

▶▶▶ The Outward Bound Trust - a case study:
Working with Autism



**THE
OUTWARD
BOUND TRUST**
Adventures for life

Case Study

Working with Autism & Asperger's Syndrome Priory Education Services

This is the story of Priory Education Services [PES] and how a bespoke programme designed by The Outward Bound Trust allowed young people on the autistic spectrum to access outdoor adventure education.

PES operates specialist residential schools for children and young people aged between four and 25 with autistic spectrum disorders; social, emotional and behavioural difficulties; specific learning difficulties and complex needs.

Autistic spectrum disorders, which include Asperger's Syndrome, are estimated to touch the lives of over 500,000 families throughout the UK.

The partnership between PES and The Trust arose from conversations between Dr Chai Patel [CEO, PES] and Sir Michael Hobbs [former CEO, The Outward Bound Trust]. They discussed the idea of combining the expertise of the two organisations to provide young people in the care of PES with access to the personal development opportunities offered through Outward Bound.

Priory Group Vision

"To bring hope, healing and sanctuary to all the patients, pupils and residents who need our services. We seek to achieve this by enabling people to take control of their lives by providing high quality healthcare, education and a secure and safe environment."

PES places a great emphasis on physical activity and learning outside the classroom as part of its holistic approach to the education and care of its young people.

Partnership Objectives

The overall objective of the pilot project was to provide young people from four PES schools with access to adventure education and personal development in a progressive, flexible environment, supported by a dedicated team of skilled and dynamic staff.

Specific objectives were identified as follows:

- Improve the students' ability to work on set tasks
- Increase trust amongst their peer groups
- Promote social skills with the young people being in control of the interaction

- Reward appropriate behaviour and redirect inappropriate behaviour
- Increase the social flexibility of the young people
- Improve communication skills
- Establish empathy and rapport among students and staff
- Promote awareness of self and others
- Through the use of a journal provide valuable lasting memories

Some students were working towards an ASDAN Certificate of Personal Effectiveness to which Outward Bound can contribute.

Delivery

The programme had three linked phases: an initial two-day, pre-residential visit to the schools by Outward Bound instructors followed by a five-day residential course at OB Aberdovey culminating in a one-day course run by OB Instructors at the individual schools.

The pre-residential visit by Outward Bound Instructors to the schools was critical in order that the needs and challenges faced by the students would be fully understood by the instructors. The visit also meant that participants were met with familiar faces when they arrived in unknown territory at the residential centre.

Another key element in making the programme a success was flexibility to accommodate the changing needs of the students.

During the residential, students undertook tasks such as team dynamics, gorge walking, trapeze jumping, abseiling, rock climbing and an overnight expedition – many pushing their limits like never before and performing well outside their personal comfort zones.

Outcomes and Testimonials

The partnership with The Outward Bound Trust has proved such a huge success that PES is currently extending the project to other schools within the group.

It was assumed that the effect of a residential personal development programme might not be evidenced by changes in an individual for some considerable time. However, there were a number of comments made by staff and parents regarding the changes they observed in some of the young people who took

part in the pilot programmes:

- Prior to his Outward Bound experience, one student would not attend school for more than one lesson a week and would not sleep in the school or eat any of their food. Since the residential, he has asked to become a full-time student at the school, sleep at the school and is quite happy eating the school food.
- Another student exhibited less extreme ADHD during the course. This was attributed to the physical nature of the course.
- In reviews with participants, they were asked how they felt when facing challenges such as the trapeze. Many of them said they were scared; some said how happy they were. One school commented on how some of their young people were expressing their feelings for the first time.
- One parent saw a picture of her son on the trapeze and was delighted that he was having an emotional response.
- School staff allowed us to decrease the number of prompts we gave the group and with this reduction we saw the young people survive without language cues in a stressful environment – a positive indicator for post school life.
- Staff relationships with boys are now better and their recognition of student ability has increased considerably.

The actual thoughts and feelings from participants are particularly revealing:

“The Outward Bound trip was really good. We learnt a lot about team building with all the fun activities we did. My favourite activity was the abseiling on the mountain. At first it’s really high and scary but when you’re going down the hill it’s a lot of fun. The rooms were nice and warm after we were outside in the cold all day. I thought the food was excellent and the instructors were really helpful and told us what we had to do.”

