



Surf lessons for children with Down syndrome, autism or ADHD

Impact Report 2021

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Welcome

Surf Project was set up in 2014 with the aim of building self-confidence through surf lessons in children aged 8-18 with Down syndrome, autism and ADHD.

Surf Project is an official foundation and in possession of an ANBI status (a Public Benefit Organisation (PBO) which means at least 90% of the institution's efforts are focused on the general good). Surf Project is fully organized by volunteers. We are open to children from all walks of life, regardless of background and origin.

For all children participation in sports is crucial. It not only makes them physically stronger but it also builds their self-confidence and social skills. And therefore they will more likely be able to take part in our society.

Surfing is a cool sport with an adventurous image. However, children with a developmental disorder or disability typically do not have access to this sport, due to the need for professional guidance and individual coaching. Surf Project provides surfing lessons for these children, in a SAFE, predictable and controlled environment, with the help of a large group of enthusiastic and professional volunteers. The children surf in small teams, but receive individual support within the team. They feel connected to the tough and adventurous culture and lifestyle that goes with this challenging sport. The children learn from each other in the team, and at the same time realize that they are not the only ones with problems. Surfing in a team shifts the focus to something positive.

It's clear that surfing makes the children feel proud of themselves and this, in turn, boosts their self-esteem. These improved skills are crucial in their everyday lives. Parents report that their children strongly benefit from the lessons; they see their children's self-confidence and self-esteem build up immediately during the first few lessons and are happy to see their children enjoy the surfing lessons.

Surf Project aims to have surf therapy integrated in regular health care in the future. In order to do so, objective research is needed. Therefore, together with a team of psychiatrists and psychologists, we continue our important research on the effect surfing has on these children.

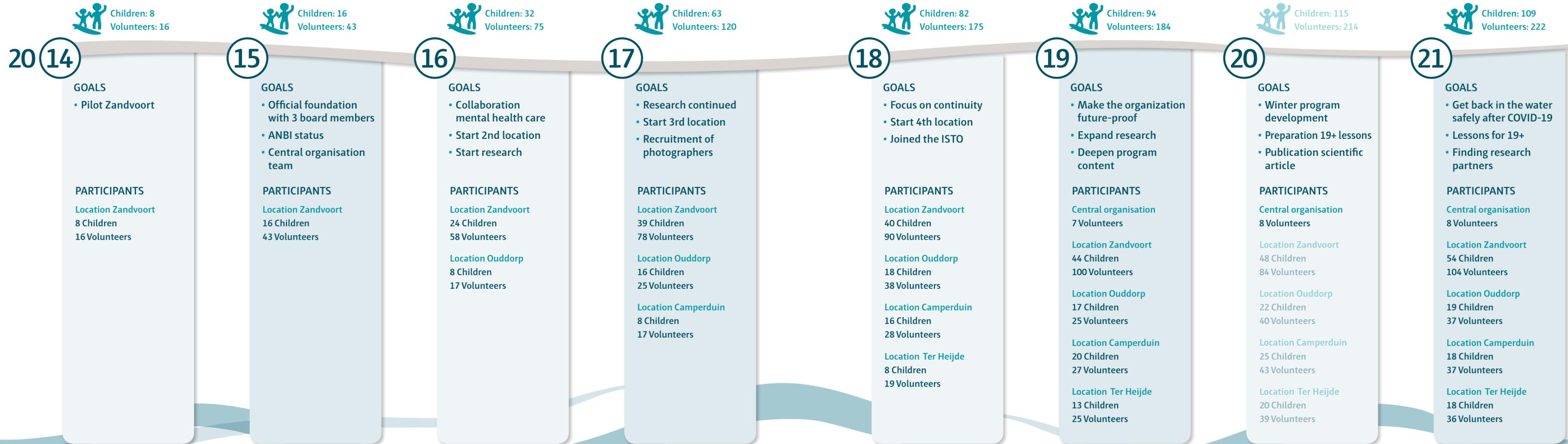
We would not have been able to do all this without our dedicated volunteers, who we rely on to help us change these children's lives. We would like to thank each one of our volunteers, along with our sponsors and funding partners across the country, for working so hard to be part of everything we have achieved for the children. We are very proud of you, our work and the organisation we are building together!

Finally, we would like to thank the children and their parents. It is our privilege to work both with and for them. Their stories continue to inspire us, and remind everyone at Surf Project how important it is that we do all that we can to ensure these children are given the opportunity to participate in surfing and therefore will be given the chance of a brighter future.



Suzanne van den Broek-Dietz
Founder Surf Project

Our timeline



Meet Jeroen

This is Jeroen. Jeroen is full of life. He is very energetic and loves to swim. Jeroen has Down syndrome, a mental disorder and a low intelligence level. He has difficulties expressing himself verbally, and therefore social interaction and making friends are not easy for him. He cannot participate in team sports. Simply because he doesn't understand the rules and other people don't understand his behaviour.



