

# March Break and Summer Funding for Children and Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Report on Parent Views on the Programs



## **MARCH BREAK REIMBURSEMENT FUND**

FONDS DE REMBOURSEMENT DE LA  
**SEMAINE DE RELÂCHE**

## **ONE-TO-ONE SUMMER SUPPORT WORKER REIMBURSEMENT FUND**



FONDS DE REMBOURSEMENT DES  
**TRAVAILLEURS DE SOUTIEN  
INDIVIDUEL POUR L'ÉTÉ**



**Autism**ONTARIO

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Autism Ontario has been the voice of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families since 1973, working to ensure that each individual with ASD is provided the means to achieve quality of life as a respected member of society. With thousands of members and supporters across the province, Autism Ontario is the largest collective voice for families whose children with ASD struggle to receive necessary clinical and support services to meet their unique needs.

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# Table of Contents

|                                   |           |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Introduction</b>               | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Background</b>                 | <b>4</b>  |
| Evaluation                        | 5         |
| <b>Results</b>                    | <b>5</b>  |
| Sample                            | 5         |
| Evaluation of Application Process | 6         |
| Summer Funding                    | 9         |
| Impact on Child - Major Themes    | 10        |
| Impact on Family - Major Themes   | 13        |
| <b>Summary</b>                    | <b>19</b> |
| <b>Conclusion</b>                 | <b>21</b> |
| <b>References</b>                 | <b>22</b> |

## Introduction

For over 35 years, Autism Ontario has worked with the Government of Ontario towards a vision of “acceptance and opportunities for all individuals with ASD”. One initiative of Autism Ontario was to develop a program that would provide direct financial support to families of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) to enable them to participate in community-based activities/programs throughout the Summer and March Break vacations from school, such as camps and recreational programs. Financial support for Summer funding was first provided by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services in 2007. Funding could be used by families in a variety of ways. The funding could be used by families to pay for community recreational/camps programs or one-to-one support over March Break or one-to-one support during summer holidays.

The direct goals of this program were: (1) to provide families with respite; (2) to support community and recreational participation of children with ASD; (3) to provide high-quality programing opportunities; and (4) to help provide continuity of care during vacation periods defined by the school calendar. Through these four primary goals, it was hoped that several secondary objectives may be achieved: (1) lower parental stress; (2) improvement in skills of the children; and (3) modest improvement in ASD symptomatology. An evaluation component of the program was initiated by Autism Ontario to measure the effective and ineffective elements of the program. This paper will provide an overview of the process involved in the evaluation of the March Break and Summer Funding program, along with a review of the results of the evaluation. First, a very brief overview of some research supporting the importance of the identified program goals will be reviewed. Next, the evaluation process will be described, followed by a review of the results from the program evaluation. Finally, an executive summary will provide a concise overview of key messages of this evaluation.

## Background

Parents raising a child with a developmental disability face challenges that are not shared by parents of typically developing children. In addition to the challenges related to symptomatology of their children, they are also faced with significant financial burdens. Consequently, parents of children with autism report greater stress than parents of children with other developmental disabilities (Dumas, Wolf, Fisman & Culligan, 1991; Holroyd & McArthur, 1976; McKinney & Peterson, 1987; Weiss, 2002; Wolf, Noh, Fisman & Speechley, 1989). Researchers highlight that parental stress should be considered in conjunction with other variables, such as supports and resources that may moderate the impact of a child with autism on the stress experienced by parents (Bristol, 1987; Perry, 2004). Both formal and informal social supports have been found to be significant moderators of parental stress in families with a child with an ASD (Beresford 1994). In particular, respite services appear to have an impact on decreasing parental stress levels for those with a child with a developmental disability (e.g. Cowen, & Reed, 2002) and are frequently cited as being one of the most important services families rely on to help them cope with their stress (e.g. Bristol, & Schopler, 1983). Parents often report that respite care has improved their quality of life (e.g. Cohen, & Warren, 1985).

Participation in recreational activities is important for child and adolescent development (Geisthardt, Brothers, & Cook, 2002; Mactavish & Schleien, 2004). In fact, access to recreational activities is identified as a fundamental right by the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Participation

in recreational activities is associated with a range of benefits for children with disabilities, including the development of friendships and improvement in both physical and mental health.

Participation in recreational activities is additionally linked to improvements in family relationships and satisfaction (Mactavish & Schleien, 2004). However, children with ASD have challenges that may impede on their ability to participate in recreational activities independently, such as, difficulties with social interaction, verbal ability, and stereotypical behaviour. More challenging behaviours, such as aggression and tantrums, may further limit a child with an ASD's ability to engage in recreational activities without support.

## EVALUATION

To support the objectives of the programs, Autism Ontario enlisted the assistance of a team of researchers in the field of ASD to serve as the program evaluation team. The evaluation team was entrusted with the primary objective of developing a tool to evaluate the program. In collaboration with an internal working group organized through Autism Ontario, this team put together an online survey to be completed by parents who applied for the funding program. Three primary objectives of this measure were identified: (1) determine the impact of this program on families; (2) gain demographic information about the families utilizing the program; and (3) obtain feedback regarding several logistical elements of the implementation of the program (e.g., the application process). Results from this evaluation provide useful information about the effective components of the program, as well as components that could be improved upon.

## Results

### SAMPLE

English and French versions of the online survey were posted on the Autism Ontario website and were circulated to all families who applied for March Break or Summer funding from 2007-2011, as well as all members of the Autism Ontario email distribution list. Over a three-month period (June – September 2011), a total of 697 respondents completed the online survey, 673 English-speaking and 34 French-speaking families. Of the 697 respondents, the average number of children per family was 2.05 (total number = 1426) and an average of 1.1 children with ASD (total number = 779) per family. Seventy-eight percent of families indicated that there were two caregivers at home, 18% had one caregiver, and 4% had three or more caregivers. According to respondents, families of children and pre-teens (children between the ages of 5 and 12 years) were most likely to apply for and/or use camp and one-to-one funding. Less than 2% of our sample indicated that they belonged to an Aboriginal group. The majority of respondents (90%) indicated that English was the primary language spoken at home. Of those respondents, 24% indicated that they spoke another language, such as Korean and Chinese, in addition to English. Additionally, the majority of families (58%) were born in Canada; however, the remaining respondents noted that they have lived in Canada for more than 11 years (30%), 6 or more years (7%), or 1 to 5 years (5%). All Francophones who responded to this question indicated that French was spoken at home, with 31% adding English as the second language spoken at home.

