



AUTISM
HOME
BASE

Program Evaluation and Community Impact Report

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Autism Home Base: Program Evaluation and Community Impact Report

Autism Home Base (AHB) was established in 2012 as a social club for adults on the autism spectrum and their caregivers. AHB provides social and recreational opportunities for these individuals in order to promote social interactions and relationships. This project marks the second time Trent University Durham-GTA has worked with AHB since 2017 and is intended to accomplish the following objectives:

- 1) Examine the impact of AHB on adults on the autism spectrum and caregivers with respect to supporting an adult on the autism spectrum.
- 2) Assess the effectiveness of a new initiative (Pal-Program*) in improving well-being and social provisions* levels in members.
- 3) Connect members of AHB with volunteers who are not on the autism spectrum, evaluate the effect of this new relationship on the members and volunteers, and if this relationship will be voluntarily maintained post-program.

The collection of data (pre-program) began in November of 2019, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and concluded (post-program) in August of 2020. Originally, evaluation of the Pal-Program was planned with 20 pairs of volunteers and members from AHB (40 participants in total). With the onset of COVID-19 the program was redesigned from in-person to virtual meetups (e.g., video calls) with a smaller number of members and volunteers (12 pairs in total). Further, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in closures of schools and businesses, physical distancing, restrictions on social gatherings and travel, and self-isolation. This created significant and unprecedented levels of social isolation in the general population and provided us with a unique opportunity to examine how COVID-19 might impact our original objectives. As a result, we added the following goals in response to this opportunity:

- 1) Identify any feelings of social isolation between members and volunteers.
- 2) Determine if the Pal-Program helped reduce these feelings of social isolation.

*The Pal-Program aims to expand the social circle of members on the autism spectrum and improve well-being through social interactions with a paired volunteer (see methodology for more details).

*Social provisions assess the degree to which social relationships provide social support (see methodology for more details).

Methodology

Participants

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (March 30th, 2020) the sample consisted of 13 independent members on the autism spectrum (i.e., could advocate for themselves), seven dependent members on the autism spectrum (i.e., required a parent/caregiver to advocate on their behalf), and 20 volunteers. Of the original sample, seven members (five independent & two dependent) and four volunteers continued with the Pal-Program during the COVID-19 quarantine. Five additional members (four independent & one dependent) and eight additional volunteers were recruited during this time.

In total, the participants included 12 members of AHB (member group; $n = 12$; age range: 19-31 years) and 12 volunteers (volunteer group; $n = 12$; age range: 19-49 years) who agreed to take part in the new Pal-Program. The AHB member group was divided into two subgroups:

- 1) Independent members on the autism spectrum ($n = 9$; can advocate for themselves).
- 2) Dependent members on the autism spectrum ($n = 3$; required parent/caregiver to advocate on their behalf).

All nine independent members were paired with a volunteer, two dependent members (along with their parent/caregiver to advocate on their behalf) were paired with a volunteer, and one parent/caregiver was paired with a volunteer in place of their dependent on the autism spectrum who was nonverbal. Members and volunteers were from the Durham, Kawartha Lakes, Peterborough, or Cobourg regions of Ontario, Canada.

The Pal-Program

The Pal-Program is a new initiative from AHB in their efforts to improve well-being and reduce feelings of social isolation in the autism spectrum community. Originally, the Pal-Program was conceived as an opportunity for independent and dependent members to develop friendships with a volunteer who has shared interests (e.g., weight training, art). This allows AHB to expand the social circle of its members beyond that of the autism spectrum community, as well as ask: Do the friendships extend beyond the Pal-Program? Do their members enjoy social interactions with individuals outside of the autism spectrum community?

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in changes to the meetups due to physical distancing guidelines. Instead of in-person meetups, each member-volunteer pair took part in one virtual meetup (e.g., conversations on the phone, texting) per week, for eight weeks. The goals and intentions of the program otherwise remaining the same.

Data-Collection and Measures Used

Data collection was completed in two stages (pre-program and post-program) to assess the impact of the Pal-Program on members and volunteers. Questions regarding COVID-19 and feelings of self-isolation were added to one of the measures assessing impact (Pre- and Post-Program Impact and Well-Being Questionnaire). The remaining measures were unaltered.

Pre-program data collection included the following measures:

Structured Interview. Members and volunteers were administered different versions of a structured interview, which addressed different areas of interest.

The member version contained nine items, assessing the following three key areas (see Appendix A):

- *General interest in the new Pal-Program initiative* to assess whether the initiative was meeting the needs of the AHB community.
- *The qualities of people that appeal to AHB members* to assess if AHB was seeking and recruiting volunteers that appealed to its community.
- *Willingness to connect and maintain this connection with people outside of the autism spectrum community* to determine whether these types of social ties were of interest and desired.

The volunteer version contained 13 items, assessing the following four key areas (see Appendix B):

- *Goals and intentions of being part of AHB.*
- *Comfort level while socializing with individuals on the autism spectrum* (e.g., confidence in

taking part in activities, maintaining a conversation).

- *Competency in navigating situations unique to individuals on the autism spectrum (e.g., pragmatically challenging social situations).*
- *Openness and willingness of volunteers to connect and maintain this connection with people in the autism spectrum community.*

Impact and Well-Being Questionnaire. An online survey was administered to members and volunteers that contained six items, which consisted of:

- General questions of well-being (e.g., do you have someone to talk and connect with?).
- Degree of negative impact COVID-19 and social isolation had on their social lives (scale of 1-5, with 1 = very little impact and 5 = quite a lot of impact).

Members were administered an additional question which asked about the impact AHB had on their quality of life (scale of 1-10, with 1 = very little impact and 10 = quite a lot of impact).

Social Provisions Scale. The social provisions scale examines the degree to which a respondent's social relationships provide social support. Volunteer and member groups were administered the social provisions scale via online survey. The scale consists of 24 items, separated into six social provisions:

- *Attachment* - The degree of emotional closeness one experiences with others (e.g., having close friendships or family relationships), which provides a sense of social and emotional security.
- *Social integration* - Sense of belongingness to a group that shares similar interests and concerns.
- *Reassurance of worth* - Recognition of one's competence, skills, and value by others.
- *Reliable alliance* - Assurance that others can be counted upon for aid.
- *Guidance* - Degree to which one is able to gather advice or information from others.
- *Nurturance* - Sense that others rely upon them for their well-being.

Respondents indicate on a 4-point Likert scale the degree to which each item describes their current social network. Scores for each social provision can range between 0 and 16 with high scores indicating a greater degree of perceived support (Cutrona & Russell, 1987).

Post-program data collection included the following measures:

Structured Interview. Members and volunteers were administered different versions of a structured interview, which addressed different areas of interest.

The member version contained 13 items, assessing the following five key areas (see Appendix C):

- *General opinion and experiences regarding the new Pal-Program initiative* and thoughts on involvement of volunteers outside of the AHB community (e.g., benefits or drawbacks, did they enjoy it?).
- *Qualities of the volunteers* (e.g., sociable, understanding) that made an impact on member enjoyment and experiences.
- *Interest in staying in touch and continuing a friendship with the paired volunteer* outside of the program.
- *Opinions regarding AHB's initiatives* to improve their community's well-being and interests in taking part in other new initiatives from AHB.
- *Impact of the Pal-Program* on any feelings of isolation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The volunteer version contained 10 items, assessing the following four key areas (see Appendix D):

- *General opinions and experiences regarding the Pal-Program* (e.g., benefits or drawbacks, did they enjoy it?).
- *Interest in staying in touch with the paired member outside of the Pal-Program* (e.g., Will they stay in touch? Did they develop a lasting friendship?).
- *Interest in volunteering with AHB in the future.*
- *Impact of the Pal-Program* on feelings of social isolation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Post-Program Impact and Well-Being Questionnaire. Member and volunteers completed an online survey with five items, consisting of:

- General questions of well-being (e.g., do you have someone to talk and connect with?).
- Degree of positive impact (e.g., reduced feelings of loneliness) the Pal-Program had on their social lives with regards to social-isolation and COVID-19 (scale of 1 - 5, with 1 = very little impact and 5 = quite a lot of impact).

Social Provisions Scale. Member and volunteer groups were administered the same social provisions scale (administered pre-program) via online survey after program completion.

Results

Impact of AHB on Members' Quality of Life

Mean ratings on quality of life impact for members (see Table 1) indicate:

- *A large degree of positive impact on the adult with autism's quality of life ($M = 7.67$)*
- *A large degree of positive impact on the parent/caregiver's quality of life ($M = 8.00$).*
- *A moderate degree of positive impact on the parent/caregiver's ability to support their son/daughter ($M = 6.67$).*

Table 1. Mean ratings of each domain of impact across members on the autism spectrum ($n = 12$) and parents/caregivers enrolled in the program ($n = 3$).

Domain of Impact	Impact on the Adult with Autism's Quality of Life	Impact on the Parent/Caregiver's Quality of Life	Impact on the Parent/Caregiver's Ability to Support their Son/Daughter
Mean Impact Ratings	7.67	8.00	6.67

Note. Scores range from 1 – 10 (1 = very little impact; 10 = quite a lot of impact).

Select responses regarding the positive impact AHB made on quality of life:

- “It really helped me to realize that there are people who understand and relate to the difficulties I experienced growing up on the autism spectrum. That, as well as the opportunity to spend time with such people, made a real positive impact on my life.”
- “AHB provides opportunities and a forum to meet people.”

- “I actually feel like I can relate to people in the group without having to constantly look to my best friend for explanations which is amazing.”
- “It has made me a lot more socially accepted of people who share the same autism spectrum as me, and has shaped my life with the AHB Group.”

Social Provisions Pre- and Post-Program

Mean social provision levels for AHB members (see Table 2) pre- and post-program indicate:

- *No differences* across the social provisions of guidance, reassurance of worth, social integration, attachment, or reliable alliance for the member group
- *A small decrease* in levels of nurturance between pre-program ($M = 10.10$) and post-program ($M = 8.20$).

These findings indicate AHB members experienced a decrease in feelings of responsibility for the well-being of others (i.e., nurturance) after the program, when compared to before the program.