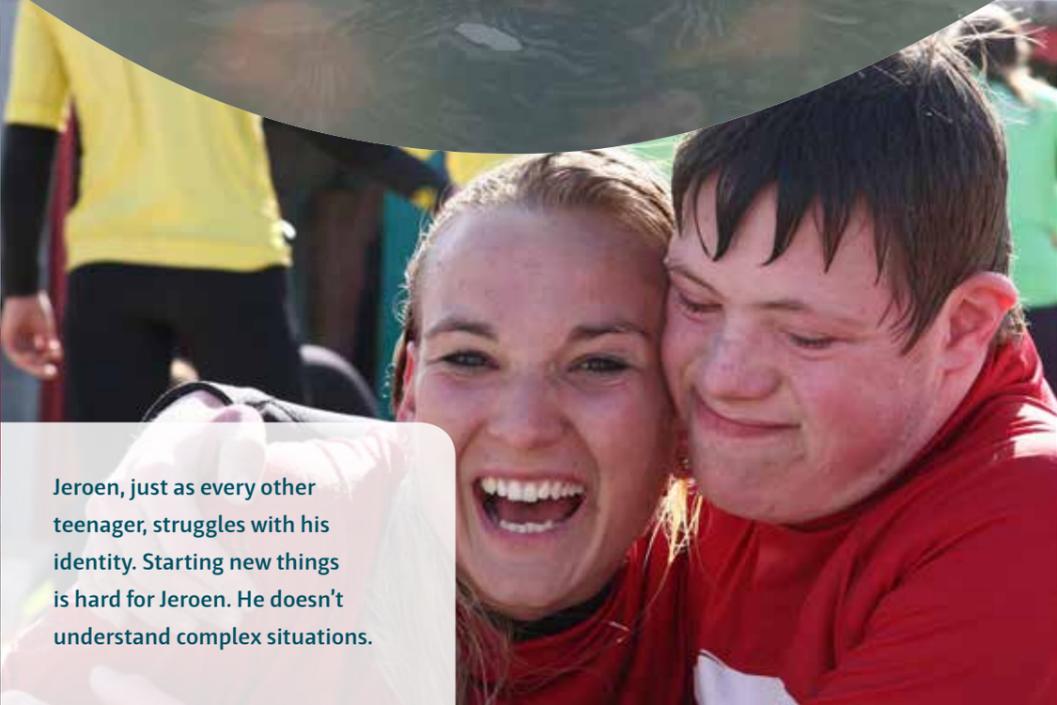
Jeroen's behaviour is impulsive. Not because he wants to be bad. Not at all, but he doesn't understand that his behaviour is sometimes inappropriate. It's just his way of communicating.



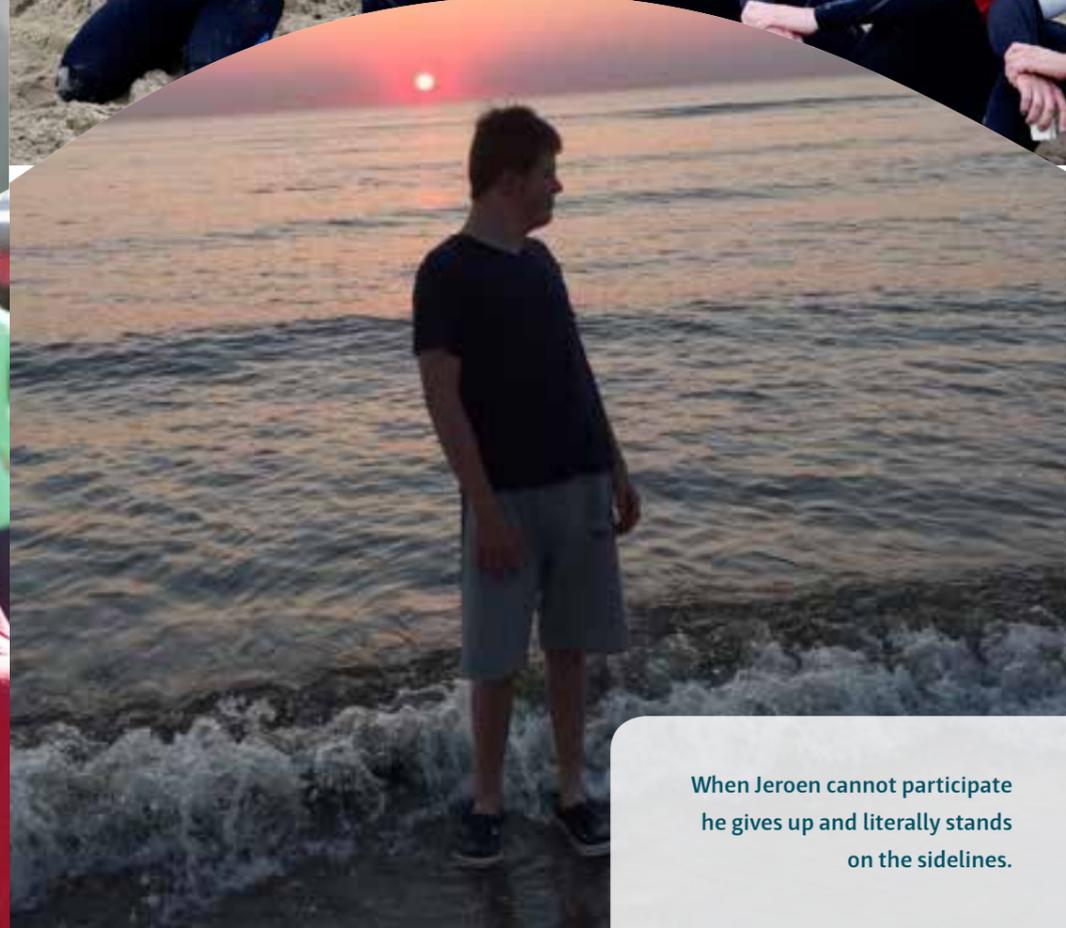
Jeroen needs an outlet for all his energy.