## EVALUATION OF THE APPLICATION PROCESS

When asked how they heard about the March Break and summer funding programs, the majority of families indicated that they had received an email from Autism Ontario (323 respondents), and 263 had been informed through the Autism Ontario website. Other respondents indicated that they had heard about the funding from a family member/friend or neighbour (89), a service provider (163), the school board (56), their child's daycare/pre-school (13), and/or other ways (37). Approximately 247 respondents reported that they had heard about the funding program through a number of different sources. Francophones heard about the funding as presented above with the exception that no one indicated hearing about the funding through a family member, friend, neighbour or daycare/pre-school.

In order to determine families' ability to complete the application, respondents were asked to indicate how much access they had to a variety of resources required to complete the application. Overall, the majority of respondents indicated that they only had regular access to the Internet (98.8% respondents) and to a printer (86%) and only 14% had been given an application from someone else. Additionally, when asked how complicated the application process was, 94.7% reported that they had found the application process straightforward. Respondents who did not find the application to be straightforward commented that both the instructions for completing the application (e.g., whether to mail it in or not), as well as the process (e.g., first come, first serve or random draw) were unclear and confusing. Of those respondents who wanted to modify the application process: 49% wanted fairness of application increased (e.g., give to all), 7% wanted to complete the application online and 3% wanted eligibility to include ages 20 and 21. It was also suggested that a qualified person be available to complete the process at least the first time. In terms of which application process was preferred, 50.3% of families reported that they preferred the random/lottery; whereas 49.7% preferred the first come, first serve process. Families were also able to provide open-ended comments about specific aspects of the application process that they would change or modify. A significant number of families (29%) reported that they think all families should receive funding or that the funding should be divided equally among all families applying. Other respondents indicated that families who had not received funding in the past should be given first priority in terms of eligibility for the following year's funding program. Other suggestions included, that funding be based on family income (16%) or should be based on the unique needs of the child (5%) as well as family factors such as the amount of support available to the parent/family, level of isolation, having more than one child with an ASD in the family and parents' health. Lastly, 77.7% of respondents (43% of Francophones) reported that providing families with a six-week notification period, allows them enough time to make the necessary arrangements. Parents who did not find six-weeks enough time to make arrangements underlined the amount of time and effort needed to make arrangements or find a worker.

### *Will families apply next year?*

Despite the suggestions as to how to change the application process, the majority of families are planning on apply for funding in the future.

| Fund        | Yes*  | No   | Not Sure |
|-------------|-------|------|----------|
| Summer 2011 | 89.0% | 6.5% | 4.5%     |
| March 2012  | 85.6% | 5.7% | 8.7%     |
| Summer 2012 | 89.2% | 3.2% | 7.6%     |

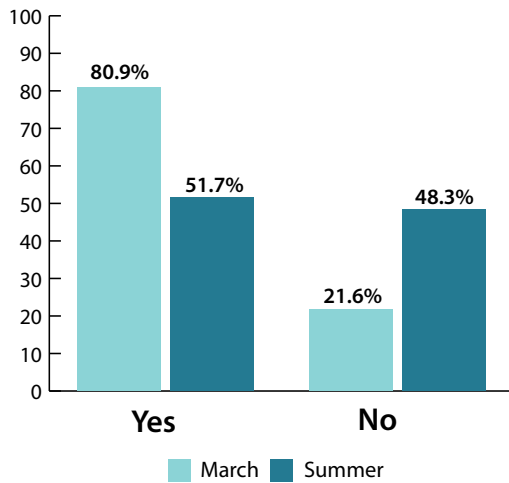
\* A lower percentage of Francophone families indicated they planned on applying for funding (69% for the three funds).



*How well is the funding meeting families' needs?*

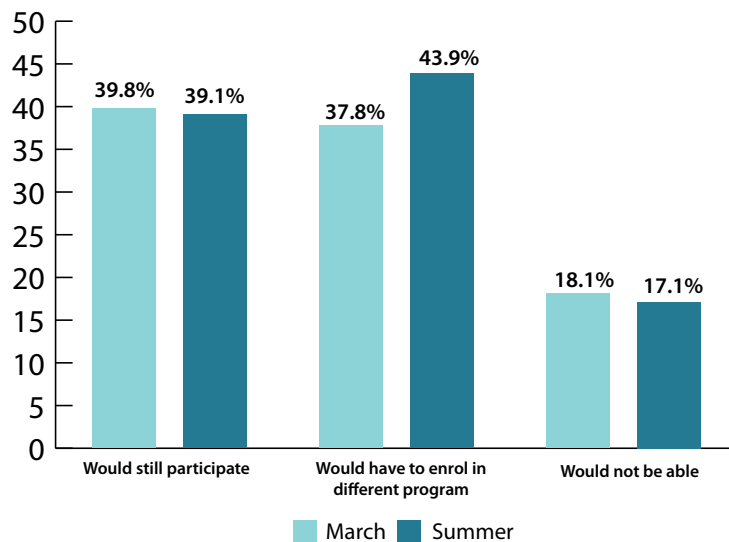
Families who had received either March Break or Summer funding over the 5 year period were asked to indicate whether the funding met their families' needs. As shown below, whereas 80.9% of families who had received March Break funding reported that the funding met their families' needs, only 51.7% of respondents noted that the Summer funding met their needs.

*Does the amount of funding meet your needs?*



Families were asked about how their participation would be impacted if funding were reduced to \$400 for the summer and \$300 for March break. About 40% of respondents reported that they would still participate in their current program, and an additional 40% would have to participate in a different program. About one-fifth of families reported that they would not be able to participate in any program if funding was reduced.