Table 2. Mean social provision scores for AHB members ($n = 12$) pre-program vs. post program

Social Provisions	Pre-Program	Post-Program
Guidance	7.00	7.25
Reassurance of Worth	9.10	8.20
Social Integration	7.75	7.60
Attachment	9.10	8.75
Nurturance	10.10	8.20
Reliable Alliance	6.60	6.60

Note. Scores range from 0 – 16. The higher the score, the greater the perceived support.

Mean social provision levels were compared for volunteers (see Table 3) pre- and post-program. The findings indicate:

- *No differences* across all social provisions.

Table 3. Mean social provision scores for volunteers ($n = 12$) pre-program vs. post program

Social Provisions	Pre-Program	Post-Program
Guidance	5.20	5.20
Reassurance of Worth	5.20	5.60
Social Integration	5.10	5.10
Attachment	5.10	5.00
Nurturance	6.10	6.25
Reliable Alliance	4.75	4.70

Note. Scores range from 0 – 16. The higher the score, the greater the perceived support.

The Impact of Social Isolation, COVID-19, and the Pal-Program on the Participant's Social Lives

Prior to the Pal-Program, participants reported the degree to which their social lives were negatively impacted by social isolation and COVID-19 (e.g., feeling lonely) on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = very little impact and 5 = quite a lot of impact).

- Members reported a mean rating of 3.67, whereas the volunteers reported a mean rating of 3.33.

After the Pal-Program participants then reported the degree to which it had a positive impact on their social lives with regards to social-isolation and COVID-19 (e.g., reduced feelings of loneliness) on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = very little impact and 5 = quite a lot of impact).

- Members reported a mean impact rating of 3.50, while Volunteers reported a mean impact rating of 3.67.

These findings indicate that:

- Before the Pal-Program, members and volunteers experienced a *moderate amount of negative impact* from social-isolation due to COVID -19.
- After the Pal-Program, members and volunteers reported being in the program had a *moderate amount of positive impact* on their social lives.

Select responses from members post-program:

- “It made me feel like I wasn't alone, & that this is happening to everyone not just me.”
- “I look forward to speaking with my Pal every week! ... My pal has also boosted my confidence and motivation for working on my art.... I can work towards displaying my art publicly and using it to communicate on a broader scale. I am looking forward to a new direction in my life because of this.”
- “I feel it made a positive impact by allowing me to practice my social skills as I interacted with and got to know a new person.”
- “I made another friend!”

Select responses from volunteers post-program:

- “Positive impact: ... I got to learn about another person, their life, interests, and experiences. I did not feel isolated after chatting with them on the phone.”
- “Positive! A new insight and new mind to connect too!”
- “Feeling connected to the community and possibly being someone for others to talk to is a nice feeling”
- “The Pal program has made a positive impact on my feelings towards social isolation ... it was nice to interact with someone else and see things through their eyes and perspective. I learned a lot from my pal in terms of how isolation affect them and how I can relate or how I can be a better pal during times like these”

Feelings of Connection Pre- and Post-Program

Responses about feelings of having a close friend or individual whom they can talk and connect with were gathered from members and volunteers (see Table 4). Prior to the Pal-Program, results indicated

the following:

- All volunteers (n = 12) had a close friend or individual to talk and connect with.
- Five of 12 AHB members had a close friend or individual to talk and connect with.

After the Pal-Program, results indicated the following:

- All volunteers (n = 12) had a close friend or individual to talk and connect with.
- Eight of 12 AHB members felt they had a close friend or individual to talk and connect with.

Table 4. Member (n = 12) and volunteer (n = 12) responses to having a close friend or individual whom they can talk and connect with.

Response	Yes	Somewhat	No	Not Sure
Pre-Program				
Member	5	5	1	1
Volunteer	12	0	0	0
Post-Program				
Member	8	3	0	1
Volunteer	12	0	0	0

Overall, these results indicate that prior to the Pal-Program, 7 of 12 members either did not have, or were not confident that they had someone to talk and connect with. Whereas after the Pal-Program, 3 of these 7 members changed their response, and felt like they had someone to talk with and connect to.

Interview Summary

The following section is a summary of information addressing key areas of interest unique to each pre- and post-program interview (see p. 4-5). The information is derived from questions pertaining to each area of interest and is noted below

The pre-program interview for members included three areas of interest and for volunteers four areas of interest. The post-program interview for members included five areas of interest and for volunteers four areas of interest. All the questions and responses can be found in Appendix E.

Pre-Program Interview (Members)

1. General interest in the new Pal-Program Initiative*

All 12 members expressed interest in the new Pal-Program, citing the involvement of volunteers as a benefit for themselves and for AHB. Responses regarding general interest in the new pal-program initiative centered around the following themes:

- An opportunity to build a friendship.
- An opportunity to improve social skills and see how other people view individuals on the autism spectrum.

- Volunteers and members can learn new things from each other.
- A way to help individuals on the autism spectrum make connections and start friendships in a new community.

*See questions 1, 2, 4, and 5 in Appendix E (pre-program member interview).

2. The Qualities of People that Appeal to AHB Members*

The following themes emerged from the members' responses:

- Someone with shared interests.
- Someone who is not judgmental.
- Someone who is patient and respectful.
- Someone who is nice and understanding.

*See question 3 in Appendix E (pre-program member interview).

3. Willingness to Connect and Maintain this Connection with People Outside of the Autism Spectrum Community*

Ten of 12 members expressed a willingness to expand their social circle and connect with individuals outside of the autism spectrum community, the remaining two members responded as being uncertain. All 12 members had confidence that a volunteer relationship can evolve into a friendship. Their responses provided the following themes:

- A volunteer could become someone to look up to and rely on.
- Member's comfort in expanding their social circle is dependent on how understanding and patient other people are.
- Meeting new people is very different and can be apprehensive, sharing common interests can ameliorate the apprehension.

*See questions 6 and 7 in Appendix E (pre-program member interview).

Seven of 12 members expressed great interest (e.g., "Yes!"; "Most definitely!") in maintaining a relationship with a volunteer post-program. The remaining five members expressed moderate interest (e.g., "I think so, it depends on the person") in maintaining a relationship post-program. Their responses provided the following themes:

- New friendships are welcome due to current difficulties in maintaining friends.
- Maintaining connections and friendships can lead to new opportunities.
- Apprehension about maintaining a new friendship. Sharing common interests and knowing for certain that the other person wants to maintain a friendship are important in reducing this apprehension.

*See question 8 in Appendix E (pre-program member interview).

Pre-Program Interview (Volunteers)

1. Goals and Intentions of Being Part of AHB*

The following themes emerged from the volunteers' responses:

- An eagerness to help others who are less fortunate.
- Meeting new friends and learning about the Autism Spectrum community.
- An interest in guiding and supporting members of AHB who share common interests.

*See questions 1, 2, and 3 in Appendix E (pre-program volunteer interview).

2. Comfort Level while Socializing with Individuals on the Autism Spectrum*

Nine of 12 volunteers expressed a high degree of comfort and experience when interacting and socializing with individuals on the autism spectrum. Two volunteers expressed little experience, but still felt comfortable in interacting and socializing. One volunteer did not respond. Their responses centered around the following themes:

- Individuals on the autism spectrum provide a unique outlook on life and are a joy to interact with.
- Volunteers and individuals on the autism spectrum can learn a great deal from each other.
- It feels great to help and support other people.

*See question 4 in Appendix E (pre-program volunteer interview).

3. Competency in Navigating Situations Unique to Individuals on the Autism Spectrum*

The following two scenarios were presented to the volunteers to gauge their ability to think through and come up with appropriate solutions:

- i) During an activity with AHB, a member with autism mentions to you that "you must be able to hear things from a mile away with such giant ears." What would you say or do?
- ii) It is bowling night with AHB, and the member with autism that you are paired with expresses that they do not want to be there and decides not to take part in the activity. What would you do?

All 12 volunteers demonstrated an ability to resolve each scenario in a positive, encouraging manner that considered the member's feelings. Their solutions to scenario (i) provided the following themes:

- Understanding that the comment was not intended to be offensive, but was a general observation.
- Playing along with the member's comment (e.g., laughing and agreeing), while giving lighthearted advice that such comments *may* offend some individuals.

Their solutions to scenario (ii) showed the following themes:

- Talking with the member and understanding why they do not want to take part, before trying to

encourage their participation.

- Encouraging participation with reasons about why it would be fun (e.g., to try new things, to spend time with other members), while avoiding a power struggle by knowing when to disengage.

*See questions 9 and 10 in Appendix E (pre-program volunteer interview).

4. Openness and Willingness of Volunteers to Connect and Maintain this Connection with People in the Autism Spectrum Community*

All 12 volunteers expressed a willingness to expand their social circle and connect with individuals in the autism spectrum community. Additionally, all 12 volunteers had confidence that a volunteer relationship can evolve into a friendship. Their responses showed the following themes:

- By staying connected, individuals outside the autism spectrum community can learn a lot by interacting and socializing with the autism spectrum community (e.g., understanding different perspectives).
- Being a member of a different community is not a good reason to *not* develop a friendship. All that matters are shared interests, being kind to one another, and having good intentions in a friendship (e.g., mutual enjoyment).

*See question 11 in Appendix E (pre-program volunteer interview).

Additionally, nine of 12 volunteers expressed great interest (e.g., “Definitely”; “Yes”; “100%”) in maintaining a relationship with a member post-program. The remaining three volunteers expressed moderate interest (e.g., “Potentially, it depends on the member”). Responses demonstrated the following themes:

- Learning a lot from one another, that a lasting friendship would be great.
- The Pal-Program provides a great framework to meet a new friend with shared interests. It is only natural to want to continue a friendship from that framework.
- A long-lasting friendship can be expected as long as the member shows interest in maintaining the friendship post-program.

*See question 12 in Appendix E (pre-program volunteer interview).

Post-Program Interview (Members)

1. General Opinion and Experiences Regarding the new Pal-Program Initiative*

All 12 members expressed positive opinions and experiences with the Pal-Program (e.g., “It was great”; “It kind of changed my life”). Their responses showed the following themes:

- It became something very enjoyable, and to look forward to every week.
- It provided the members with someone to talk with when the COVID-19 pandemic separated them from the AHB community.

- Members really connected with their volunteer partners due to common interests.