Jeroen, just as every other teenager, struggles with his identity. Starting new things is hard for Jeroen. He doesn't understand complex situations.



When Jeroen cannot participate he gives up and literally stands on the sidelines.



Jeroen needs help to experience success. He needs help to realize he matters and he is just as important as everybody else in this world.



Surfing at Surf Project is a great experience for Jeroen. It makes him feel special and gives him more self-confidence.

Our lessons

We work with local surf schools and local Surf Project teams. They are fully equipped and know the local circumstances best.



The participating children surf in small teams. Each team has a certified surf instructor, and each child is individually guided by one of our volunteers. Surf Project makes certain the children have one on one guidance by the same buddy during the first three lessons. They get confident by seeing the same face. The children belong to a team and to their own colour. This helps them grow their social skills.

And at the same time, they don't have to play together to win. There is no competition but many high fives are given in the water. Everybody is a winner. You surf with your team and you are happy for everybody who glides the waves.

The flow of the sea makes you forget everything, and just concentrate on what you are doing. Surfing is known as an extreme sport; outdoor, wild nature and waves that cannot be controlled. So without professional guidance these children cannot participate.



Therefore during our lessons, much attention is paid to structure and predictability. Safety and a positive experience of the participant are always paramount. New participants will initially follow three surf lessons in three consecutive weeks.

After the first three lessons we celebrate their courage with a well-deserved medal and a diploma during a grand finale. Children who have participated before can take a total of three to six Surf Club lessons spread over the summer months.



Children often take their whole family to the beach. This works for everybody. Parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and grandparents, see how much fun this child is having on a surfboard. Seeing them in such a positive, healthy and even cool setting makes them feel proud. This has a great impact on their everyday family lives.

Surf Project would not exist without the help of all our passionate and important volunteers. All the people who join Surf Project choose to be there. They are extremely motivated to help and share their own passion with these children. This makes the atmosphere incredibly positive and happy.



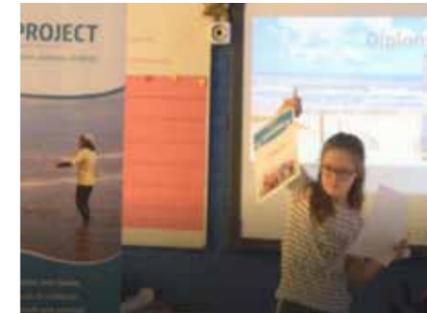
Look at Jeroen now! Jeroen's mom tells us he is more self-confident since he can surf. He feels proud of himself. At Surf Project he can grow physically and emotionally. Others are interested in his new passion. They actually listen to him. Every year at Christmas there is a calendar under the tree. Surf Project is one of the first things written down on it.

What parents say

"For once I didn't have to explain his behavior. He just belonged in the water with Surf Project."

"I don't exactly know what happened in the water. But I haven't ever seen him so free before. Free from his fears and anxiety, free from the restraints of his autism. When we drove back from the surfing lessons we couldn't stop laughing. For me it was such a big gift."

"My child never dared to speak in public. But now at school she made her own presentation about Surf Project and her new surf skills. This opened a new world for her. A world where she can be herself and where she's not afraid of what people might say about her disability."



"He has learned so much from surfing. He feels stronger in all different ways. He wants to help me carry the groceries and at the dinner table he starts a conversation. He opened up. This has never happened before and it is a big change in our family life."

"It was like there was no disability while taking part in Surf Project."

"It's great that I trust these people for 200%. I leave my kid surfing with them and at the same time I can simply have a coffee and relax. This doesn't happen very often."

"Before my daughter went surfing with Surf Project I wondered if she was ever able to live independently or if she can live the life she wants to live. But now, after taking part in this project, I see she is dedicated to get there. Maybe it takes her a little bit longer than someone else, but I am confident now that she can do it. This is the biggest gift anyone could give to me."