*How would participation be impacted if funding were reduced?*

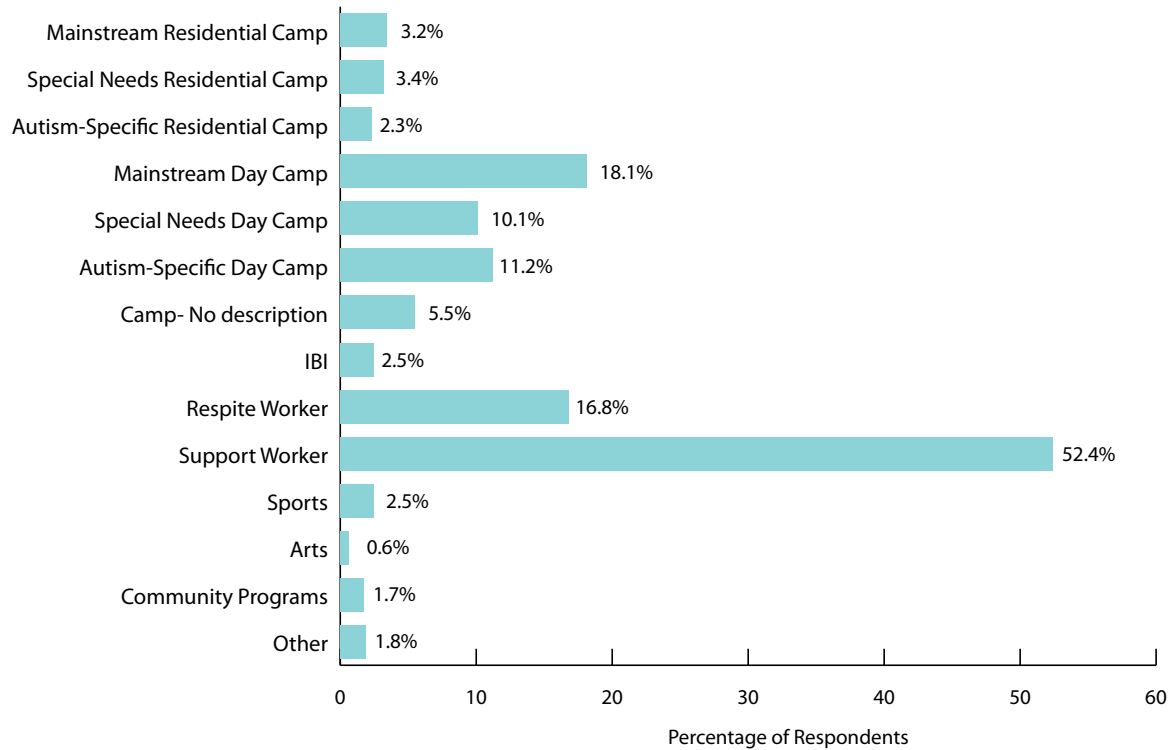


## MARCH BREAK FUNDING

### *How was the funding used?*

Before being presented with the question with multiple options, respondents were asked an open-ended question about how the funding was used. A total of 196 families (29%) did not respond to this question.

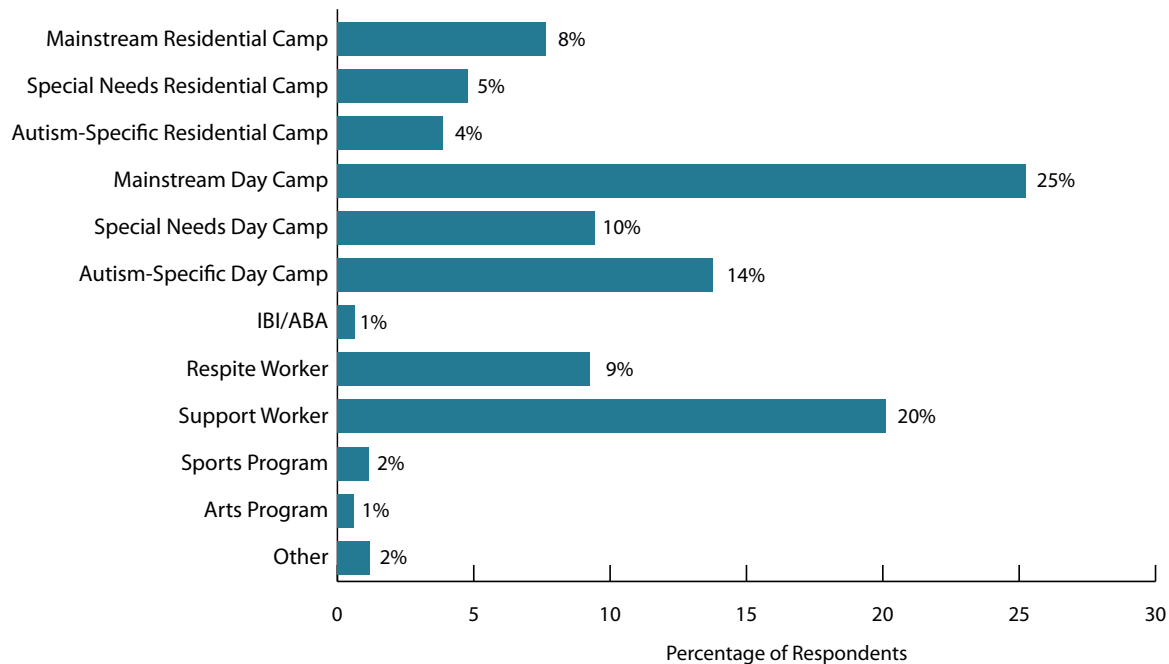
According to families' responses to the multiple-choice options, the majority of children who received March Break funding utilized it on a support or respite worker. Additionally, 76% families placed their children in short day programs (i.e., 1-4 days) versus longer programs, 24% (i.e., 5-7 days).





## SUMMER FUNDING

As shown below, according to families' responses to the multiple-choice options, the majority of families who received summer funding used it to fund support workers to enable their children to attend mainstream or autism-specific day camps. Unlike the March Break funding, most families tended to place their children in longer camps or programs, lasting at least 5-7 days to 2-3 weeks.



