

# INTRODUCTION TO THE LAB

## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE LAB?

The Lab provides an environment in which 10-16 year old young people with high functioning autism can explore opportunities to achieve their full potential in life. The Lab is an after-school social club where young people develop their social and communication skills by connecting with each other through shared IT interests, as well as gaining new technology skills through expert mentoring. The Lab provides an unstructured environment where young people are encouraged to find their own place, set their own timelines and develop their own interests.

## THE PRINCIPLES, VALUES & PHILOSOPHY THAT DRIVE THE LAB

Individuality, equity and social inclusion are celebrated at The Lab.

The Lab challenges the idea that Asperger's Syndrome and High Functioning Autism are deficits. It aims to create an environment where individuals can find a pathway into study, work and relationships with others through increased confidence and social skills.

## THE LAB PRACTICE MODEL

The Lab provides a relaxed environment in which participants are supported by mentors with technology expertise to explore their interests in computer programming, design and game creation. The Lab is deliberately different to school. This includes the way the room is set up and the one-on-one, unstructured nature of its learning activities.

Some participants arrive with existing projects they would like to develop, while others may simply want to socialise and play games. Everyone has the opportunity to find their own place and develop their own interests, at their own pace. Participants differ in how long it takes for them to settle in and feel comfortable enough to start to engage with the rest of the group. Social engagement really begins at the point at which each individual feels accepted and comfortable enough to mix with others. Having the freedom to achieve this at their own pace and in their own way is key to The Lab's practice model.



Mentors are young professionals in in game development, coding or other aspects of IT or online media. Their role is to provide one-on-one tuition, guidance and support rather than school teacher-style instruction. Their credibility in the eyes of participants lies in their technology expertise, and their ability to act as role models and collaborators rather than supervising adults. Mentors always work in pairs in order to ensure a safe and supportive environment.



Parents are encouraged to socialise in a nearby but separate room. It's important to separate parents and participants so that young people can engage for the two hours on their own terms, without parents hovering (although parents are welcome to check in regularly). For many of the parents, who are often dealing with complex and challenging issues, the opportunity to trade advice and form supportive relationships is a valuable aspect of their own involvement in The Lab.

## **WHAT ARE MY FIRST STEPS?**

Determining that the level of interest in your local area is sufficient to support and ongoing Lab is an important first step. The logistics of locating a venue, checking for appropriate facilities, locating mentors and initiating a structure for operation of The Lab are essential and time consuming activities. These represent the significant time commitment required to support the ongoing viability of The Lab. The involvement of people who can assist with the administrative and organisational demands of The Lab is also an important consideration. Staffing, scheduling, monitoring and reporting are important functions that require the commitment of more than one individual.

In terms of gauging local demand, Asperger's Network can be an important venue for contacting local parents or carers who might also be interested in organising a local Lab. Contact with local and National support and advocacy organisations such as Amaze, Autism Queensland, Autism SA, Autism West or other groups in your state can provide assistance with networking to assess local interest.

The Lab Network can provide support with invaluable experience in setting up and operating many Lab venues and this is an important aspect of The Lab Network's service.

## **FINDING A PREMISES**

In most situations, Lab venues are provided for free. The Lab's financial model is based on this assumption; however some Lab groups do rent premises and source local funding to cover this. Donated spaces may be sourced from community centres, local businesses, local government, libraries or even schools. In the case of schools, however, it's important that the Lab room is one that is not set up like a typical school classroom with straight rows of desks – the space should allow for participants to move around, work together or sit on their own.

Two spaces are required for each Lab: one for the participants and the other as a meeting space for parents and carers, ideally with tea and coffee making facilities. Adequate parking and safe after-hours access for families are also important considerations.

## **RECRUITING MENTORS, PARTICIPANTS, AND VOLUNTEERS**

Local universities, TAFEs and local IT or design businesses are often good starting points for recruiting mentors. Local autism and disability organisations may be able to help you by including requests in their newsletters. Websites such as Reddit can also be useful for advertising to technology experts in your local area.

The quality of the mentors will dictate the quality of the sessions so it's essential to recruit mentors with appropriate social and technical skillsets. The Lab Network can help with this process.