Design and safety

Surf Project pays a lot of attention to the safety and the specific needs of the individual child when developing and executing surf lessons. For example, an extensive interview is held with every registered child together with its parents, the lessons are explained by pictograms and we use colored shirts for clarity. Much attention is paid to structure and predictability.

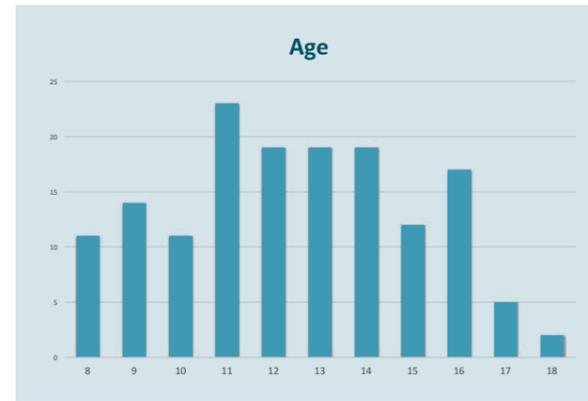
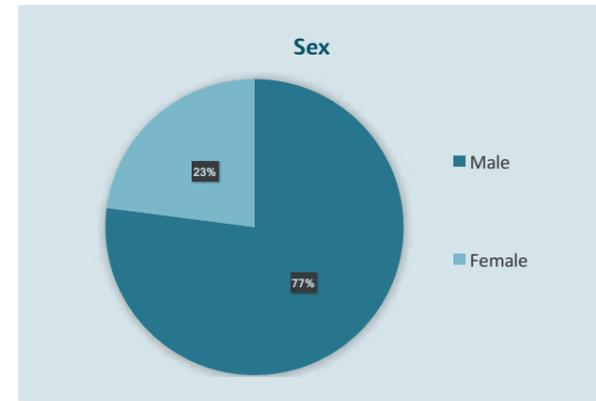
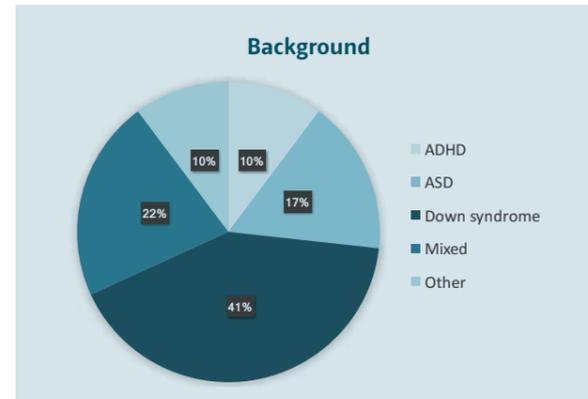
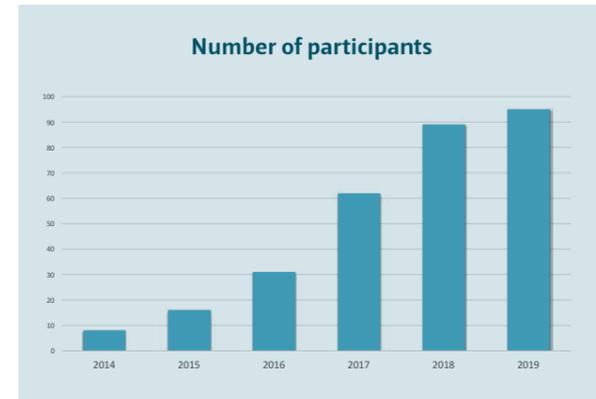
There are various professionals from health care and sports education involved and a rescue team is present. All surf instructors are certified and work at connected surf schools.

All volunteers have experience or affinity with the target group and water sports, and receive specific training for Surf Project. All volunteers deliver a Declaration on Behavior (VOG). This will ensure that participation is as safe and positive as possible for the children and their parents. Throughout Surf Project, the safety and experience of the child is paramount.



About our participants

We surf with amazing children aged 8-18 with Down syndrome, autism and ADHD. We are open to children from all walks of life, regardless of background and origin. Below you will find the data concerning our participants.