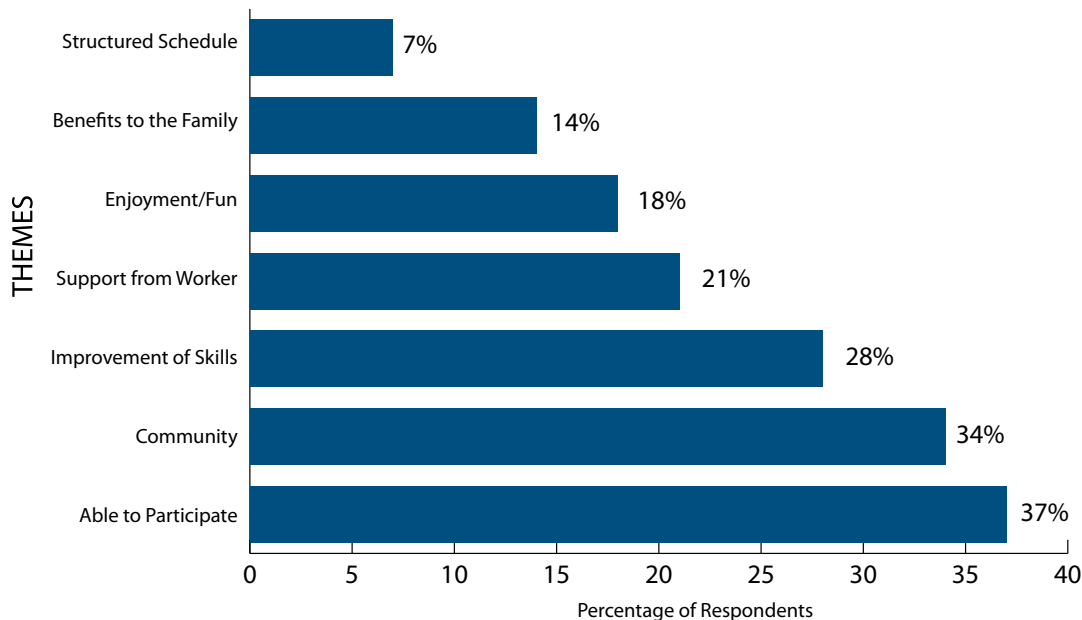
Overall, the results from this question were very similar to the forced-choice question. Just under 20% of families participated in a mainstream day camp. Almost 17% of families used the funding for a respite worker. Over half of the families used the funding for a support worker, many of whom also attended a camp. There are a few small differences between these results and the results from the following question. First, many more respondents noted that the funding was used for a support worker. That is because many families reported that they used the funding for camp and for a support worker, but they did not check the support worker option in the forced-choice question. There were a few additional families who reported participating in camps in this question relative to the forced-choice question, particularly mainstream day camps. This is because several families who only endorsed the support worker category, also participated in camps, but failed to report this in the forced-choice question. In addition, an option for “camp-no description” was included because some families reported that their children participated in a camp, but they did not provide details about the camp.

### *How did the funding impact the child and the family?*

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to describe how the funding not only impacted their child but also the family. In terms of the impact on the child, several themes were identified. Of the 671 responses sampled, 245 families (37%) did not respond to the question, thus percentages reported are based on the 426 families who did respond. Each response was coded for all themes, so each response may have been coded more than once. Seven major themes, and several subthemes, were identified. Four

percent of respondents made a generic comment about the impact of the funding that could not be coded within the themes (e.g. “it was really helpful,” “great”). A total of 1% of respondents reported minimal or no impact.

## IMPACT ON CHILD - MAJOR THEMES



### Theme 1: Able to Participate-37% (specific reference being unable to participate without funding)

*“He wouldn’t be able to go by himself to the summer camp, he did require a respite worker”*

*“It provided my child with the opportunity to go to the program. He loves it, and feels like someone special because of it”*

### Theme 2: Participation in the Community- 34% (more involvement within the community)

#### a) Participation in activities-13% (involved in recreation or daily-life activities in community)

*“He absolutely LOVED camp. He might be non-verbal, but it was very clear how much he’d enjoyed the year before, when last summer, he got out of the car(his worker’s- I can’t afford 1) and ran around the camp, laughing. He barely noticed when I left. Fresh air, swimming, being around other kids. it couldn’t get better.”*

*« L’enfant a pu participer à des activités de loisirs au sein de la communauté et cela a pleinement favorisé son intégration. » (Child was able to participate in community activities which fully promoted his integration)*

#### b) Social interaction with other kids-25% (activities with typical or other special needs kids)

*“He was able to associate with typical kids in a normal setting- good for his social development.”*

*« Lui aide avoir une vie plus sociale et lui donne quoi à faire quand on travaille. » (It helped him have a social life and something to do while we work)*

### **Theme 3: Improvement of Skills–28%**

- a) Behavioural- 5% (improved behaviour, reduction in problem behaviour, more compliance)

*“We find it is getting harder now that he is 16 yrs old. He wants to be independent from us but cannot due to his abilities and the autism (& he is blind). It is a huge safety concern, and without this extra funding we would see more of the SIB’s and risk taking behaviors. With AO’s help it benefits his self-esteem because he can go out in the community with support staff and have some freedom from mom & dad in a safe way.”*

*« L’enfant est beaucoup plus calme et est capable de contrôler sa nervosité face au public. »  
(Child is a lot calmer and able to control nervousness in public situations)*

- b) Communication-5% (improved communication or speech)

*“He was taught skills in communication, behaviour and compliance at the camp.”*

- c) Social-11% (improved social development)

*“My son needs a lot of structure which is definitely provided at camp. He also needs help with his social skills. There are a lot of kids at camp which helps.”*

- d) Daily Living-5% (improved functional life skills, increased independence)

*“The child stays busy with respite help and while using his energy he learn life skills (visit to grocery store, Dollar store and sometimes restaurant) and hence at home he stays calm”*

- e) Other-14% (improvement in skills in general or in specific skills, e.g., sports, computer)

*“she can go to the community and have learn something”*

### **Theme 4: Support from Worker -21% (emphasis on importance of the support worker)**

- a) 1:1 support from worker –17% (ability to access 1:1 support)

*“He was able to attend the program because of 1:1 support.”*

*« Ma plus jeune aimerait je crois que je suis à la maison, mais elle aime bien aussi être avec les travailleurs (ses). » (My youngest would like it if I were home but she also likes being with her workers)*

