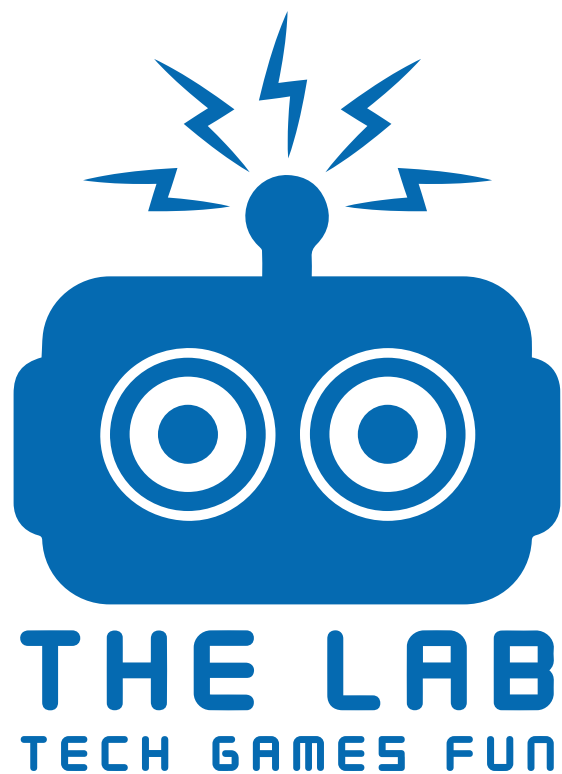
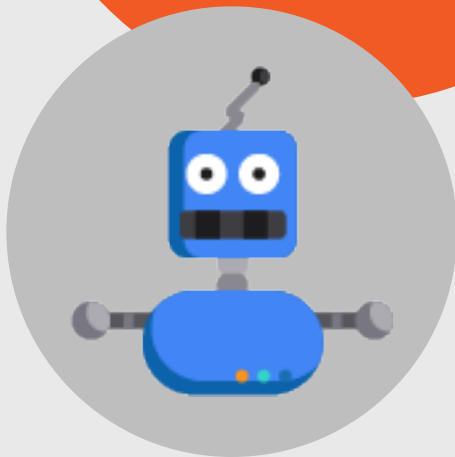


THE LAB IN YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY



Where do young autistic people in your community find friends, tech, games and fun?



Every community needs a safe and welcoming place where its young people with autism can go to have fun, make friends and work on their social and technical skills.

The Lab is Australia's world-first technology-based social club for young people with autism aged 10 to 18. The Lab engages and empowers our participants through the most difficult transitions of their adolescence – from primary into secondary and through to school-leaving age and further education.

Barriers, disadvantages and missed opportunities at these critical developmental stages can have persistent consequences. This is clearly evident in the shocking 2018 ABS statistics on education and employment outcomes for Australians with autism.

People with autism are four times less likely than others to complete a bachelor degree; and eight times more likely to be unemployed.

For ten years, The Lab Network Ltd has been working with individuals and organisations to establish new community-based Labs. There are now **more than 30 Labs across the country** run by individuals, disability service providers, local community organisations, local government organisations and Victorian Tech Schools.

Demand has seen the number of community Labs double in the past two years and **more Labs are already scheduled to launch in 2022**, with a vision to offer opportunities to young people across metro, regional and rural parts of Australia.

In weekly sessions at The Lab, tech-savvy mentors help young neurodiverse people to make friends and develop their social, technical and vocational skills through activities including social gaming, programming, IT, 3D and digital design.

A decade of research has created a strong evidence base for the transformative effect of the Lab's interest-based mentoring approach on participants' social skills, motivation to learn, engagement in education, self-efficacy, well-being, family relationships and life ambitions.

Lab fees are in line with the NDIS Price Guide Rules for Assistance with Social, Economic and Community Participation. Most of our participants are now NDIS-funded; either Self-Managed or Plan-Managed.

We're always open to supporting local organisations establish a Lab in their local community, but without one in your local area, **participants can enrol with The Lab Online**, which has offered online group mentoring for neurodiverse young people since 2016.

The Lab Online was awarded for outstanding use of online technology by NBN Co. and the Australian Information Industry Association (AIIA). Joining The Lab Online is a great way to experience The Lab while we work with the local community to establish a physical venue.



To find out if there's a local Lab for young people with autism in your community, visit: www.thelab.org.au

Why offer The Lab service?

When a child with autism enters the school system, they face enormous barriers to successful outcomes both academically and socially.

Families consistently report children being bullied, isolated from their peers, frustrated and disengaged from school and, in some cases, lack of empathy and understanding from school staff, leaders and the broader school community.