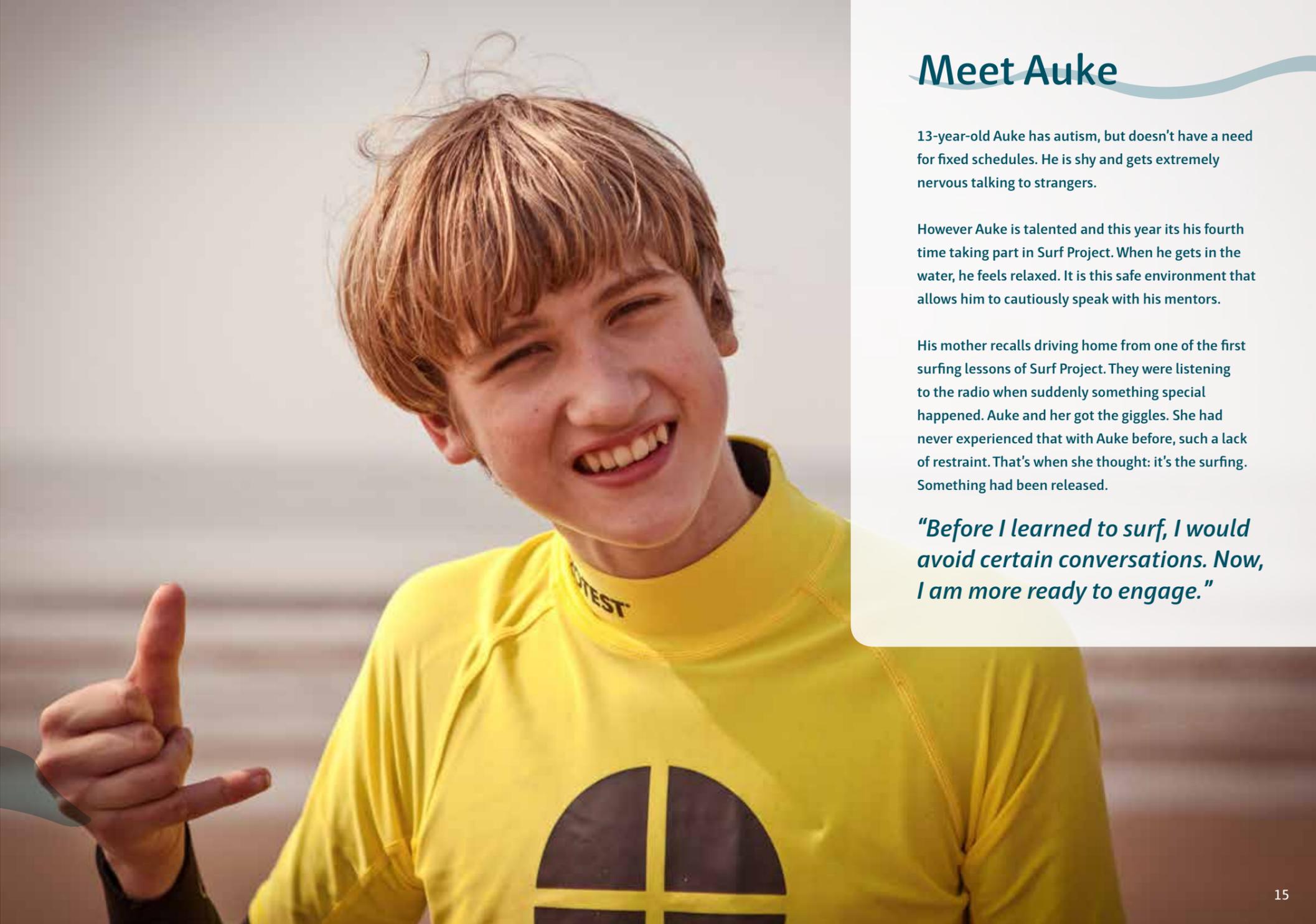
Meet Auke

13-year-old Auke has autism, but doesn't have a need for fixed schedules. He is shy and gets extremely nervous talking to strangers.

However Auke is talented and this year its his fourth time taking part in Surf Project. When he gets in the water, he feels relaxed. It is this safe environment that allows him to cautiously speak with his mentors.

His mother recalls driving home from one of the first surfing lessons of Surf Project. They were listening to the radio when suddenly something special happened. Auke and her got the giggles. She had never experienced that with Auke before, such a lack of restraint. That's when she thought: it's the surfing. Something had been released.

"Before I learned to surf, I would avoid certain conversations. Now, I am more ready to engage."



Meet Dailin

When 16-year-old Dailin was little, she often said that she wanted to die. She didn't think she was good enough. Her mother would be better off choosing a different child. Dailin has ADHD, autism and a minor form of intellectual disability.

It's Dailin's fourth consecutive season at Surf Project. The fact that she is able to stand upright on the board gives her the confidence that other things will work, too. At school, she signed herself up for an internship; she wanted to prove that she could assume responsibility. She got permission, which is quite unusual given that Internships don't usually happen at this age.

Dailin recently got tested. The results showed that her performance had gone up exponentially, allowing her to skip a whole year. Her mentality has changed from 'I'm not good at anything' to 'there's no fault in trying, and I can surf!'

*'What I like most about surfing?
That it works! When I stand on
my board, I get a warm feeling
inside'*



Meet Eva

18-year-old Eva has Down syndrome. When she joined Surf Project a year ago, she was shy. Verbal communication is very difficult for her.

Eva's mentor at Surf Project made sure to adjust his way of communicating to hers. From that moment onwards, Eva fully devoted herself to surfing. According to her mother, she usually needs to be urged on to get going, but during Surf Project, she literally couldn't wait to jump on the board.