- b) Consistency/Frequency of Worker -2% (ability to access support worker more frequently)

*“It was wonderful! It allowed him to have more time with his worker. We have started a new phase of PECS and it allowed for more reinforcement on a daily basis. I felt he was better able to grasp this phase with the daily support.”*

- c) Quality of Worker–5% (enabling families to hire highly qualified support worker)

*“I am more at peace to know that my child is with someone I trust and he trust”*

**Theme 5: Enjoyment/Fun – 18% (experience described as pleasurable for the child)**

*“Made the child very happy to participate in a camp program with respite worker. we could not have afforded it without your generous help”*

**Theme 6: Benefits to the Family-14% (improved family functioning, life of parents)**

a) Respite for parents- 5% (opportunity for parents to take a break, attend to other things)

*“With two disabled children being cared for by a disabled parent, my daughter needs a break from us as much as we need a break from her. This affects the entire family’s well-being and ability to cope day to day with a multitude of stresses. This also answers question 6 below.”*

b) Child Occupied/Not Bored-6% (providing activities for the child, keeping the child busy)

*“He’s not boring at home for the whole week.”*

*« Notre enfant a beaucoup apprécié le programme de camp d’été au lieu de rester à la maison à ne faire presque rien. » (Our child really like the summer camp program instead of staying home with almost nothing to do)*

c) Parents worry less/know child is safe-5% (knowing the child will get attention needed)

*“This fund was a great help to my child and the family, with the raise in all programs prices, we had the chance to use the money where our child can safe and learn to socialize in the community and learn new skills”*

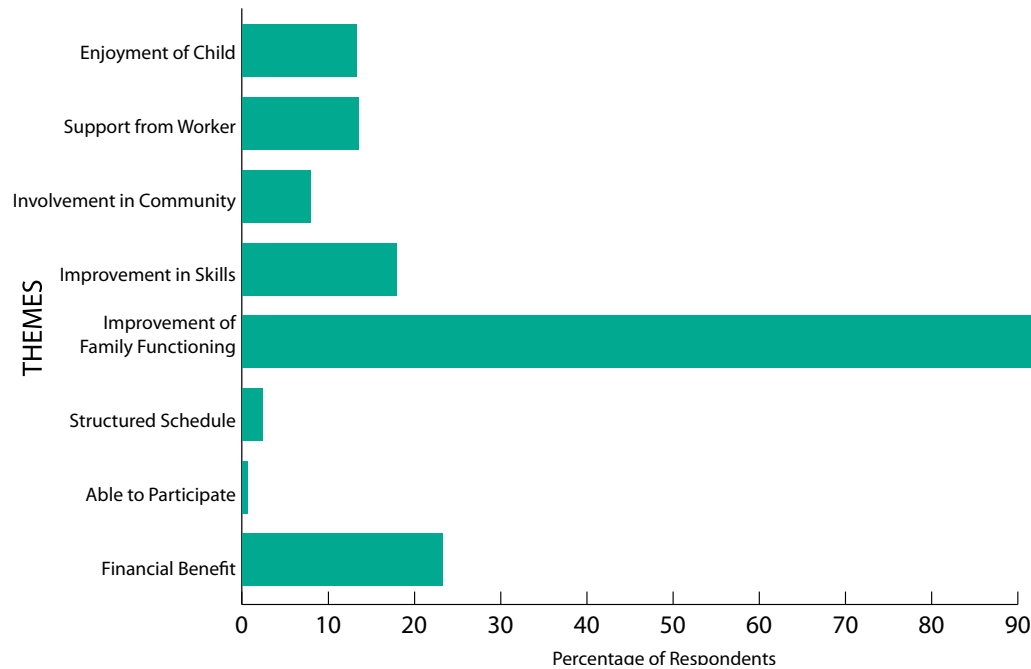
**Theme 7: Structure Schedule/Consistent routine-7% (stay on a schedule, transition to school easier)**

*“Able to keep my son on his schedule so the transition to get back to school is smoother”*

Over one-third of the families reported specifically that they would not have been able to participate in the activities that they had if they had not received the funding. Involvement in the community was the top-reported theme, reported by over 34% of families. Almost 30% reported improvement in skills, especially social skills and over one-fifth of families reported that their child benefitted from the ability to access a support worker. About 14% of families reported additional benefits to themselves, including respite, keeping the child occupied, and feeling less worry about the child’s involvement in the program. Almost one-fifth of parents reported that their child enjoyed the program as a benefit. Several families also appreciated that the program enabled them to keep their child on a consistent schedule, making the transition back to school an easier one.

Several themes regarding the impact of the program on the family were identified. Of the 671 responses sampled, 254 families (38%) did not respond to the question, thus percentages reported are based on the 417 families who did respond. Each response was coded for all themes, so each response may have been coded more than once. Seven major themes, and several subthemes, were identified.

## IMPACT ON FAMILY - MAJOR THEMES



### Theme 1: Improvement in Family Functioning-96% (improved family functioning, life of parents)

- a) Respite for parents- 30% (opportunity for parents to take a break, attend to other things)

*“Offers a welcome respite for families who may have been forced to take time off of work during this break which also has an impact on child in the family etc. Unfortunately, this was still the case because of the lottery process this year, as our family could not afford the costs for both children to have support/camps, etc. Which actually had a negative impact on our family.”*

*« L'aide nous a permis d'obtenir du répit durant la période et d'avoir l'esprit calme. » (The funding allowed us to get some respite during this period and to experience peace of mind)*

- b) Time to spend with other family members-17% (allows time for parents to spend time with other family members)

*“... when my son is at camp (having fun) we are free to do other activities with our other children - activities that may involve waiting in line-ups or being in large crowds - things our autistic son cannot do. Everyone is more relaxed and enjoys the summer.”*

*« On a pu faire des choses avec les deux autres sans compromettre leur intérêt. » (We were able to do things with the other two [children] without compromising their interests)*

- c) Parents worry less/know child is safe-20% (knowing the child will get attention needed)

