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Andrew Field is grateful to the NDIS and says his family is now much better equipped to manage his son's diverse behaviours since he was able to use his son's NDIS funding flexibly to attend a Mansfield Autism Statewide Services (MASS) family camp.

Andrew said after facing daily challenges with 11-year-old George, who has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and an intellectual disability, it was really beneficial for George to use his funding to go to the five-day MASS camp in Harrietville.

At our own expense, my wife Katherine, my eight-year-old daughter, Clare and I were also able to attend with George.

"It was inclusive for families, and it equipped us, as parents, and Clare as George's sibling, with some base knowledge about understanding, managing and living with George's ASD," he said.

"We met a lot of other parents, and spending time with them made us feel less isolated. It made the camp such a positive experience as well."

Andrew said prior to the camp, they had engaged various autism specialists, but George's progress seemed "incremental".

"In contrast, the immersive aspects of the MASS camp appeared to markedly affect George, including managing his behaviours in crowds and other situations," he said.

"I remember driving back from the camp thinking MASS was the best hope we had to help George with his ASD. It was like a light had been switched on. For Clare, meeting other children her own age, who were also living with siblings with ASD, provided a supportive experience for her where she wasn't so conscious of having a brother who appeared different."

Benefiting from the MASS family camp so much, the Fields secured another MASS support for George – a nine-week residential therapeutic term placement.

Andrew said the placement assisted George to modify his behaviours in a positive way.

"It was a huge milestone for us," he said. "George's behaviour continues to be confronting, but MASS provided a real way forward, with a focussed program, which we think offers George his best chance of regulating his behaviours and building life skills."

MASS Director, Simone Reeves, said camps offered a unique chance for families to spend time together in a supported and accepting environment while working towards their NDIS goals.

"Often the family camps are the first holiday many families have had together," she said.

“At the camps, the child with autism is supported 1:1, or 2:1 if necessary. Siblings are also supported, and parents get to attend a range of formal and informal activities/sessions to help support them.”

Simone said over the 50 years MASS has operated across the state, the need for intensive support for families with children with ASD has surged.

“Last year, MASS purchased a 40-h farm on the outskirts of Mansfield so it could expand to build a Therapeutic Care Farm. “We’ve dubbed it Operation Game-changer,” she said.

“Four key elements to the farm are ‘Project Retreat’ with the family camp and conference and training facility; ‘Project Education’ – a new school campus; ‘Project Residence’, providing term placement, respite and crisis care accommodation; and ‘Project Recreation’, which includes a swimming pool, equine arena, walking and cycle paths, hard court areas and sensory gardens.”

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