*See questions 1 in Appendix E (post-program member interview).

All 12 members expressed positive opinions about the involvement of volunteers and showed interest in taking part in future initiatives involving those outside of the autism spectrum community. Ten members felt that involving volunteers provided many benefits (e.g., new friendships), with two members not specifying any benefits or drawbacks. Member responses about benefits of volunteers include:

- Meeting someone new was a great experience, there is much to learn from someone outside of your regular social circle.
- Interacting with volunteers allows members to open-up and practice social skills.
- Volunteers provided very positive outlooks (e.g., optimistic perspective about the COVID-19 pandemic; encouraging about shared interests), which improved the mood of members.

*See questions 2, 7 and 10 in Appendix E (post-program member interview).

2. Qualities of the Volunteers that made an Impact on Member Enjoyment and Experiences*

Eleven members expressed specific qualities about their volunteer partner that made their experiences more enjoyable. One member noted that their experience with the volunteer had room for improvement (e.g., would like more in depth conversations). The following qualities regarding the volunteers were brought up most frequently by members:

- Understanding, patient, kind, welcoming.
- Good listener.

Members also highlighted *shared interests* as an important factor in their enjoyment and positive experiences.

*See question 3 in Appendix E (post-program member interview).

3. Interest in Staying in Touch and Continuing a Friendship with the Paired Volunteer*

All 12 members expressed great interest in continuing their friendship with the paired volunteer post-program. Four members noted that they had already continued to be in contact after the Pal-Program had concluded. The following rationales for wanting to stay in contact were brought up most frequently:

- Wanted to continue learning from their volunteer partner (e.g., advice on their shared interests, such as art).
- Volunteer partners were kind, talkative, and a joy to converse with.
- Looked forward to their weekly virtual meet-up and not wanting it to end.

*See questions 5 and 6 in Appendix E (post-program member interview).

4. Opinions Regarding AHB's Initiatives*

All 12 members believed that AHB was successfully taking initiatives to improve member well-being and reduce social isolation felt by the autism spectrum community. Members noted the following reasons for their opinions:

- AHB connects people from the autism spectrum community together and fosters a comfortable environment for friendships to flourish.
- AHB continues to try new things to improve member's well-being (e.g., the Pal-Program).
- AHB provides a forum for new experiences and to learn new things (e.g., art, music).

*See question 8 Appendix E (post-program member interview).

5. Impact of the Pal-Program*

All 12 members felt that the Pal-Program had a positive impact on their feelings of isolation. The following reasons were most frequently provided as to why:

- Pal-Program provided someone to talk to during times when they felt more isolated than usual (e.g., COVID-19 self-isolation).
- Members felt respected and enjoyed having a friend who shared common interests.
- Consistent contact with a new friend felt great, members looked forward to it each week.
- Individuals on the autism spectrum do not have equal opportunities to be social but the Pal-Program provided these opportunities.

*See question 9 in Appendix E (post-program member interview).

Post-Program Interview (Volunteers)

1. General Opinions and Experiences Regarding the new Pal-Program Initiative*

All 12 volunteers expressed positive opinions and experiences with the Pal-Program (e.g., something to look forward to; fun to engage with others). Their responses regarding the Pal-Program showed the following themes:

- Connecting with the autism spectrum community was a very fulfilling experience.
- Great opportunity to become more educated about the autism spectrum community.
- Positive social interactions that included long conversations, laughs, and shared interests.
- Learning how to become a better friend and mentor.

*See questions 1 and 2 in Appendix E (post-program volunteer interview).

2. Interest in Staying in Touch with the Paired Member Outside of the Pal-Program*

Eleven of 12 volunteers expressed great interest in staying connected with their AHB partner (e.g.,

“Absolutely”; “Yes”). One volunteer expressed moderate interest (e.g., potentially, depends on the AHB member). The following rationales for wanting to stay in contact were brought up most frequently:

- There was always something to talk about and the volunteer had a lot in common with their AHB partner (easy to want to stay in touch).
- Having the opportunity to have a different outlook on life and going beyond a neurotypical perspective.
- Would not feel like an obligation because it was like a real friendship, and someone that they would want to interact with regularly.

*See question 4 in Appendix E (post-program volunteer interview).

3. Interest in Volunteering with AHB in the Future*

All 12 volunteers expressed interest in volunteering as a pal in the future. Ten volunteers expressed interest in being involved with AHB in a different role, whereas two volunteers were uncertain. The following rationales were most frequently brought up:

- Working with AHB was rewarding.
- Volunteering with AHB was extremely flexible and easy to fit it into a schedule.
- Pal-Program makes the lives of both the AHB member and volunteer better.

*See questions 6 and 7 in Appendix E (post-program volunteer interview).

4. Impact of the Pal-Program*

Ten volunteers expressed that the Pal-Program had a positive experience on feelings of social isolation whereas the remaining two were uncertain. The following reasons were most frequently provided as to why the Pal-Program had a positive impact on feelings of isolation:

- Comforting to have someone to talk with each week.
- Felt connected to someone else and provided a forum for socializing that they otherwise would not have.
- Fulfilling and provided a sense of kinship.

*See question 5 in Appendix E (post-program volunteer interview).

AHB and their Impact on the Autism Spectrum Community

Impact of AHB on Members' Quality of Life

Our findings from the impact survey indicate that membership with AHB provided all members with a *large degree of positive impact* on their quality of life (e.g., happiness and joy from taking part in

activities, making new friends). This finding is consistent with our previous work with AHB, which also indicated that membership greatly improved quality of life (see AHB Community Impact Report, 2017).

- When viewed in tandem with our findings from 2017, it becomes clear that *AHB not only improves member quality of life but has been consistently doing so since they began.*

The pre- and post-program interviews provide details regarding how AHB has contributed to improved quality of life over the past year:

- AHB are targeting member interests and needs with new initiatives (e.g., Pal-Program).
- When members expressed interest in expanding their social circles to feel more connected, AHB initiated the Pal-Program.
- When creating the Pal-Program, AHB carefully screened and recruited volunteers to match qualities that members desired (e.g., not judgmental, shared interests), and as a result, the volunteers were positive role models for the community.

Impact of the Pal-Program on Well-Being and Feelings of Social Isolation

The post-program interview made clear that the Pal-Program was an *extremely positive experience* (e.g., enjoyment and improved mood) that AHB members looked forward to each week. Moreover, members noted that this positive experience was something they otherwise would not have available to them without AHB initiatives. This was particularly important due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting prolonged isolation from the AHB community. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, additional interest was to identify:

- 1) Feelings of social isolation and its negative impact on members and volunteers, and
- 2) The effects of the Pal-Program in ameliorating this negative impact.

Regarding the first point, prior to taking part in the Pal-Program we identified that:

- Members and volunteers were experiencing near identical levels of *moderate negative impact* ($M = 3.67$ and $M = 3.33$ respectively) from prolonged social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In terms of social isolation, regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic, results from the pre- and post-program interviews indicate that:

- Some members reported feeling socially isolated prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., “Not much has changed for me socially since COVID-19”),
- Other members reported feeling more socially isolated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., “I feel lonely, I can’t get out and see my friends [at AHB]”).

The fact that some members feel more socially isolated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic than others is revealing of the effects membership with AHB has on social isolation. Many members who felt *more* socially isolated attributed some of these feelings to an absence of in-person AHB events. In fact, all 12 members reported that the initiatives of AHB, beyond that of the Pal-Program, were successful in improving their well-being and reducing feelings of social isolation in general.

In summary, our findings regarding feelings of social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic indicated:

- Members of AHB and volunteers were experiencing *moderate negative impact* from prolonged social isolation due to COVID-19.
- For some members, feelings of social isolation are commonplace. For others, membership with AHB helped reduce feelings of social isolation, and the absence of in-person AHB events led to more intense feelings of social isolation.

Regarding the effects of the Pal-Program in reducing the negative impact of social isolation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, *our findings indicate that it was a success.*

- Members and volunteers experienced near identical levels of *moderate positive impact* ($M = 3.50$ and $M = 3.67$ respectively) from the Pal-Program on negative feelings associated with social isolation.

It is important to note that the positive impact of the Pal-Program can be generalized to contexts of social isolation from factors other than a pandemic. Although the program did help members cope with stress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., connecting with volunteers who were reassuring and optimistic), the program primarily benefited the original needs of the members (e.g., providing a greater sense of community and reducing loneliness). Undoubtedly, the Pal-Program would be successful in improving well-being and reducing a feeling of social isolation outside of a pandemic.

How Social Provisions are Affected by Membership with AHB and the Pal-Program

Overall, our findings indicate that the members who participated in the Pal-Program displayed *moderately low levels* of perceived support across all 6 social provisions. No notable changes occurred between pre- and post-program for the provisions of Guidance, Reassurance of Worth, Social Integration, Attachment, and Reliable Alliance. However:

- Nurturance was notably higher pre-program ($M = 10.10$) than post-program ($M = 8.20$).

Nurturance refers to a sense that others rely upon the individual for their well-being (Cutrona & Russell, 1987), suggesting that members were less inclined to feel this way after completing the Pal-Program. Conceptually, it makes sense that taking part in a program that pairs members of the autism spectrum community with a friend would reduce this sense of nurturance by allowing members to experience a feeling of reliance on their new friend. In fact, reduced levels of nurturance were also found in our 2017 report of member social provisions, where a “shared sense of community within AHB allowed members to feel comfortable relying on other members” (see AHB Community Impact Report, 2017). In conjunction with our qualitative data we can state with confidence that this reduced sense of nurturance was interpreted by members as a positive experience. For instance, in addition to all 12 members reporting the Pal-Program as an extremely positive and beneficial experience, their specific responses also emphasized a reliance on their pal as a benefit for their well-being (e.g., “...It was really good support to have”; “... It kind of changed my life a little bit... making new friends, learning something new from them”; see Post-Program Member Interview in Appendix E).

It is important to note that the social provisions scale may not capture many of the subtle nuances of

social support that the members of AHB are currently experiencing.

- Although the social provisions scale indicates *moderately low* levels of social provisions across members, this did not seem to be the case based on member responses from the interviews (e.g., improvements in social provisions).