*“I enjoy having the break from my child, not worrying about him or wondering if he is having fun. When he comes home, he is very relaxed, happy and chattering non-stop about the camp.”*

*“With this help, I don’t have to worry about the safety issue, and I would also have a break time for myself and decreased my stress.”*

d) Child is occupied- 3% (knowing that the child is occupied, busy and not bored)

*“Boredom leads to agitation and aggression, it impacts all of us if our son is not provided with activities throughout the summer.”*

*“Peace of mind knowing that he was actively involved in a program and not at home in front of a computer.”*

e) Parents able to work-6% (opportunity for parents to work instead of taking time off or vacation time)

*“I would have probably had to pay for this support worker myself and deprive the family of other things we could have used the money for or take an unpaid vacation from work in order to stay home with him during the break.”*

*“This funding was crucial to me. I had recently started a new full-time job and could not take time off to care for my son during March break. Without this funding, the cost of one-to-one care would have been a budget-breaker.”*

f) Improvement in Family Relationships-4% (improvement in the overall family relationships and emotional state).

*“Progress for our child is very important to our family’s happiness... as our child is engaged, our day-to-day lives are improved”*

g) Involvement in Activities with Sibling-1% (opportunity for child to participate in an activity with sibling).

*“Allow the family to experience other events (more money) but also provide X with great camp where his sister also attend (good socially and for its self-esteem and developing confidence and independence).”*

## **Theme 2: Financial Benefit-20%**

*“I have four children, the amount of money that is spent on my son with autism is tremendous, any help we can receive helps so much.”*

*“Its make a huge difference on both our lives my wife and myself. As I have quit my job to look after X for sometime. Every extra dollar helps or rather goes along way to help X improve his day-to day life.”*

*« Ceci nous a beaucoup aidé car la vie avec un enfant TSA est très dispendieux puis n’importe quoi aide beaucoup. » (This helps us a lot because life with a child with an ASD is very expensive so anything helps a lot)*

*« Comme dans la plupart des familles, les deux parents doivent travailler à l’extérieur de la maison. Quand vient un congé, l’un des parents doivent prendre congé. Si un des parents travaille à son compte, il n’ait pas payé si il prend un congé. Alors les congés d’un parent s’écoulent vite. S’il n’y a pas de programmes et de personne qualifiée, ou laisserons nos enfants autistes? » (Like most families, the two*

*parents work outside the home. When a [school] break comes along, one of the parents must take time off. If one parent is self-employed, they are not paid while they take time off. So the vacation time of the [other] parent is quickly used up. If there were no programs or qualified people, where would we leave our children with autism? »)*

### **Theme 3: Improvement of Skills–16%**

- a) Behavioural- 3% (improved behaviour, reduction in problem behaviour, more compliance)

*“It helps us be more easier with our child and less tantrum occurs with her and more family time with my older daughter.”*

- b) Communication-2% (improved communication or speech)

*“It become very helpful since it’s like she’s still going to school since I’m a working single mom. They give us advice and update in regards to communication, social skills and behavior.”*

*“He explored more and knows how to communicate.”*

- c) Social-4% (improved social development)

*“Provided a wonderful opportunity for my son to grow socially and for me not to worry about his camp expenses.”*

- d) Daily Living-3% (improved functional life skills, increased independence)

*“Improvement is achieved bit by bit and step by step. it ensures the kid to build long-term success and independence while eventually being able to make contribution to the society.”*

*« Comment demander pour quelque chose à la caisse au Macdonald de façon appropriée. » (How to appropriately make a request at MacDonald’s)*

- e) Other- 4% (improvement in skills in general or in specific skills, e.g., sports, computer)

### **Theme 4: Enjoyment of Child – 12% (experience described as pleasurable for the child)**

*“This funding allowed our family to be very excited for the “camp” experience. We were able to talk about it before our child went to camp so he was thrilled and anxious to go. We had a wonderful time seeing our son smile.”*

*« C’est soulagement important pour toute la famille et la joie de notre enfant ayant fréquenté un camp d’été nous a rendu heureux. » (It’s a great relief for the entire family and the happiness our child experienced attending a summer camp brought us great joy)*

### **Theme 5: Support from Worker -12% (emphasis on importance of the support worker)**

- a) 1:1 support from worker –10% (ability to access 1:1 support)



*“For one week I have peace of mind knowing that he is involved in an activity that gives him self confidence, knowing that he will be safe having a 1:1 aide with him. We also get satisfaction in having him get a little taste of ‘normal’ for at least one week of his summer camp experiences.”*

b) Quality of Worker–2% (enabling families to hire highly qualified support worker)”

*“It has been difficult to have 2 children w/special needs at home. With the funding we are able to plan a time for me and my husband to do things as a couple since our kids are in summer camps and with a worker that we can trust...”*

**Theme 6: Able to Participate-12% (specific reference being unable to participate without funding).**

*“Receiving this funding allowed us to enroll her a in mainstream camp benefitting her social skills and growing awareness of ASD children in the community.”*

*“The most significant benefit is that this money allowed for her to participate in family outings that are near impossible to do without one on one support. It also allows for the family to enjoy time together without constant worry and disruption from our little angel with special needs.”*

**Theme 7: Involvement in the Community- 7% (more involvement within the community)**

a) Participation in activities–3% (involved in recreation or daily-life activities in community)

*“Yes it was wonderful seeing my child happy participating enjoying something in a group setting.”*

*“Made me feel secure that he was getting attention, I knew he would be included in all activities to the best of his abilities and had time away when he was overwhelmed and needed more quiet time...I have always wished he could experience camp as I did as a child...this allowed that wish to happen.”*

b) Social interaction with other kids-4% (activities with typical or other special needs kids)

*“It would give my daughter the chance to work on her social and play with kids her own age, with the support there, she would flourish for sure.”*

*“We are pleased with the progress our child is making in both socialization opportunities and academic as we are obtaining funding from Autism Ontario. Our child is able to more easily integrate with other children and engage in play and conversations (there has been a huge improvement in since going to camp). We get so many compliments on his skill set from other parents as they see the difference in his and our quality of life as he begins to form friendship and actively participate in camp and sporting programs. He is feeling much better about himself and this confidence is transferring into other activities he performs. :)”*

