

Media Release



15 February 2022

NEWCASTLE PERMANENT STAFF HELP PORT KIDS TO SURF THE SPECTRUM

What: FREE 30 minute surfing lessons for Port kids on the autism spectrum

When: 9am – 12pm February 26. 10 people per 30 minute session.

Where: Flynn's Beach

Bookings: Visit surfingthespectrum.org

Port Macquarie kids on the autism spectrum will be able to get free surfing lessons later this month thanks to Newcastle Permanent employees.

Surfing the Spectrum has received \$14,000 from Newcastle Permanent staff to run its specially designed surfing therapy program in Port Macquarie on February 26 at Flynn's Beach and in Coffs Harbour in May.

Surfing the Spectrum co-founder and paediatric occupational therapist Aimee Blacker grew up in Port Macquarie, where she learned to surf. Ms Blacker said the lessons provide kids with autism with a safe way to experience the powerful benefits of being in the ocean and an opportunity to succeed at something they never thought possible. Family members, including siblings, are encouraged to join in the sessions

"Water can have a therapeutic effect for many children with autism, and surfing is a simple and natural way to develop sensory integration skill, motor and postural skills, and emotional regulation," Ms Blacker said.

"Surfing promotes inclusion, minimises deconditioning, optimises physical functioning and enhances wellbeing," she said.

"Some people on the spectrum have sensory aversions such as not being able to stand the feel of sand but once they are in the water, the sand doesn't matter."

"Without this funding from Newcastle Permanent staff it would be difficult for us to offer this program to local kids and their families."

Roberta Shield's daughter Matilda has done several Surfing the Spectrum sessions. Ms Shields said as well as being a fun day out that gives children water safety skills and creates a sense of community, she loves the fact that Surfing the Spectrum is truly inclusive.

She has four children; three with a disability. She finds activities tend to be structured either for kids with a disability or kids without a disability.

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"My kids do the program together which builds their relationships – no one is left out," Ms Shields said.

Matilda is 14, lives in Redbank, and attends St Josephs Regional in Port Macquarie. She said the sessions are really exciting and fun. She said she is standing up more and more now, can paddle out by herself and is confident judging the waves.

"The people are really kind; I can express myself and people don't judge you," Matilda said.

"It is great to do the sessions with my siblings; usually my little sister gets left out if I am doing a program for kids with autism," she said.

Newcastle Permanent regional manager Adam Power said, under its Community Assist Program, employees donate \$60,000 a year to charities. He said each year, staff vote on the four charities to receive support. Newcastle Permanent also provides two days paid volunteering leave to support charities or community groups.

"The daughter of one of our staff members volunteers for Surfing the Spectrum in Newcastle so she has seen the benefits it gives kids on the spectrum and their families," Mr Power said.

"Because we're customer owned, Newcastle Permanent is all about supporting our customers and our local communities. Surfing the Spectrum is helping to make sure the ocean can be enjoyed by everyone in our community. I'm looking forward to getting down on the sand this month to see it in action," he said.

Ms Blacker and disability worker Tahlia Anderson founded Surfing the Spectrum in 2017. Both women work with kids with a disability and had volunteered at surfing days for people with a disability through a surf school for whom they worked. Their not for profit charity partners with local surf schools to provide therapy surfing lessons along the coast of NSW.

Ms Blacker is also calling for local volunteers, who don't necessarily need to be surfers, to help at the Port Macquarie session on 26 February. To find out more, volunteer, or to book a lesson visit surfingthespectrum.org.

Autism affects how a person thinks, feels, interacts with others, and experiences their environment. According to [Autism Spectrum Australia](#), one in 70 people are on the autism spectrum.