The Lab model responds to these challenges of isolation and separation by engaging skilled mentors to work directly with small groups in a learning environment very much unlike school. We engage participants through their interests such as gaming, IT or computing. We create a safe and welcoming environment with like-minded young people, where they can **develop their technical and social competencies at their own pace.**





The Lab is a strengths-based program. We celebrate **diversity and difference**. Young people with autism may lack social capital, but their characteristic traits of attention to detail, strength of concentration and common capacity to develop remarkable skills in their area of interest can give them an advantage – when they are afforded the opportunity to flourish.

Lab participants **enhance their self-esteem, build emotional resilience and relationship-building skills** with a flow on **benefit to family wellbeing, education engagement and connections to community**.

Many participants have reported improved engagement with schooling and academic outcomes, reduced experiences of bullying, enhanced social connectedness, a better understanding of the rules of personal relationships and community spaces, and a reduction of disruptive behaviours.

Few, if any, other programs in Australia enhance both the social and technical (vocational) skills of young people on the autism spectrum.

Recent studies

A recent doctoral study by **Victoria University's Lye Ee Ng** of three Melbourne-based local Labs, found:

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...The Lab enabled young people with autism to socialise by empowering them to build positive narratives and experiences around their autism and sociality...young people were able to create new knowledge about themselves and others...to learn that being autistic may not necessarily impede them the way medical narratives have described...the findings of this research provide a good case study for others to understand how young people with autism can perform beyond the perceived limitations of their disability. (Ng, 2019, p.304)

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A 2019 research project by the **Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre**, *Charting the operation of The Lab: Technology clubs for autistic teens*, visited seven Victorian local Labs (five metropolitan and two regional) and found:

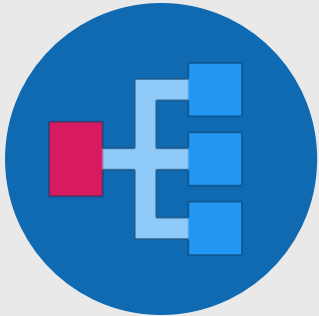
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The Lab is a safe space for autistic people. The Lab is a welcoming space, where participants can be themselves without judgement...The clubs appear to be beneficial with regard to improving social inclusion...Interactions between mentors and participants at all sites appeared less didactic (teacher to student) and more mutual (respected peer to peer)...working collaboratively to problem solve. It was evident that the sessions offered participants a chance to develop relationships that may assist with their life outside...

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Our mission

The mission of the Lab Network is to:



empower local communities to start and sustain their own local Labs with governance and operational support from the Lab Network;



positively impact the life prospects, social connectedness, wellbeing and skills (IT and social) of a group of young people who are severely disadvantaged. Although young people on the autism spectrum have considerable skills and potential, they suffer from isolation, disengagement and bullying leading to a distressingly low rate of workforce participation; and



provide an informed and understanding support network for families and carers who often struggle in isolation with poor access to effective services.

Organisational structure

The Lab Network is a not for profit company whose aim is to support existing Labs and to promote the establishment of new Labs. The Lab Network has a nine member volunteer board of management with extensive experience in the delivery of disability, education and technology services.

The Lab Network has a National Coordinator who assists local Organisers in the resourcing and operation of local Labs, and provides general support for the development of the national network.

Local Labs have always operated on a 'cost recovery' basis to keep the financial burden low for families facing significant economic and social pressures. Local Labs are self-managing and responsible for their own administration

with support from The Lab Network. Local Labs charge per-session fees for participation in line with NDIS price guidelines. Session fees are used to compensate volunteer mentors, fund rent and administration costs, and to purchase resources used during 'Lab sessions'.

The Lab Online was first introduced in 2016 with funding by the Melbourne Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation for young people on the autism spectrum living in regional and rural Australia. It was awarded for outstanding use of online technology by NBN Co. and the Australian Information Industry Association (AIIA). The Lab Online now offers online group mentoring for neurodiverse young people wherever they live.

The Lab Network expresses its sincere gratitude to Gandel Philanthropy and Equity Trustees as manager of The Lynne Quayle Charitable Trust for their ongoing support.