**Theme 8: Structure Schedule/Consistent routine-2% (stay on a schedule, transition to school easier)**

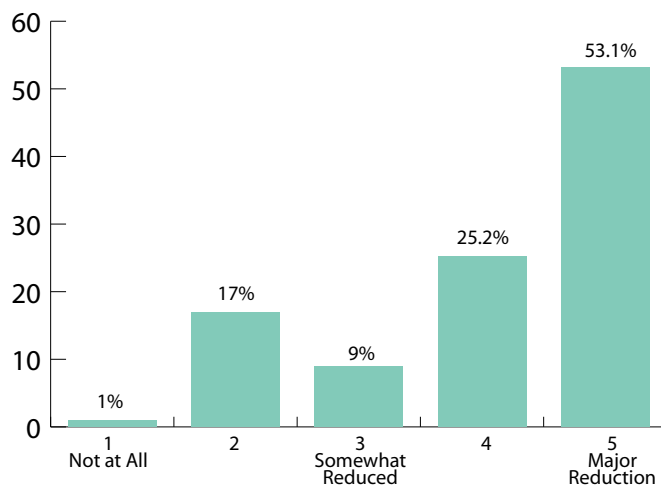
*“It keeps my soon in a good structured environment it relieves a lot of the stress in the house and it allows me to do other things with my other son.”*

*“Keeping her in a structured routine made things much easier at home. Keeping her active also helped keep her regulated. My family received some much needed respite.”*

Taken together, the majority of the respondents highlighted a number of benefits that the funding programs had on the overall functioning of their family. Specifically, families indicated that having respite for the caregivers (30%), the opportunity to spend time with other family members (17%), and parents knowing that their child was safe (20%) were the most frequently reported benefits to their families' functioning. Almost 20% of families reported improvement in skills, primarily in the areas of social skills and in other areas, such as learning new skills and gaining more independence. Several families also appreciated the financial benefit of the program, that is, they indicated that they would not have otherwise been able to afford a summer camp or the support of worker for their child.

In addition to the impact that the funding had on the child and the family, respondents were asked to rate the effect that the funding programs had on decreasing stress in the family. As shown below, over half of the families indicated a major reduction in stress, with less than 3% of families saying not at all or a little.

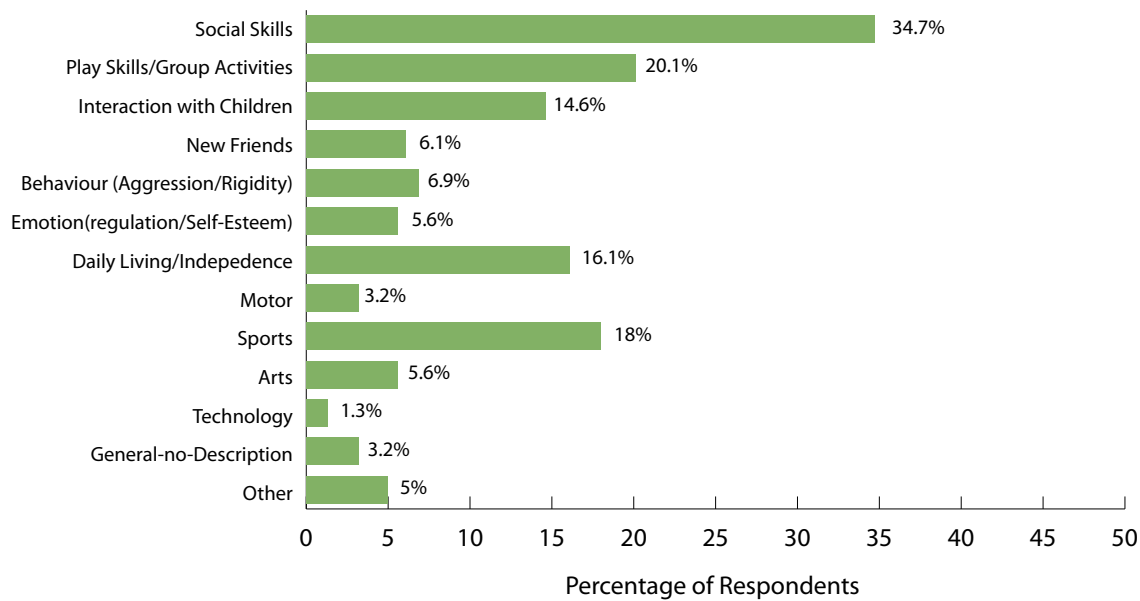
### *Families' Ratings of How Receiving Funding Decreased Stress Within Their Family*



### *Did the funding help support the development of skills?*

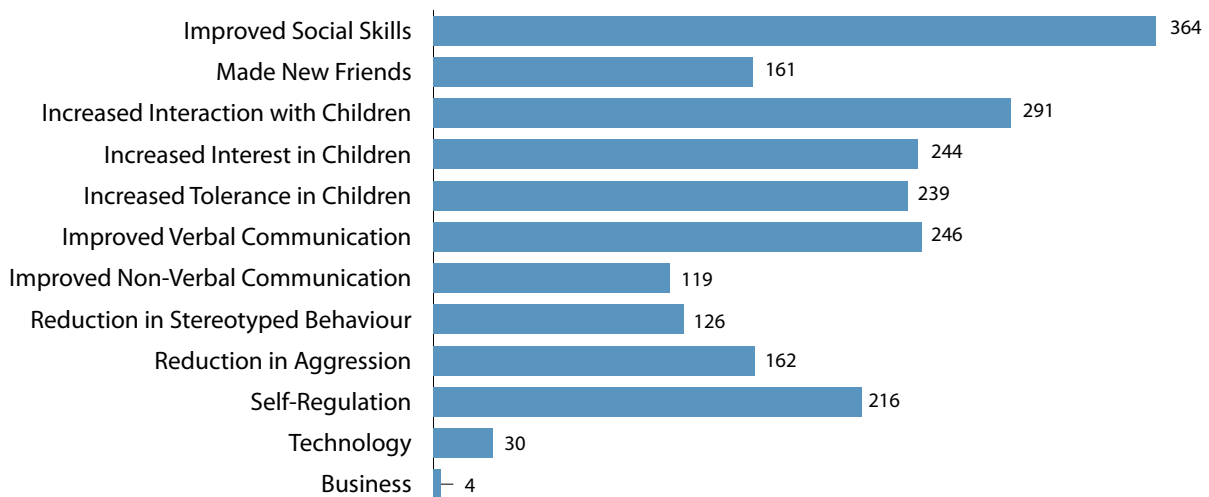
Prior to being presented with the question with multiple options, respondents were asked an open-ended question about skills learned. These responses were coded based on the response options provided in the close-ended question, with additional items being included when necessary. Some categories were collapsed when cell sizes were very small. A total of 293 families (44%) did not respond to the question and 10 families (2.6%) reported that no new skills were learned.