At last year's National Gala for Disabled Sports, Eva was named 'Unique Talent in Sports of 2017'. In her red ball gown, she danced on stage with one of the Netherlands' most famous rappers. She's a lot less interested in her toys now, her mother says. She behaves more like an adult.

The morning after the gala where she was named Unique Talent in Sports of 2017, Eva said to her mother:

"I'm a big girl now, aren't I?"



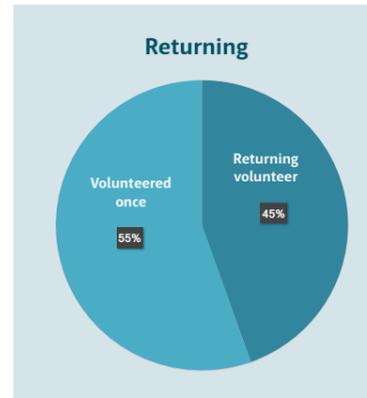
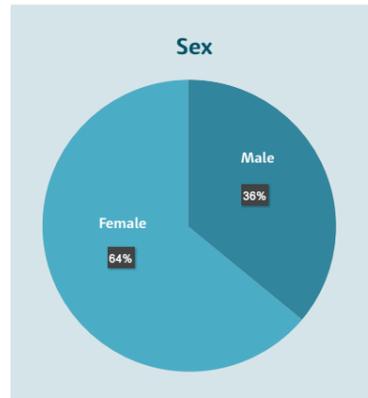
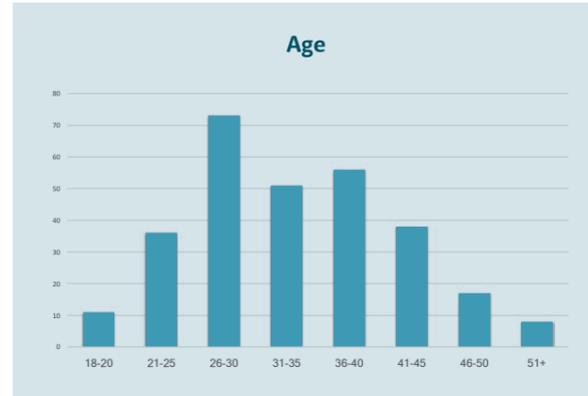
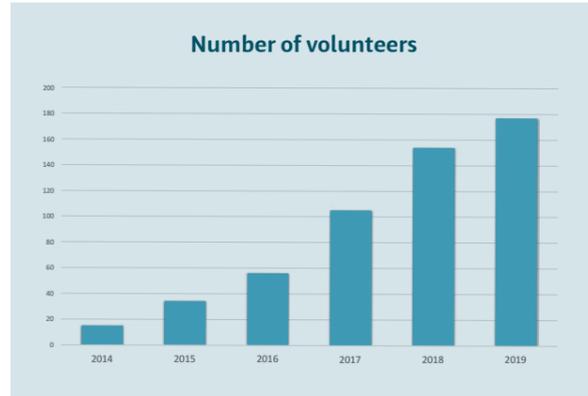
About our volunteers

Our volunteers are the reason why we exist. We work with so many important volunteers. They are extremely motivated to help share their passion with the children. This creates an incredibly positive and happy atmosphere.

In a positive and enthusiastic way our volunteers help the children to gain success in the water and catch some waves. The children don't have to become pro surfers. They can surf in a way which suits their capacities: lying down, on their knees or standing up. It is all about the success experience and the fun factor. Volunteers help the children by explaining the exercises and help them to remember the instructions.

We also have a team of photographers. These volunteers are very important too. Their pictures make sure children and their parents can look back on a beautiful experience. They capture the moments they can be proud of and hereby keep their self-confidence high throughout the whole year.

On the right you will find the data concerning our volunteers.



WHAT VOLUNTEERS SAY

"Being in the ocean makes these children feel free. In the beginning surfing is very tense, but step by step they see something very big become smaller for them. Also because of the trust they get from the people surrounding them in the water. They learn to see their own true identity and not 'the child with the disability'. I love working with them. I learn so much from these pure children."



"As a volunteer at Surf Project I feel I can make a difference in someone's life. It brings me so much joy to see a happy child in the water. You can count on me next year and the year after and..."



"Thank you all for this wonderful experience. This project enriched my surfing life. Share the stoke and bring back the fun."

"I am very proud to have been a volunteer at Surf Project this year. I realize that it's important to give your trust to a child, but in the mean time you get so much back. I feel honoured that I could be a part of this amazing project. I will miss the happy faces from all the children and the volunteers. I am glad there are so many videos and pictures to look at this winter. Thank you for changing my life."