“I think that overall it was a good trip and I really enjoyed it! I enjoyed the journey there and back, and it went quicker than I thought it would. I was really nervous going on the trapeze, and couldn’t go very high. But I managed to go higher than I thought I would. I really enjoyed the “skiing”, in which we had to walk on skis and get to the top of a hill! I also really enjoyed doing the weather report for the rest of the people at Outward Bound, and listening to every one else’s. I enjoyed doing the blindfold activity, in which we were blind folded, and we had to follow this trail at night!”

“Thought it was good and helped me to understand teamwork better.”

“I enjoyed being in Outward Bound. We made good teamwork. At first, I was nervous about doing some challenges before I started them and then in the end, I passed the challenges.”

“I enjoyed the scenery and landscape of the area, particularly on the abseiling trip. The part of the trip I enjoyed the most was the trek up the mountain on Wednesday, that was easily the best day. I didn’t like a lot about the trip but I think it’s better I went than I didn’t go.”

Comments from staff were equally telling. This is their diary:

Day 1

Monday morning, eight boys and four staff are leaving the school, under wall to wall blue skies, heading for Aberdovey, North Wales. Two weeks earlier three Outward Bound instructors, Phil, Rich and ‘Big’ Olly had visited us to get to know the boys. Ahead, a long drive to Wales and a week’s residential experience at the Aberdovey centre.

By 1pm we had arrived at The Trust’s Aberdovey and were settling into our accommodation, the Red House. The views from here, out onto the Dovey Estuary, are simply stunning. After an orientation walk we were soon taking part in a number of team-building activities around the grounds, including The Wall. The Wall is an assault type wooden wall over which we all had to help each other – impossible on your own! The highlight of the day was dinner. Excellent food, plenty of choice, and a huge flight of steps back to the Red House to help digestion.

Day 2

After a morning’s practice on the climbing tower we headed off to Bird Rock for our climbing and abseiling session. Despite the cold wind, the skies were clear and all enjoyed the climbs and the exhilarating abseil. The drive back took us along a series of forest roads to a log cabin, in the middle of the forest. The cabin was basic – light was a Tilley lamp, water from a nearby stream, the loo a shack at the end of a muddy path. Heating depended on how much wood we managed to collect and cut to feed the ‘pot bellied’ stove. Everyone had jobs to do, collecting wood, cutting wood, feeding the stove, cooking, eating and clearing up. The evening passed quickly enough until bedtime. Despite some efforts to extend the evening entertainments, we all eventually got some sleep.

Day 3

Still bright and sunny but cold. After tidying the cabin a fleet of

mountain bikes arrived and all but three set off on a fast and furious ride down through the forest. Another drive to the site of our next activity, the Gorge Scramble. A walk uphill in rubber suits, then sliding, jumping and swimming down a mountain stream. A mega experience – one not managed by all attending The Trust's Aberdovey centre!

Day 4

Our water activity day was based at The Trust's purpose-built harbour-side boathouse, during which the group constructed a Trimaran from a few poles and three open canoes. When completed we paddled downwind, with the tide also helping us on our way along the Dovey Estuary. After returning in the powered escort boat, all had an opportunity to leap off the jetty to the sea some five metres below.

Day 5

The morning found us teetering around the High Ropes Course – a series of rope bridges, balance ropes and obstacles set high in

the trees in the grounds. A fantastic finish to a brilliant week.

Evenings at Red House were never boring. Each evening there was a variety of activities on site, the low ropes challenge, the trapeze jump and the filling in of the bespoke diaries, which if completed will gain an ASDAN award for the boys – and then there was the food!

All boys were surprised at some of the activities they undertook. We all, boys and staff, got to know each other better in a different light. One now wants to be an Outdoor Activity Instructor, another stood still on top of a pole, 10 metres high, for more than 30 seconds! All gained confidence they didn't know they had, survived two cold nights in very basic accommodation and smiled for miles.

A big, big thank you to all the Outward Bound staff, especially Phil, Rich and Olly, who looked after us so well, challenged us and kept us safe.



We hope you've enjoyed reading about the work of The Outward Bound Trust. If you'd like to receive other case studies, or any other information about The Trust, just tick the relevant boxes below, fill in your details and fax to 01931 740000.

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