For instance, a common theme across member responses was a deep appreciation of learning from their volunteer partner (e.g., guidance on shared interests/hobbies) and a desire to continue learning from them post-program (see page 13). This theme reflects the social provision of guidance (i.e., the degree to which one is able to gather advice or information from others) from the social provisions scale. Based on this information, any conclusions derived from social provision levels needs to be qualified by the qualitative data (e.g., interviews) to fully capture how members are experiencing social support.

The Potential for Lasting Friendships Post-Program

A primary goal for the Pal-Program was to examine if the friendships fostered within the program would continue naturally once it concluded. Before starting the Pal-Program, less than half of the members ($n = 5$) believed they had a close friend to talk and connect with. This is in contrast to volunteers, all of whom felt they had a close connection and friend. Once the program concluded, *more than half of the members ($n = 8$) felt they had a close friend to connect with*. Furthermore, all members and volunteers expressed an interest and willingness to continue the friendship outside of the Pal-Program. In fact, four pairs had already continued their friendship at the time of the post-program interview (roughly one week after the program had ended).

- Based on these findings, *the Pal-Program was successful* in connecting AHB members with a new friend/mentor from outside the autism spectrum community.

Our findings further indicate that the success of the Pal-Program can be attributed to:

- 1) A desire from the AHB community to expand their social network and be more connected,
- 2) Volunteers with qualities that were valued by the members (e.g., understanding, patient), and
- 3) The efforts of AHB in trying new initiatives to meet the desires of their community.

The Current Study and COVID-19

It is important to acknowledge that our findings are based on data collected before and/or during the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 17th, 2020, the Ontario government declared a state of emergency in an effort to stop the spread of COVID-19. This meant shutdowns of public gatherings, and all communal or shared, public or private, outdoor recreational amenities by March 30th. Prior to and during this state of emergency, members and volunteers were becoming involved in the Pal-Program with data being collected. The extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting quarantine affected members and volunteers could not be fully accounted for (e.g., stress from a loss of work and income). This may have affected our findings in ways we cannot or have not addressed. For instance, the social provisions scale is a general measure of social support and connectedness (e.g., addresses social connectedness from all aspects of life) and is likely to have been affected by both the Pal-Program and factors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., stress from losing work; worrying about becoming ill).

Fortunately, we made use of measures that allowed us to direct responses more relevant to the Pal-Program or AHB, rather than life as a whole. For instance, the interviews allowed for specific questions regarding AHB and the Pal-Program and for prompting from the interviewer, and the surveys allowed us to ask for ratings of impact for specific things (e.g., AHB, the Pal-Program). The specificity of these measures allowed us to try and limit confounding factors that likely impacted the lives of the AHB members and volunteers (e.g., COVID-19).

- Thus, despite the other potential factors of influence in the current study, we can still state with confidence that the Pal-Program *was a success*, and that AHB is improving the well-being of its members.

Finally, due of the shift to virtual and online meetups, the dependent members who relied on a parent/caregiver were unable to take part in the program to the same extent as the independent members. For instance, the nonverbal dependent members could not communicate with their pal and required their parent/caregiver to communicate on their behalf. Understandably, this affected the dependent members' ability to truly benefit from the program (as indicated by parent/caregiver responses; see Appendix E). Despite this, impact ratings and qualitative data were still generally positive for the dependent members. If the implementation of the Pal-Program had not been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and in-person meetups had progressed as planned, we likely would have found greater success than currently demonstrated.

Limitations

- The nature of interviews makes them subject to response bias (e.g., giving favourable reviews of the Pal-Program to appease the interviewer). Our pre- and post-program interviews could have been subject to this, where participants may hesitate to provide negative feedback on the Pal-Program.
- As previously discussed, the COVID-19 pandemic may have affected our findings in ways we were not aware.

Conclusions

- AHB has demonstrated their efforts in successfully improving the quality of life of their members and has been consistent in doing so since they began.
- The Pal-Program was effective in improving well-being and reducing feelings of social isolation for AHB members.
- Despite moderately low levels of social provisions across members, our qualitative findings suggest that members greatly benefited from the Pal-Program on specific social provisions (e.g., guidance).
- The Pal-Program was successful in: 1) connecting AHB members with a friend/mentor from outside the autism spectrum community, and 2) providing a foundation for these relationships to prosper naturally post-program.

Future Directions for AHB and their Community

Based on our findings, we can make the following suggestions for AHB to further improve the well-being of their members and to streamline future initiatives:

- 1) Members and volunteers reported an interest in staying in touch post-program, but to our knowledge only four member-volunteer pairs were in contact one week after the program ended. Follow-ups with members would be useful in facilitating long-term friendships.
- 2) AHB has had great success in targeting member needs with new programs and initiatives (e.g., Pal-Program). We recommend continued “check-ups” with members to stay up to date with their members’ needs.
- 3) The Pal-Program was a success in improving well-being and reducing negative feelings associated with isolation for members and volunteers. Continuing the Pal-Program would serve to maintain these benefits for the AHB community.

References

Cutrona, C. E., Russell, D. W. (1987). The provisions of social relationships and adaptation to stress. *Advances in Personal Relationships, 1*, 37-67.

Appendix A

Pre-Program Interview (Members)

1. *In your opinion, would the involvement of volunteers provide benefits or drawbacks to AHB?*
 - **Query:** *What kind of benefits/drawbacks? Why/Why not?*
2. *What do you think about connecting with people outside of Autism Home Base?*
 - **Query:** *Would that interest you?*
3. *What kind of qualities would do you prefer in people you surround yourself with or feel close to?*
4. *How would you feel about a peer volunteers at AHB? (e.g., casual conversations; taking part in activities; helping with tasks).*
5. *Would your experiences with the programs and members of AHB change if volunteers became involved (e.g., providing company, helping with activities)?*
 - **Query:** *Why/Why not?*
6. **Parents/Caregivers only:** *To your knowledge, would your son/daughter ever consider expanding their social circle to include a volunteer? (i.e., can you imagine someone other than a close family member, paid support worker, or member of AHB being a part of your son/daughter's life?)*
 - **Query:** *Why/Why not?*
7. *Would you consider expanding your social circle to include a volunteer? (i.e., can you imagine someone other than a close family member, paid support worker, or member of AHB being a part of your son/daughter's life?)*
 - *Follow up, if needed: Do you think a volunteer relationship can evolve into a friendship?*
 - **Query:** *Why/Why not?*
8. *Given the opportunity, when the program ends, do you think you would maintain a relationship with any of the volunteers you met?*
 - a. **Query:** *Why/Why not?*
9. *Is there anything else you would like to share?*

Appendix B

Pre-Program Interview (Volunteers)

1. *Why are you interested in volunteering with Autism Home Base?*
2. *What are your intentions/goals as a volunteer with Autism Home Base?*
3. *What do you most want to learn from your experiences as a volunteer?*
4. *How do you feel about spending time with an individual with Autism? (e.g., casual conversations; taking part in activities with them)*
5. *How many times per week do you get out of the house?*
 - a. *Specify a concrete number.*
6. *Can you describe a time when you've been involved in a conflict with another individual or group?*
 - b. **Query:** *How did you handle the situation?*
7. *Can you describe a situation in which you did not get your way or when you did not agree with a decision made?*
 - c. **Query:** *How did you handle it?*
8. *Can you describe a particularly stressful situation in which you have been involved?*
 - d. **Query:** *How did you handle the situation?*
9. *Now I'm going to give you a scenario, and I want you to tell me how you would approach it.*
 - e. *During an activity with AHB, a member with Autism mentions to you that "you must be able to hear things from a mile again with such giant ears." What would you say or do?*
10. *Now I'm going to give you second scenario, and again I want you to tell me how you would approach it.*
 - f. *It is bowling night with AHB, and the member with Autism that you are paired with expresses that they do want to be there and decides not to take part in the activity. What would you do?*
11. *Would you consider expanding your social circle to include a person with Autism?*
 - *Follow up, if needed: Do you think a volunteer relationship can evolve into a friendship?*
 - g. **Query:** *Why/Why not?*
12. *Given the opportunity, when the program ends, do you think you would maintain a relationship with any of the members you met?*
 - h. **Query:** *Why/Why not?*
13. *Do you have anything else you would like to share?*

Appendix C

Post-Program Interview (Members)

- 1) *Tell me about your (and/or son/daughter's) experiences taking part in this program. (e.g., did you enjoy it? What did you think about the activities you took part in? How did you feel about the people you met?)*
- 2) *Overall, how did you feel about the involvement of volunteers (or non-members)?*
 - **Query:** *positive or negative experiences? Benefits or Drawbacks? Why?*
- 3) *Thinking of the time you (or son/daughter) spent with the volunteer (or non-member), are there any qualities they had that made your experiences more or less enjoyable?*
- 4) *Thinking of Autism Home Base, would you say the involvement of volunteers (or non-members) provided benefits or drawbacks to the AHB community? (e.g., did it make AHB feel more or less inviting?)*
 - **Query:** *What kinds of benefits/drawbacks? Why/Why not?*
- 5) **Parents/Caregivers only:** *To your knowledge, would your son/daughter consider staying in touch with the person they were paired with?*
 - **Query:** *Why/Why not?*
- 6) **Independent Members only:** *Would you consider staying in touch with the person you were paired with?*
 - **Query:** *Why/Why not?*
- 7) *Thinking about the future, would other initiatives involving people outside of the AHB community (like this Pal-Program) be something you (and/or son/daughter) would be interested in?*
 - **Query:** *Why/Why not?*
- 8) *In your opinion, do you believe that AHB is taking initiatives to improve the well-being and reduce any social isolation felt by the Autism Spectrum Community?*
 - **Query:** *Why/Why not?*
- 9) *Given that we are experiencing more social isolation during this pandemic than normal, do you feel that the Pal-Program had an impact on these feelings of isolation (whether positive or negative)?*
 - **Query:** *Positive or Negative impact?*
 - **Query:** *Why or Why not?*
- 10) *Would you (or your son/daughter) be interested in taking part in the Pal-Program again?*
 - **Query:** *Why or Why not?*
- 11) *Would you recommend the program to someone else?*
 - **Query:** *Why or Why not?*
- 12) *Do you have anything else you would like to share?*
- 13) *Before we finish up, would you be willing to spare 10 more minutes to complete an online survey similar to the previous one?*

Appendix D

Post-Program Interview (Volunteers)

- 1) *Tell me about your experiences taking part in this program (e.g., did you enjoy it? What did you think about the activities you took part in?)*
- 2) *Was there anything notable you learned through your experiences working with members from the home base community?*
- 3) *How did you feel spending time with members of AHB and of the Autism Spectrum Community? (e.g., casual conversations; taking part in activities with them)?*
- 4) *Would you consider staying in touch with any of the members you met?*
 - **Query:** *Why or Why not?*
- 5) *Given that we are experiencing more social isolation during this pandemic than normal, do you feel that the Pal-Program had an impact on these feelings of isolation (whether positive or negative)?*
 - **Query:** *Positive or Negative impact?*
 - **Query:** *Why or Why not?*
- 6) *Would you continue to volunteer as a Pal in the future?*
 - **Query:** *Why or Why not?*
- 7) *Would you continue to volunteer for AHB in a different role?*
 - **Query:** *Why or Why not?*
- 8) *Would you recommend other people you know to volunteer with AHB?*
 - **Query:** *Why or Why not?*
- 9) *Do you have anything else you would like to share?*
- 10) *Before we finish up, would you be willing to spare 10 more minutes to complete an online survey similar to the previous one?*

Appendix E

Pre-Program Interview Responses (Member)

Question 1:

In your opinion, would the involvement of volunteers provide benefits or drawbacks to AHB?