### Did the funding help support the development of skills?



Improvement in skills related to socialization were the most commonly reported, with 60% of respondents reporting improvement in at least one skill within the social domain (social skills, interaction with children, new friends, play skills). Sports skills were reported by just under 20% of respondents. Further, improvement in communication and daily living/independence skills were reported by approximately 16% of respondents. Overall, the results from this question were very similar to the forced-choice question (see results below). Improvement in social skills was also the top-reported improvement, reported by almost 75% of respondents in the forced-choice question. About 60% reported increased interaction with other children, and several other factors within the social domain related to interest and tolerance of other children were frequently reported. Almost half of respondents reported improvements in verbal communication and just under half noted improvements in self-regulation in the forced-choice question. About 40% noted improvements in sports skills. It is also worth noting that about a third of respondents reported a reduction in aggression.

### Skills Gained by Child (All that Apply)



## Summary

### *Sample Demographics*

- A total of 671 English-speaking and 34 French-speaking families are represented in the sample. These families had a total of 1426 children, with 55% of whom have an ASD.
- Just under one-fifth of the sample was single-parent families.
- The majority of those who responded had children within the 5-12 year-old range.
- Less than 2% of the sample identified themselves as being Aboriginal.
- Ninety-percent of the respondents noted English was their first language.
- Just under a quarter of those families indicated that they spoke another language in addition to English.
- All Francophone families confirmed that French is spoken in the home and 31% identified English as the second language in the home.
- Majority of families (58%) were born in Canada with the remaining respondents having lived in Canada for more than 11 years (30%), 6 or more years (7%), or 1 to 5 years (5%).

### *Evaluation of the Application Process*

- Most families heard about the program through Autism Ontario and about a third through multiple sources. The vast majority of families have access to a computer and printer.
- Almost 95% of respondents reported that the application process was straightforward, and over three-quarters reported that the 6-week notification period was sufficient. Respondents were split almost 50/50 with regards to preference for lottery-based versus first-come first-served application process.
- Suggested improvements to the application process included: dividing funding between all applicants, preference to those who have not received funding in the previous year, allocating funding according to family need, extending the age limit to 21 and an online application.
- The majority of families reported that they plan on applying for funding in the future.

### *Is funding meeting the needs of families?*

- Over 80% of families reported that the funding was sufficient for March Break programs, while just over half reported that the Summer Funding was adequate.
- If funding was reduced, 40% of respondents reported that they would still participate in their current program, an additional 40% would participate in a different program, and about one-fifth of families reported that they would not be able to participate in any program.

### *What was the funding used for?*

- March Break funding was typically used for support or respite workers, while Summer Funding was typically used to pay for support workers for mainstream and autism-specific day camps.
- The majority of those who used March Break funding participated in shorter programs, while most using summer funding reported using programs from 1 to 3 weeks.

### *How did the funding impact the child and the family?*

- Of those who responded, almost all of the families reported that the funding had a positive impact on their child.
- Over one-third of the families reported that they would not have been able to participate in the activities that they had without funding. The top-rated impacts on the child were involvement in the community and improvement in skills, especially social skills.
- Almost all of the respondents noted that family functioning also improved. About one-third of families reported respite as a benefit. Approximately one-fifth reported financial benefits, and parents also added that they were less worried about the safety of their child.
- Over 97% of families reported that the program helped to reduce their stress, and over half reported a significant reduction in stress.

### *Did the funding help support the development of skills?*

- Skills related to socialization were the most commonly reported skills learned.
- Almost three-quarters of families reported improvements in social skills.
- Self-regulation, verbal communication, daily living, and sports skills were also reported by many families.
- About a third of families noted a reduction in aggressive behaviours.

## Conclusion

This evaluation has provided a wealth of explicit data detailing the impact of the March Break and summer funding programs on families and children, along with feedback regarding several logistical components of the program. Key messages from this evaluation are that most families reported benefiting from the programs that they participated in. In particular, children gained skills that are critical to their future, especially social skills, communication, and daily living. Many families reported that the funding enabled their children to become more involved in their communities and in recreational activities. A reduction in problematic behaviour, including aggression, was also noted by many families. Benefits of participation extended to the family as a whole. Almost all of the respondents noted a reduction in stress and improved family functioning. Parents also benefited from the respite provided by the program, financial support, and reduced worry regarding the safety of their child.

One of the most innovative components of this program is that feedback regarding its implementation was elicited from parents. Almost all of the families reported that the process was straightforward and there appeared to be equal preference for the lottery-based and first-come first-served application process. Suggested improvements to the application process included: dividing funding between all applicants, preference to those who have not received funding in the previous year, allocating funding according to family need, extending the age limit to 21 and an online application. This evaluation provided important information about whether existing funding levels are meeting the needs of families. Interestingly, while over 80% of families reported that funding was sufficient for the March Break program, just over half reported the same regarding the summer program. If funding was reduced, many families reported that they would not be able to participate in the quality of programming that they did and about 20% would not be able to participate in any program without the funding.

Results from this evaluation indicate this program is very beneficial to children and their families. While a number of suggested improvements were offered, most parents were satisfied with the application process. This funding proved to be a key factor in allowing some families to participate in any program and for many families to participate in the quality of program they did. The collaborative efforts between Autism Ontario and the research team provides a wealth of information regarding the effective components of this program. Through this evaluation, the program can continue to be responsive to the needs of families across Ontario.

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