"Last year I got the opportunity to be a mentor of SAM. He is the most stoked surfer on the planet. He loves to joke around, romp with everybody, make people laugh (even if that means farting in his wetsuit and I love him for it, cracks me up every time) and surf's like a pro. He is a true bundle of joy. He doesn't take life too seriously and is honest, pure and always shares his love and motivation with others! The children from Surf Project all have a disability which has them living in the moment and taking nothing for granted, what a life lesson to us all. I will be forever grateful for this opportunity! Surf Project crew, keep up the amazing work you're doing! See you in 2018! And Sam - keep on sharing your stoke!"

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Annual voluntary time investment & (market)value

Central Team (8 persons)

EXPERTISE

- Communication expert
- Social media expert
- Graphic designer
- Surf instructor
- Senior researcher
- Lawyer
- Sales manager
- Psychologists
- Accountant/ Financial expert
- HR Specialist

1700
€ 127.500

Local Teams (14 persons)

EXPERTISE

- Surfschool owners
- Doctors
- Gym teachers
- Pedagogues
- Autism specialists

700
€ 52.500

Imagery (33 persons)

EXPERTISE

- Photographers
- Camera operators & Video editors

1330
€ 99.750

Total number
of voluntary
expertise
hours spent:

3770
€ 279.750*

Water Time (184 persons)



Hours of water time with
the children spent by our
voluntary surf buddies:

1863
€ 93.150**

Our research

Introduction

Research is an important aspect for the Surf Project. Parents and children tell the most amazing stories about the effect the surfing lessons have on their children. It is important to substantiate these stories with scientific evidence, in order to further develop and grow the organisation and let more children benefit from the surfing lessons.

Since 2016, the Surf Project has done research to gain more insight into the effects that the surfing lessons have on the participants, in collaboration with psychologists and psychiatrists from GGZ Noord-Holland-Noord. In 2020, the results were published in the Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice, which published a special issue on surf therapy around the world.

Publication

Below, we will provide a short summary of the Surf Project's publication.

BACKGROUND

Children with developmental disorders or disabilities often experience a wide range of difficulties and a reduced quality of life. Surfing is gaining popularity as a sport that can boost psychological well-being, but research into these effects is still scarce. Moreover, children with developmental difficulties often experience a wide range of barriers to participate in (adapted) sports, especially risky sports such as surfing. The current study investigated the effect of adapted surfing lessons on children with developmental difficulties in the Netherlands.

METHODS

Participants were children with Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) that participated in the Surf Project

between 2016 and 2019. Quality of life was measured by a parent-rated questionnaire (KIDSCREEN-27) before and after a series of three surfing lessons (N=84; new participants only). Furthermore, parents filled in an evaluation questionnaire after the third surfing lesson (N=149; new and returning participants). Pre-post differences in quality of life were determined using statistical analyses, and responses on evaluation questionnaires were systematically analysed using thematic analysis to gain more in-depth insight into the experiences of children and parents.

RESULTS

Results of the KIDSCREEN questionnaire showed a significant increase in the children's quality of life after three surfing lessons. This positive effect was found for the Total score (measuring quality of life in general), as well as 3 subscale scores: Psychological well-being (indicating that children experienced more positive emotions, were more satisfied with life and felt less lonely or sad), Social support & peers (indicating that children felt more positive about their interaction with peers and family) and School (indicating that the children felt more positive about school, their teachers and their own cognitive abilities).

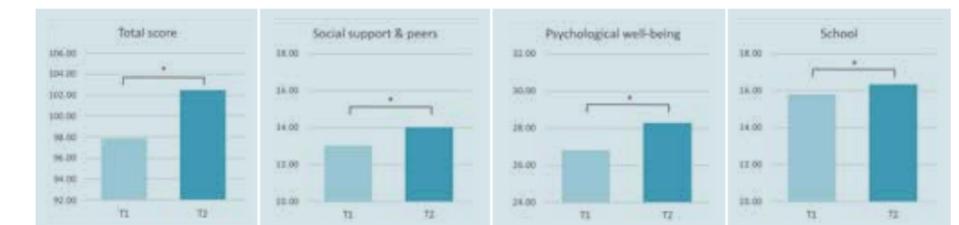


Figure 1. Significant increases in quality of life total score and three of its subscales. Adapted from: van Ewijk, H., Wansink-Lokerman, M., Lamerz, A., & van den Broek, S. (2020). Positive Effects of Surfing on Psychological Wellbeing for Children with Developmental Difficulties. Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice, 11(2).

“A boost for his confidence. He is not a fast learner at school. Surfing made him realize that he can have other talents.” (Parent, 2018)

Qualitative analysis of evaluation questionnaires showed consistent positive experiences by children as well as parents. According to parents, surfing improved the child’s mood (parents saw their children happy and cheerful after surfing; they appeared satisfied, peaceful and slept well), self-esteem and self-confidence (children felt proud or ‘cool’ for learning a new skill and being able to surf) and social-emotional functioning (children were better able and more prone to express emotions, felt included, got positive reactions from peers or were more inclined to engage in social behaviours or relationships). According to many parents, effects transferred into their child’s daily life (e.g., their child would push through to overcome their fears, undertake new activities and become more independent or self-reliant).