- **Query:** *What kind of benefits/drawbacks? Why/Why not?*

Participant	Benefits/Drawback? (B/D)	Query: Why/Why not?
Independent Member #1	Benefits	My mom told me that the person that would be working with me would do things with me, and it could be an opportunity to build a friendship.
Independent Member #2	Benefits	It would help people on the autism spectrum learn to improve social skills and to see how the other people view us
Independent Member #3	Benefits	When I was involved with a group...I was very comfortable and it was welcoming and such. Like, I had a myself a good time or so. It makes me get out a little more often and such.
Independent Member #4	Benefits	Maybe helping set up group events, maybe? Maybe helping possibly providing transport to get people to the events, contributing food and snacks for events or other supplies. And maybe just having an extra person to take part in and make the activities fun.
Independent Member #5	Benefits	Depending on the events you go to and the number of members coming...you can't just be like one person doing it all. You'd have to have everybody involved. ...there's people that you don't know, some may have disabilities, some people you know there's other things around...we wanna make sure we get to know them
Independent Member #6	Benefits	It gives a good opportunity to (sic) people. It gives people a sense that they belong.
Independent Member #7	Benefits	Um, I think it is good. And it's something I've been wanting to do for a while. Like, mentor someone who's younger.
Independent Member #8	Benefits	It opens your eyes to...yourself. And how other people with Autism act...or behave Its positive for both of us...'cause they learn from us, and we learn from them.
Independent Member #9	Benefits	Because...we could learn from the volunteers who we're paired with and stuff ...it would uh give us a chance to, sort of in a facilitated way, meet someone new in ... a community that it's hard for a lot of people on the Spectrum to actually um make connections or start friendships at all.
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	Benefits	...It's a good way for our members to connect with the outside community. Learn some new things. I feel like a lot of the members are isolated because of their autism and so if they connect with people on the outside of the community, they'll feel more connect to the community.
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	Benefits	Well, there are so many different aspects to AHB that I don't know if uh, you know, say a paid employee could cover all those bases. They provide things like social skills training, or just a friend. Something they otherwise would not have.
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	Benefits	...the volunteers I guess are always appreciated. Uh, you know, nothing goes on without volunteers at the end 'cause it's not a paid organization, so. Without the volunteers it wouldn't exist.

Question 2

What do you think about connecting with people outside of Autism Home Base?

- **Query:** Would that interest you?

Participant	Answer	Query: Would that interest you?
Independent Member #1	I think it's cool	Yeah
Independent Member #2	I would like to	I just wanted to improve my social skills without people judging
Independent Member #3	I'll have to think about it more when I experience it firsthand	Yeah, it depends on how accepting they are of people on the spectrum
Independent Member #4	I try to be thoughtful of others, try to treat people the way I want to be treated, and sometimes I strike up a strike up good rapport with people I meet and interact with or work with...	... If I do find I get along with them and that I understand them, uh I think I would enjoy it. Yeah.
Independent Member #5	I feel comfortable	If they're doing things I'm interested in then I feel like I could connect with them.
Independent Member #6	I don't know, hah.	Uh, little bit, I usually just connect with people anyway, so. Haha, yeah.
Independent Member #7	It's good	Um. Like a regular thing. I don't know cause I like- Like, I connect with people outside of Home Base. I enjoy it.
Independent Member #8	M: It's much easier after Home Base...It's like a normal conversation.	DMW: It seems normal just to connect with people outside of Home Base? M: Yeah. As long as I am, uh, well, know them. DMW:...and if it's someone new, how is it for you? M: ...It's kind of like a little bit nervous but not really. 'Cause I'm actually okay with talking to different people.
Independent Member #9	I think it's cool. I'm just not very good at it on my own.	M: Um, yeah! That would be cool.
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	I think it's a great idea.	...It's good for our members to feel like they belong and that's good for the people out in the community to learn more about autism and be part of it. ...I feel like he's, uh, even though he's nonverbal, he's quite social and he likes people so it'd be good for him to just meet other people and not just, you know, immediate family. Since he's nonverbal, he doesn't have like friends and a wide social circle, so it'd be really good for him to connect with people other than family.
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	Uh, what do I think of connecting outside?	Oh, I already do.
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	He [son] likes talking to people... but he also will sometimes if there's too many people around he doesn't enjoy it, you know. Typical with a lot of kids with autism. When we've done the	Uh, I'd say my son has moderate interest in this ... Uh, [redacted name], like I said, he can be very outgoing, but it depends on the people around him.

Participant	Answer	Query: Would that interest you?
	bowling and the other events before, uh, he would talk more to the adults more than the kids that were there	

Question 3:

What kind of qualities would do you prefer in people you surround yourself with or feel close to?

Participant	Answer
Independent Member #1	I want people to understand me. And I'd like people to listen if I have something to say. Not judging me. Not um, cutting me off. And not um, getting turned off if I make a mistake because everybody has their moments.
Independent Member #2	I would like someone that doesn't base their stereotype on what they've see on like tvWhen they see, you know, low and think everyone's like that...Doesn't think, you know, people are low or "Like not judgemental." people who are super high like you know, uhm the Big Bang Theory or the Good Doctor. We're not all like genius level.
Independent Member #3	They should be...comfortable with me ...'Cause it takes me a while to warm up to people considering like, I'm not like really kind to them at the first cause I don't know what to feel about them.
Independent Member #4	Talkative people who aren't afraid to talk about how they're feeling and talk about their thoughts on things and exchanging thoughts about things...also that are respectful and...considerate people
Independent Member #5	...respectful, polite, not like the rude to you and 'cause I don't like that....Not a rude person
Independent Member #6	Um, as long as they're nice to me and happy, you know, everything's good.
Independent Member #7	Yeah. That is good. And also, people who have the same interests as me is important...and people I can be myself around and I won't feel judged.
Independent Member #8	I usually connect to extroverts more than introverts. I'm more of a mix between introvert and extrovert. But um, I find myself more on the extrovert.
Independent Member #9	That they're nice...people who like aren't going to try to take advantage of you or trick you or whatever. So they're trustworthy. ...it's hard to say because it's sort of nice to have common interests, but you don't learn anything new if you have everything in common all the time. And so, um I guess maybe like some shared interests or they're willing to learn about new things too, so it can sort of go both ways with adapting
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	Good sense of humor. Very playful, lots of energy.
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	Uh, having an open mind. Because-because it is a huge spectrum. And it- you know, like, you've got some kids that are very independent and others that you know, uh, are – they need their caregivers. You know, and just to have that open mind of-of-of, like the span of the spectrum.
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	...anybody that has an interest in video games that usually is a big starter for him. Also, politics, he seems to like talking about politics a lot, he tends to watch the news and uh, he will research stuff online as far as Youtube videos and things like that. Um, both historical and current day events, so, he is – he can be quite knowledgeable about subjects at times, so he will talk to people about things like that...

Question 4:

How would you feel about peer volunteers at AHB? (e.g., casual conversations; taking part in activities; helping with tasks).

Participant	Answer
Independent Member #1	Good.
Independent Member #2	I think it would help people not being so stereotype (sic)...and hopefully help people want to get more involved with helping people on the spectrum. More programs, you know
Independent Member #3	I feel pretty comfortable... I got to know like topics on hand or something cause, sometimes, I may not know a lot of things cause I'm not- I'm like- sociability is a bit like, you know... I'm a very quiet kind of person.
Independent Member #4	I think I would be fine...It seems like a good thing to have as part of Autism Home Base.
Independent Member #5	I think I feel a little comfortable.
Independent Member #6	Um, I like them, they're very nice people. They- they- they help as much as they can.
Independent Member #7	...I think it would be good... my past experience is that they just worry...and tend to infantilize me...like, treat me as not um, having agency and stuff. So, as long as they aren't doing that, then that's cool. If they're coming at it as a human interacting with a human.
Independent Member #8	I feel like um, that they do a good job at doing that. And help us to keep on schedule and a good routine.
Independent Member #9	Um, fine. When there's a somewhat consistent group of people, then I think it's good. And it's nice to have new people that aren't on the Spectrum or aren't like, haven't been there yet... I don't really like when I don't know anyone or when there's the people that would come if it was like constantly rotating or switching in it. So, you start to just meet one person- someone one week, and then you have to meet a different person the next week and a different person the next week. And it doesn't have continuity.
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	...I feel like it would be good if they would help the tasks, it might be nice for them to be able to work with my son for maybe some life skills or something like that.
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	Um, yeah. You know and I think volunteers are, you know, there's – there's a, you know, a – a certain level of confidentiality as well. As long as they're aware of that, they respect that, then no, there is not an issue.
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	...they're not gonna be his [the son] best friends, you know, these are people that are, you know, volunteering to help him out as much as they can and, you know, it's a contact and a resource – someone he can talk to and stuff like that...

