools in South Australia. The program is supported by the Telstra Foundation.

## **ENDS**

### **About the program:**

In the first year of the iModelling Social Groups program, four video social development groups will be held with girls and boys in the eight to 12 years and 13 to 15 years age categories. In the second year, a single group of eight young people with both autism and an intellectual disability will participate in the program.

The social development groups will run over 40 weeks, facilitated by Autism Spectrum Advisors. Parent support groups will run concurrently with the program. The Disability Research Unit at the Department of Psychology, University of Adelaide will provide ongoing evaluation of participants.

Participants will learn new social and conversation skills through a role-playing film, and online tools which generate online comic strip conversations and social stories using an online visual-narrative program. An online safety and self-protective behaviours program specifically for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder will also be a core feature of the program.

At the end of the three-year period, the project aim is to create a new and on-going service model which will provide children with social education material which they can continue to refer to and use to understand and function in the social world.

### **About Autism SA [www.autismsa.org.au](http://www.autismsa.org.au)**

Founded in 1964 by a group of parents to employ a specialised teacher for their autistic children, Autism SA today provides a broad range of services to 3600 individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (autism or Asperger syndrome) and their families. Autism Spectrum Disorder is an umbrella term for a number of neurological disorders which are characterised by pervasive developmental delay.

### **About the Telstra Foundation [www.telstrafoundation.com](http://www.telstrafoundation.com)**

The Telstra Foundation is a giving program devoted to enriching the lives of Australian children and young people, and the communities in which they live. Since 2002, the Telstra Foundation has committed \$27.5 million to over 4,640 projects to help make a positive and lasting difference to the lives of children and young people.