“At home he was less stressed, took things as they came, was focused but at the same time relaxed. Also, he started talking more, took more initiative in conversations.” (Parent, 2018)

The specific design of the Surf Project appears to play an important role in these results. Parents consistently mentioned the good organisation and programme structure and the

warm, positive and enthusiastic vibe. They often mentioned that they felt safe leaving their child with the capable and trained volunteers, who adapted their approach to each individual child and their needs and capacities, and provided the children with undivided personal attention.

“It was super fun and well- organised. A lot of room for the kids to be themselves and be able to succeed. There was a clear structure, and tranquillity.” (Parent, 2017)

CONCLUSION

Participating in the Surf Project significantly increases the quality of life of children with Down syndrome, autism and/or ADHD. More specifically, positive effects are seen on psychological well-being, social-emotional functioning and school. Effects often seem to transfer to the children’s daily life functioning. Surfing in a safe, structured and positive environment is a promising tool to boost the well-being and development of children with developmental difficulties, and could be a valuable addition to the current treatment options for these children in mental health care.

More information

Article: [Read the full article here.](#)

Video: [Watch the Surf Project’s video here.](#)

GJCPP special issue: [Read all the articles from the special issue here.](#)



International partnership

Since 2018 Surf Project is a proud member of the International Surf Therapy Organisation (ISTO). ISTO is formed in 2017 in Cape Town, South Africa. We are a group of partner projects, across the globe who are all using the power of surfing to effect positive change in people's lives. ISTO's mantra is "to go fast, go alone, to go far, go together."

Surf Project is committed to working alongside ISTO by doing research and sharing best practice guidelines for others who are just beginning their surf therapy journey. Evidence continues to grow that getting in the sea, having a surf and having fun with friends in the water makes a measurable difference to people's mental health.

For more info go to: <https://intlsurftherapy.org/>



ISTO GOALS

1. Provide access to surf therapy for people who are physically, mentally or socially disadvantaged.
2. Build a research and evidence base to showcase global innovations in surf therapy.
3. Grow the global network of gold standard, high quality surf therapy interventions servicing various vulnerable populations.
4. Mentor upcoming surf therapy programs for inclusion into the ISTO network.
 - a. Help these programs meet the minimum requirements of surf therapy.
 - b. Ensure a high safety standard.
 - c. Monitor outcomes and program evaluations.
5. Highlight the importance of the natural environment and its benefits in therapeutic interventions.
6. Promotion of surf therapy access to landlocked areas using new wave pool technology alongside other innovations.

ISTO
All people should have safe access to salubrious, wild, biodiverse waters for well-being, healing, and therapy.
 — Wallace J. Nichols, Blue Mind, 2014

Pathways to impact

ISTO believes in pioneering surf therapy, and helping new organizations flourish and grow. The following 3 pillars define ISTO:

<p>Pillar 1 UNDERSTAND Increase understanding of surf therapy</p> <p>Conduct shared research projects, publish existing research annually and share on intlsurftherapy.org. Execute an annual Surf Therapy conference to highlight impact and best practice in the sector.</p>	<p>Pillar 2 SHARE Promote excellence in surf therapy</p> <p>Connect leaders of surf therapy organizations worldwide, share knowledge and exchange program tools, evaluation tools and evaluations to help each other improve practice and evidence base.</p>	<p>Pillar 3 ADVOCATE Build awareness of surf therapy</p> <p>Share research and impact data at conferences globally, grow social media accounts and recruit global ambassadors to push awareness of surf therapy globally. Increase inclusion of surf therapy beneficiaries in the growth of surf therapy worldwide.</p>
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International Surf Therapy Organization



Plans for the future

OUR KEY OBJECTIVES FOR THE COMING PERIOD 2021 - 2023 ARE:

1. Continue professionalisation of the organization.
2. Due to Covid-19 we had to cancel our lessons in 2020. Our aim is to get back into the water with all our participants, in a responsible and safe manner, in 2021 for at least three lessons.
3. Our research shows that children already benefit from only three surf lessons. Evaluation with parents and surfers made clear there is a wish for more surfing lessons. Our aim is to build up the amount of lessons per child. We will explore the possibilities.
4. Surf Project aims to have surf therapy integrated in regular health care in the future. In order to do so, extended and objective research is needed.
5. The recruitment of structural sponsors to ensure financial continuity in order to provide more lessons per child.
6. Further develop our involvement and participation in the global network 'International Surf Therapy Organization (ISTO)' in which we share best practices and investigate the effect of surfing on the children.



Thanks to our sponsors

Surf Project is a professional organization and is organized and run mainly by volunteers. Since 2017 parents pay a small contribution for surf lessons. This amount is deliberately very low so that it is accessible to parents from all walks of life. Until now, the costs are covered by (mostly) onetime donations and sponsoring. We'd like to thank each one of our sponsors and funding partners across the country, for working so hard to be part of everything we have achieved for the children.





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