Question 5:

Would your experiences with the programs and members of AHB change if volunteers became involved (e.g., providing company, helping with activities)?

- **Query: Why/Why not?**

Participant	Answer	Query: Why/Why not?
Independent Member #1	Well, I think it would help us with our confidence.	It would change in a positive way!
Independent Member #2	...I think it would improve.	'Cause it could also help...maybe job connections and help know people learn...how to improve their social so they don't try to offend people''

Participant	Answer	Query: Why/Why not?
Independent Member #3	That all depends...I'll have to experience it beforehand or so. But I'm sure like, in all, I wouldn't mind either or.	My experiences would be a lot better...it'd help me be more sociable...
Independent Member #4	No. I don't think it would change too much.	It would probably be a good thing to have a couple of extra hands to help out with events sometimes
Independent Member #5	I think so.	So long as the volunteers don't just like, ignore you, and instead you know they want to help you when you have questions.
Independent Member #6	Probably, yeah. 'Cause then that gives more, um support to everybody.	Uh, because you're not just having like, you know, one person for every five people. You'd have, like, three people for five, or something like that.
Independent Member #7	...it depends on who the volunteers are. If they're coming to like, have fun and have a good time.	...it could be good. It depends. But also, I do enjoy having like, autistic-only spaces.. I feel like having volunteers come to ones where parents also come to would be less of an intrusion than them coming to ones that are like an autistic-only.
Independent Member #8	No, I don't think it would change.	Because...the volunteers, some of them already are involved in some aspects. So, we're kind of used to it, if they're there or not there.
Independent Member #9	I haven't been fitting very much with Autism Home Base at the pandemic stuff.	I- I'm in Peterborough, so I'm not around or able to go to the Hub regularly or anything, but I was involved in the art projects. So, I was just sort of starting to go every other week. And it was really cool and the one thing that I was really excited about doing and a good-Like, it pushed me to actually get out of the house and talk to people other than my parents. ...but then, it shut down when there was the COVID-19 and went to online, and I wasn't really comfortable with that at first. I'm not even really sure why, but it was just very different. So then, I only went to or like signed in for one of the online sessions... And it was really, really good and fun, and I realized sort of ...how I had missed interacting with anyone other than my parents and that it's really good to actually have friends again. ...I realized when I actually do one of the events that it was really fun and important... having something to do or someone to interact with is, I think, really valuable. And so, if there were sort of more outlets and times or people that we could talk to, I think it would probably be really encouraging and beneficial...
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	...It would be really good for our members to feel like they're part of a community outside of just Autism Home Base.	...so the volunteers would make them feel good about themselves and I'm sure its vice versa as well. The volunteers would feel good about themselves.
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	No, I find quite a variety of volunteers already involved in the program and at home base. So I don't think that's an issue.	Well, you know, like I'm – I'm thinking that can just, uh, our experiences can improve as we go along. You know we're -we're just sort of in the pl- the early stages of the program. So, to me, it can only grow from here.
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	No, I think the more help ..the more things are gonna go on, right?	... we'll try, when they start up again to see if he likes it. I've talked to him about it, he said he wouldn't mind trying it 'cause like I said,

Participant	Answer	Query: Why/Why not?
		he's been expressing more – um, a little bit, that he is lonely and talking to mom and dad all the time – it's not fun.

Question 6.a:

Would you consider expanding your social circle to include a volunteer? (i.e., can you imagine someone other than a close family member, paid support worker, or member of AHB being a part of your life?)

- Follow up, if needed: Do you think a volunteer relationship can evolve into a friendship?
- **Query: Why/Why not?**

Participant	Answer	Follow up:	Query: Why/Why not?
Independent Member #1	Yeah! Of course.	Yes.	Well, it depends on how much time I, um, it allow me to get to know them. Common interests and how we socialize would help us get a long.
Independent Member #2	Yeah.	Yeah...Anything as long as you work on it both sides, you know try to communicate.	[Well] it's just what anyone... as long as they don't stereotype or you know, try to understand like I'm not trying to be offensive...I interrupt a lot and I'm not trying to do it on purpose. I know that I have problems, I'm trying to bet- (sic) get them better, so I just don't want somebody get, you know, upset and angry I want them to be understanding.
Independent Member #3	We'd be welcoming	Yes, definitely.	I mean, uh when I get attached to one person... it definitely makes me want to like hang out with them a lot more...
Independent Member #4	Yeah.	Oh, yeah. I think I can see that happening. For sure.	... I think it's because Autism Home Base...that's like the...the organization to provide social opportunities for people on the Spectrum...It can also be an opportunity to meet other people. Even if the volunteers themselves aren't on the Spectrum, if they're eager to help and respectful of who they're volunteering for, then I um I think it could be could be a way could be another opportunity to expand your social network. Uh, yeah.
Independent Member #5	I think I would.	I think they would be for sure.	...'cause you know if you wanna maybe the volunteer would like to ask you or say hey, how would you like to help me with this event and you say okay, that works too.
Independent Member #6	Oh yeah, for sure.	Oh yeah, yeah. It always does.	You can actually see these people outside, like bump into them, say hello and stuff. Yeah just, that's- hang out with them outside of autism, right?
Independent Member #7	I mean, if they were cool.	Uh, yeah, I think so.	Well, I mean, it depends on like if the people hit it off, and if we get a long well.
Independent Member #8	Not really. I'm used to already having my friends around me. And uh, I don't know. It just wouldn't mesh	Yes.	Yes...well, because um, they help you. So, you can treat them as someone you can look up to and maybe help you if you need the help...or somebody you could rely on.

Participant	Answer	Follow up:	Query: Why/Why not?
Independent Member #9	Um, yeah!	Yeah!	Yeah! Um, there's a thing online...like a Facebook group called [Redacted Name], and they pair people with disabilities with athletes and then the person... And, in the group, it's mostly kids that are partnered with people...And a friend convinced me to do that um, I think, three or four years ago now. And I got matched with a lady in Chicago who's a physician assistant and a triathlete. And we talked all the time and became- We're really close friends now. She came to visit me in Peterborough, and I've gone down to Chicago to see her. And then, I went down again last year for her wedding. And so, um I definitely think that uh [sort of] volunteer set-up relationships can turn into friendships. Cause I already...seen it with [Redacted Name].
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	Yes.	Most definitely.	Because I will have to be there as well because he is more of higher needs. So I feel like I would be with the volunteer quite a bit as well and you know, once she or he gets to know myself and my son, I'm sure it can expand into a friendship.
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	For sure.	It's possible.	Uh, like, you know, quite – like wanting to meet people along your-your path of life, you're-you're bound to – to meet some people that, you know, uh, it goes into a friendship, you know path as well, so. And I think it's possible, yeah.
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	Uh, I guess I'm not sure.	Definitely.	If it helps him (their son), it helps us So, I could see him making friends even if it's just someone he can talk online with and play video games against, you know if it was somebody he met in person it makes it a little bit more tangible for him, right? As opposed to this - you know, somebody down in the States that he - he's on – plays games against

Question 6.b:

Parents/Caregivers only: To your knowledge, would your son/daughter ever consider expanding their social circle to include a volunteer? (i.e., can you imagine someone other than a close family member, paid support worker, or member of AHB being a part of your son/daughter's life?)

- **Query: Why/Why not?**

Participant	Answer	Query: Why/Why not?
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	I think he would, yeah.	...because he is social and he likes people. Like I said, he's nonverbal, but he's able to communicate through an iPad not really well, but he just loves people, he really does.
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	Yeah.	n/a
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	Yeah	... I could see that 'cause he, he uh, several of his EAs, uh, like from when he was very young and all the way through high school, he got quite close with uh, some of them and they were quite friendly and like, they were good cause they were people he could talk to that weren't us. And they were – uh, they were very – most, almost every single one of them uh, was, involved with [Redacted Name]. He liked almost all of them and uh, they were good uh,

Participant	Answer	Query: Why/Why not?
		good support for him and they would come in and talk to him and talk to us, so sometimes they would tell us things that he had said, you know and we can talk to him about it. This, so I guess he felt sometimes he could talk to them more than us.

Question 7:

Given the opportunity, when the program ends, do you think you would maintain a relationship with any of the volunteers you met?

i. **Query: Why/Why not?**

Participant	Answer	Query: Why/Why not?
Independent Member #1	I hope so.	M: Well, I- I'm also not really sure about my social circumstances with people. M: ... I'd like to get along with people. I'd like to be friends with people. DMW: Mhm. And let's say um a volunteer, you know, they followed up, and they expressed to- that they- to you that they would want to maintain a relationship outside of, you know, the program, um would that open a door for you? Would you be like open to that? M: Yeah. DMW: Okay. So, depending on like the circumstances and depending how the volunteer feels about you, that would make a huge um impact on whether or not you, yourself, would maintain a relationship with them? Is that what you're saying? M: Yeah. M: Like, it depends on how the volunteer behaves, it depends on how I behave- M: -how I feel, how the volunteer feels. Yeah.
Independent Member #2	I would like to try.	M: 'Cause...I have a lot of hard time trying to sustain friendships. I have school friends, I made school friends and then once school's over it's – they never want to talk or communicate with me.
Independent Member #3	Yeah. I would [think].	M: Well, as long as, you know...we can get along well... then it'd be all good in my books.
Independent Member #4	M: Uh, yeah. It depends on...how close the relationship I would develop with them or...if I felt compelled enough to stay in touch with them.	
Independent Member #5	M: I think so.	M:...just interact, be social
Independent Member #6	M: Oh for sure, yeah.	M: Um, 'cause when you see them outside you can talk to them on the phone, you know. They're just- they're just those kind of people that you just can't really um, that just, they- they're -they're in your life now forever, right? So.. DMW: The volunteer? M: Yeah. DMW: Ok, um, and when you say they're in your life now forever, what do you mean by that?