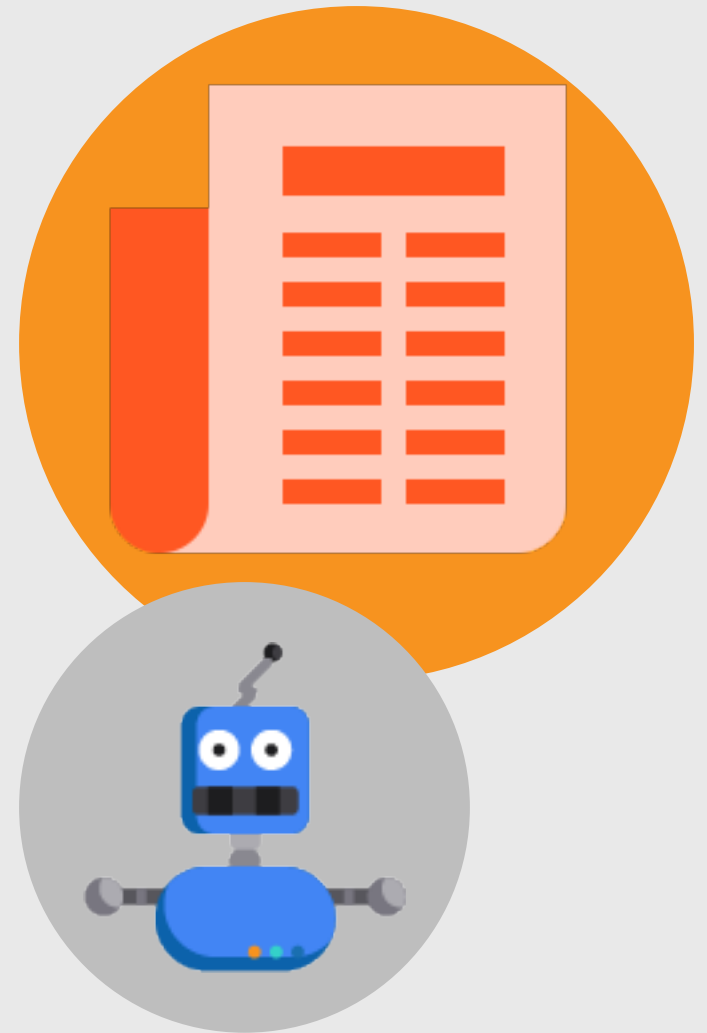
In the media

In recent months, the Lab Network has had the opportunity to celebrate the vital work of the tech clubs around Australia through a number of radio, television and print interviews.

The Lab has appeared across reputable and mainstream publications, metro and regional outlets, local news sites and other relevant media channels.

Some of these interviews include the likes of community-led radio stations and established broadcast channels: ABC radio, Triple R radio, Vision Australia, RTRFM, Ticker TV and various print publications across the country.

- *The Lab supports children with Autism who 'don't have friends' to gain friendships, learn social skills on [ABC Online](#)*
- *Byte Into IT radio interview on [Triple R](#)*
- *New tech club for young people with autism coming to regional South Australia on [Disability Support Guide](#)*
- *Tech club for young people with autism expands in Victoria on [Third Sector](#)*



What people have said about The Lab

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The Lab has been a wonderful respite for my son who regularly feels disengaged and misunderstood in the schooling system... **My son looks forward to the Lab every week and in a world full of anxiety and peer rejection, this is a bit of lifeline we cling to.** For me, the Lab allows me to connect with other parents in the same situation. It's a fabulous network of ideas, experiences and compassion.

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Nothing fills the needs for kids on the autism spectrum like The Lab. Most of our kids in the group are in the process of transitioning from primary to high school and the Lab provides them with the opportunity to socialise with other kids with similar interests and skills. As a parent, I see it as a brilliant environment for my child to form friendships – something that is usually difficult for him to do – while doing what he loves doing.

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The Lab has been fantastic for our son. He is keen to go into gaming as a career and the mentors have been just brilliant. He looks forward to every session and has been forming friendships with the other kids... He has really started to blossom. **I have also found support, friendship and a group of people who know just what I, as a parent of an autistic child, am going through.**

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What people have said about The Lab

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Since coming to The Lab, we've had many ups and downs in our family, but The Lab has been the one thing to keep us going. **My daughter talks now – more than she ever has in her life. She goes to visit friends.** The Lab is the one stable thing in her up and down life. For me, the support from other parents at The Lab has been a wonderful thing. **I've made friends, swapped ideas, laughed, cried, and celebrated with The Lab.** I could never express properly how grateful I am for The Lab... Those who organise, mentor, fund and work to keep The Lab going deserve the highest praise.

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Before we started at The Lab, I was becoming quite worried about my son's future prospects at being able to engage with others and being able to survive in an environment other than at home and be happy... The Lab has shown me that he can be happy away from home with something that really interests him. This has made looking into the future and mapping his next years of schooling to lead him where he wants to go so much easier. **The Lab has been a bright light to the week that overshadows the days that are hard for him.**

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How you can help

If you are interested in starting a local Lab to support young people with autism in your local community it's a simple and flexible model with several options for hosting or running Lab sessions. Our vision is to make the Lab service available to all young people on the autism spectrum and their families across Australia.

For assistance or further information, visit www.thelab.org.au or email The Lab Network National Coordinator Alan Morgans at : admin@thelab.org.au