Participant	Answer	Query: Why/Why not?
		M: Like, they're um, they're around. Like you can - you can easily contact them and talk to them and stuff. They're- yeah. DMW: Okay so it's easy to, you know, say – contact them 'cause they're around. I think that's what you're saying, right? M: yeah, exactly, unless they passed away then, yeah.
Independent Member #7	M: ...it's like if we're compatible.	DMW: Depending on the person, you know, you would be open to it. Right? M: Yeah.
Independent Member #8	M: Yeah, I would.	M: Because...they taught me a lot of stuff, and I learned a lot from them. So, I think it was worth meeting each one of them really. So, there I got more in tune with being who I am with Autism and how I fit in the Spectrum really. DMW: Mhm. And um, when you're responding to that question about opening up um or maintaining your relationship with the volunteers, is that for volunteers you've already met or are you talking about a volunteer that you're going to meet during this program? M: I have met.
Independent Member #9	M: Um, if they wanted to.	M: I don't want to annoy people or be a nuisance. Um, but if they wanted to be friends too, then I think that would be really cool. Cause all of my friends, pretty much now, in the last two years have had kids and they've been married for a while now. Um, but that's not something that I'm planning on doing or really interested in, so it sort of puts everyone else in a different world and makes it really hard to connect anymore.
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	Yes I probably would.	M: I just feel if it's a good fit and everything clicks and we click, then why would you bother giving that up, right? DMW: And what about your son? M: ...I think if he felt the bond with the person that he would most definitely enjoy seeing them after the program is over.
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	M: Well, it's possible.	M: You know, it depends on Eric's uh, level of interest and again if I'm going back to the, uh, train club example, where that is possible, like it's just opened up a new door for Eric, uh, you know, if it -if it provides him with the uh, the interest, uh then I can see him going to it quite often actually.
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	Possibly, it depends.	DMW: Ok, and what about yourself? I imagine by extension, if it helps Jamie, it helps you, like? M: Yeah. Definitely.

Question 8:

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Participant	Answer
Independent Member #1	N/A
Independent Member #2	N/A
Independent Member #3	N/A
Independent Member #4	N/A

Independent Member #5	Oh you know, I like to get a few ideas for the volunteering...Obviously looking at like things that may interest in some people and then I just I just (sic) tell whoever's in charge saying hey how would we do this program and we'll do uh this event.
Independent Member #6	N/A
Independent Member #7	N/A
Independent Member #8	N/A
Independent Member #9	I think it would be really neat to have someone else to connect to and that uh, it's a really cool idea. Like I said, I don't want to be annoying or something that someone has to do as a chore volunteering- type volunteering, but um if there's people that are interested in doing it that actually enjoy talking to people or making new friends or that, then I think it would be really neat.
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	N/A
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	N/A
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	N/A

Pre-Program Interview Responses (Volunteer)

Question 1:

Why are you interested in volunteering with Autism Home Base?

Name	Answer
Volunteer #1	...I currently work with uh students with autism, with their communication. And I'm just seeing that there's a need for some adults with communication in the community. So I thought that I would help with that.
Volunteer #2	...I currently work at a learning center for children with ASD anyways and eventually I wanna like, pursue a career more to help people, especially with all different kinds of disorders and disabilities, like the end goal is to like become a speech pathologist... I started working at an actual center and what I noticed was like the kids that I know that have ASD, they're all under like 12-years-old and the only adult I know with autism is like, my brother...So I [just] noticed I don't really know a lot of adults with autism and I thought like the Autism Home Base is like eighteen and up, so I just wanted to like, interact with adults as well because I don't only want to work with children, I wanna work like with everyone kind of thing like, no matter the age. So, I just wanted...to familiarize like myself and get experience working with uhm people with ASD at all different stages of life I guess.
Volunteer #3	I've always volunteered... I like helping people. Like, I have a lot of spare time I work shift work and I work twelve-hour shifts...So, for every other week I only work two shifts a week, so it gets me interacting with people, meeting new friends, yeah, I like it.
Volunteer #4	Um, because uh [Redacted Name] is one of my best friends, and I know [Redacted Name]. And [Redacted Name] and I have had a great connection over the years. And I just enjoy being with him and um I just- I have time to volunteer to um- cause I thought that I had a good rapport with [Redacted Name] so that I may have a good rapport with other autistic children.
Volunteer #5	Umm well I've worked with Autism Home Base for maybe three years umm I recently had to withdraw from working with Autism Home Base for my career, but I'm still in touch with everybody still. I'm still in touch with [Redacted Name] and I just love the community aspect of it all and the families.

Volunteer #6	... my mom's a child and youth worker so it's just something that my family does and I know it's just good because for some reason there's still barriers between those with autism and those who don't have autism which I find stupid... so it's just an opportunity to kind of remove that one of the barriers and gain more friends
Volunteer #7	...I did placement with AHB from September to December and [Redacted Name] sent me a text and asked me if I could uh help out with uh you know calling having the phone calling umm once a week for eight weeks and since COVID is happening and I have nothing else going on so I thought it was a good opportunity.
Volunteer #8	... I know this is uh a hard time for a lot of people and I think that people ah especially people with autism are struggling in this time and that it's really important that we maintain social interaction and so I think that by that by uh participating in this program I am helping by connecting with them and ah it's also personal for me because I have a brother on the spectrum so I definitely ah can sympathise with that what's going on right now
Volunteer #9	Uh, well I've been volunteering with them now for, I guess almost two years. Um, so I was hosting some of the events as well as our independent adults program. And so, uh, [Redacted Name] approached me about this opportunity and I think it especially during these times, I would love to just connect with someone else and help them feel a bit less isolated and have someone to talk to.
Volunteer #10	...I actually became involved in AHB through my work. So I work at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa so I coordinate the residency program there as well as the community gallery...on an initial level I was just interested in the work they were doing and I think it's great for the Robert McLaughlin Gallery to be involved and you know the goal of that space is to share voices that often aren't present in institutional. [Redacted Name] contacted me and asked me if I'd be interested in participating as a volunteer on this...she had a particular person in mind who had an interest in art and then someone with that interest and expertise I thought it would be a neat opportunity to connect with someone new and you know get more of a ground level of understanding of autism and of the organization so that's why I said bring me on
Volunteer #11	Uh, a couple of reasons. Number one, I've got family uh who are on the Autistic Spectrum. Two of them being uh part of Home Base Durham, a third one being out in Vancouver. So, we have a line of sight as to some of the challenges that they have in getting support, community engagement, and uh health and well-being in their lives. I work for a company that is hugely supportive of community groups such as this. We have committees that respond to persons with unique abilities, minorities, women, veterans, and the LGBTQ2+ community. So, the more we can do to kind of overlap our supports uh for those groups, the better for all of them.
Volunteer #12	... My brother is on the spectrum and my family is involved with the with the organization... I didn't know first hand that families can struggle in terms of feeling isolated and it's good to part of a community, right?

Question 2

What are your intentions/goals as a volunteer with Autism Home Base?

Name	Answer
Volunteer #1	Umm. A little bit of giving back to the community and possibly making some networks of my own.
Volunteer #2	... To learn and hopefully just interact with the adults and like get to learn about them...I know it's [Autism Home Base] like very holistic, like they involve the families as well...So just to see how it relates to my family too. Also to just like make friends and it looks good on like a resume and application as well so [that doesn't hurt] either. Yeah I just noticed like I never really volunteered like besides with buddies in high school and that's about it like or my job right, I never actually like sacrificed my own time or like...I'm not getting paid or anything so I kinda just wanna give back I guess

Volunteer #3	I want someone to feel like they can depend on me, count on me, and look up to me and talk to me and if there's something like, they wanna do or need help with, they can look at me and say, you know, feel comfortable with me.
Volunteer #4	Uh, my intent and goals would be to be able to help them out in any way that I can... and like build bonds with them.
Volunteer #5	My intentions as a volunteer would be to just connect with my pal and just be a friend and we all know that relationships are important especially during this time. So its important for our well being to have a friend to talk to so I think that's why.
Volunteer #6	Well right now I know they [Members of AHB] and myself are getting bored with things because of this virus...and I'm sure I mean I'll be connecting with [Redacted Name] and I know he's working but I'm sure he's also still bored because like we can't go out and do like sports aren't on tv...so just an opportunity to kind of break that boredom and do something fun
Volunteer #7	...just to help out and see where it goes from there just uh you know want to make connections with people and uh keep the connections that I already made from September to you know that I already made from when I did placement there
Volunteer #8	I am hoping that I can uh build a connection with uh members and uh hopefully make their day a little bit better and ... help them through these difficult times
Volunteer #9	To welcome someone new to the AHB family, um, get to know someone else. For myself, just have someone – someone else to chat to and yeah, I guess just kind of make a new friend, in a sense.
Volunteer #10	I mean my goal is to provide my own time and also get to know someone. There is no one within my circle that's on the spectrum so it's you know something that I would love to become more familiar with and we are in a weird moment right now being in lockdown and everything so I think that for me it's a sort of a nice sort of professional development opportunity but also like on a professional development level a nice activity to connect with someone new and meet a new person...outside of that I'm just kind of interested to see where it goes and am open to whatever it brings
Volunteer #11	...the immediate one is twofold. Number one, uh [Redacted Name]'s my cousin. So, it's kinda looking out for family. Number two is that I'm a member of a local model railroad hobby club, and we had a recent show-and-tell and had a lot of members of the Autistic community come out to that. And so, we're looking at setting something up so that we can bring them in and uh engage them in the hobby and give them exposure to something they might not have had previously.
Volunteer #12	...you know, to see the organization inside and to you know, see more opportunities for people – more people and for families

Question 3:

What do you most want to learn from your experiences as a volunteer?

Name	Answer
Volunteer #1	Um, just what the need is, um for adults with autism and their communication.
Volunteer #2	Uhm, maybe like how to interact with the adults with autism and like their families. Cause like [I don't know many] families that have adult with ASD besides my family. Like now I'm beginning to know more people because my brothers like going to similar groups kind [of like this.] Plus just to like just to network I guess, connect is probably the main reason why.
Volunteer #3	I would like to know more about the spectrum, like, the different levels and how each of them are affected differently 'cause I don't know too much, so that's what I'm interested in learning more
Volunteer #4	I would like to learn how to de-escalate something when a member of AHB gets wound up or something. Cause I haven't had that experience with [Redacted Name]. I've never had to do that. So, if that happened, like to learn how- what to do. And how to do it. And when to do it. That's just a thought. Also to learn how other autistic children communicate too.

Volunteer #5	I guess just about my pal and I'm hoping that she is able to open up about things that she's interested in and things that she'd like to talk about umm...
Volunteer #6	...I just I try to go into like any anything with without any umm assumptions of what I'm going to learn so that I can learn what the task and events are going to teach me so I'm not putting blinders on myself .
Volunteer #7	...Just how to help people on the spectrum and just learn more about autism and expand my horizons
Volunteer #8	... I'd like to gain more insight into others on the spectrum because my brother is on one end of the spectrum, so it would be nice to engage with people who are on the other parts of the autism spectrum and try and learn from them and I think that neurotypical people have a lot to gain by interacting and uh defending people who are on the spectrum
Volunteer #9	...I guess just to learn about somebody else. Have somebody to chat to, find out someone else's interests and yeah, just a connection.
Volunteer #10	... I suppose I mean from the perspective of a person who is working on an exhibition what I'm hoping for is greater insight into what it is to be in the world with Autism and what that perspective looks like. The goal of the show in general is to sort of provide a platform for people to share their stories and to identify the many ways that we are similar you know we all have our interests that we love and we have our networks and so there's that sort of breaking down the notion of difference but also recognizing that difference as well... Its sort of where do we connect and where are the differences and do those differences matter once we know them? it's almost eliminating a barrier because I think that what we don't know is sometimes intimidating. So it plays an educational role I guess so getting that first hand perspective is interesting to me just hearing about what [Redacted Name] is interested in and umm what her life is like on a sort of daily basic kind of level...
Volunteer #11	Uh, what the needs of the community are...There's a lot of perceptions, and I think people might be kind of reluctant to respond to that based on what they know or what they don't know. And being able to provide more transparency to that is going to give people more comfort in supporting that and doing things that are going to help out the autistic group.
Volunteer #12	...think it's just the different experience because you know, for growing up with a sibling that's on the spectrum, like I had my idea of what, you know, what someone with autism looked like and you know, what supporting them looked like and was all informed by my personal experience and then as I got more into the field – I also work as a development service worker. So, um, the more I kind of seen, the more I've kind of learned how different everyone's experience was and how unique my own experience was.

Question 4:

How do you feel about spending time with an individual with Autism? (e.g., casual conversations; taking part in activities with them)

Name	Answer
Volunteer #1	Yeah, I am looking forward to that. I do that as a living so I'm gonna be quite comfortable doing that as a volunteer.
Volunteer #2	yeah just excited because its like I said the only person I have is my brother kind of thing. So I want to interact with other people and see what they're all about and just learn more. It's all about learning pretty much...Yeah I think it will be interesting, its just about learning really
Volunteer #3	I like learning from people and I like figuring out how someone reacts or how someone is affected by certain things in the daily community. So I, I enjoy that.
Volunteer #4	Uh, I'm fine. I've spent time with [Redacted Name] alone and I don't have a problem with him at all.
Volunteer #5	It's a unique experience... I like to know what they know already and umm they always do end up surprising me...

Volunteer #6	...I've I worked in a group home for a few months uh in Ottawa, so I just enjoy it because it's a lot of fun and they provide a lot of different ways of looking at things and its just haven't had a bad experience with it so
Volunteer #7	N/A
Volunteer #8	... yeah, I feel good about it I feel like it helps them uh get more engaged and uh have some social interaction and it helps me in that sort of way as well and we can learn from one another and uh see what our common interests are and uh just go forward from there
Volunteer #9	I guess I just feel like I'm learning something new about someone else, just as much as they're learning about me...I guess also, you feel like you're kind of being a part to destigmatize any kind of preconceived notions about people on the spectrum. So, it's really just, you're learning about them as much as they're learning about you and yeah.
Volunteer #10	I would consider my exposure to that already to that already be pretty low you know after leaving elementary or high school and even then I don't know how frequently I had that interaction with folks on the spectrum, I mean personally I don't also like talking on the phone is not something that I always love and talking to new people is something that I find somewhat difficult so you know I'll be entering into it with a little bit of nerves. I'm not like nervous or frightened or anything but meeting someone new is always a little bit of a oh I hope it's okay (giggling). I think that in general I am looking forward to the conversation I don't know that I have any specific expectations about what it will look like but I'm going in I guess with interest yeah.
Volunteer #11	Time well spent. It's an investment in their well-being, and it's an opportunity to give back to the community and do for them uh what they might not be able to do for themselves [when they need it].
Volunteer #12	Its always interesting because I think people with autism are more direct about the way that they think. And it's – it's interesting to see the way someone processes and I think once you have a grasp of the way somebody processes and the way that they express themselves and the way that they receive information. You know, it's easy to have an interaction with that person, but it's all the kind of challenging getting to know them and getting to know what they are trying to communicate versus what their behaviour is actually looking like or whatever like that.

Question 5:

How many times per week do you get out of the house and do something social? (Specify a concrete number).

Name	Answer
Volunteer #1	Probably like. Um, well lets- weekly, maybe once a week for myself.
Volunteer #2	Uhm probably four times.
Volunteer #3	Once or twice a week, about there.
Volunteer #4	Oh. i could be out daily (7)
Volunteer #5	...maybe like seven times a week. Once a day probably, yeah.
Volunteer #6	... uh let's just say I don't know, 15
Volunteer #7	...four nights - like four days out of the seven days
Volunteer #8	um six
Volunteer #9	Three to four times a week
Volunteer #10	...I would say six
Volunteer #11	A dozen
Volunteer #12	...I'd say twice a week...

***Note: The transcriptions for the following questions (Q.6, Q.7, Q.8) were redacted for confidentiality.**

Question 6:

Can you describe a time when you've been involved in a conflict with another individual or group?

Query: *How did you handle the situation?*

Question 7:

Can you describe a situation where you did not get your way or when you did not agree with a decision made?

Query: *How did you handle it?*

Question 8:

Can you describe a particularly stressful situation which you've have been involved in?

Query: *How did you handle the situation?*

Question 9:

Now I'm going to give you a scenario, and I want you to tell me how you would approach it.

During an activity with AHB, a member with Autism mentions to you that "you must be able to hear things from a mile away with such giant ears." What would you say or do?

Name	Answer
Volunteer #1	I would probably laugh it off and make a comment that yes I can. I'm a mom and that's what I do.
Volunteer #2	I would probably just start laughing cause like they're so honest (laughs) ...I'd be like oh they're not that big come on! You're calling me Dumbo? Like joke around like that. I know they're brutally honest, it's hilarious.
Volunteer #3	Just say thank you. You know, like, it's not – nothing personal, they're not trying to take anything out on me, they're not looking to target me with anything. Just brush it off, it's not meant to hurt me or say anything to me.
Volunteer #4	I would probably, honestly kind of laugh and make light of it. And say something like, "Yep. You'd be amazed with what I'm able to hear." Or something to that effect...
Volunteer #5	I know not to take it personally so I would probably umm agree (giggling) I would probably agree with that umm and just take it lightheartedly.
Volunteer #6	So it would definitely be relationship dependent. If I knew them and knew their humour I could like joke and say like 'that's right so you better not be saying anything behind my back' like obviously the joking would depend on the relationship or just saying like 'you're right I do, but I love em.' Or saying something like that like completely like they are all situation dependent...
Volunteer #7	...I'd laugh at first and say that's not very nice to say and then I'd ah I'd just say umm I don't know, I wouldn't take it personally, I'd just say that's not very nice to say and make sure that they aren't saying that stuff to other people there as well.
Volunteer #8	...I'd probably laugh a little bit but I wouldn't take it personally of course. I'm not the type of person to say "hey it's not okay to say things like that", because its pretty mild. There's no negative feeling or intention there so I'd probably just laugh it off and make a joke like is there something
Volunteer #9	...I would just thank them for noticing and just say, 'yeah, you know what? I actually do have really great hearing and that helps me a lot so that I know what's going on around me'. And I think depending on the member and I guess the relationship I have with them, I would just let them know that some

Name	Answer
	people might get their feelings hurt by a comment like that, but I think it would be very situation-dependent, member-dependent, and depend on the relationship I would have with the member
Volunteer #10	...I think it would probably just chuckle, umm... I think I would just sort of let it roll off, that wouldn't necessarily bother me ... I just think like for example if a child were to say something like that you might use it as a learning opportunity to say hey that's not very nice ... I wouldn't take it to heart or anything.
Volunteer #11	I'd joke around, laugh it off...Maybe I'm related to Mickey Mouse. Uh, maybe I've got hidden superpowers that I don't know about. Just like they might because they probably had uh unique abilities and talents that I might not have.
Volunteer #12	... I mean I would just laugh that off, right? I mean, there's no point getting offended about that – you might internalize some of that if it's something, but I think, you know, just based on my experience it's something I'd laugh off. You know, being casual and kind of rolling with it is just the best way to handle it even if you are uncomfortable.

Question 10:

Now I'm going to give you second scenario, and again I want you to tell me how you would approach it.

It is bowling night with AHB, and the member with Autism that you are paired with expresses that they do want to be there and decides not to take part in the activity. What would you do?

Name	Answer
Volunteer #1	I would probably just say 'you could just watch if you don't wanna participate'. I may offer to sit and just do something different with that particular person if they didn't want to participate it really- I guess it would depend on once I got to know them- what they would need. Would they need just space or would they need me to hang out with them. But I wouldn't force them to participate if they didn't wanna participate 'cause they're adults.
Volunteer #2	... I'd just sit down and talk with them, or like. Sometimes bowling alleys have like arcades and stuff and pool tables. I'd ask them and be like do you want to play a game instead or like play pool instead? Or I'd also like- (sic) at first I'd probably try and encourage them... then I'll just be like try to be like oh we can play with the games, like usually bowling alleys have like games or like vending machines or we can go get a snack to eat, like something like that pretty much. Just uhm redirect I guess.
Volunteer #3	That's fine, we can – depends what they wanna do, if we just - if they wanna go sit on the side or something and talk or, depending on what their hobbies and interests maybe they have something a little bit more they'd like that we can do, still in the area. Over on the side table or something like that, um, if they don't wanna bowl that's OK, that's alright.
Volunteer #4	V...Okay. Well, I would just say that we were out to have some fun and to have some time together, and- would they like to at least try bowling once? Like try throwing the ball once to see how it felt... I would just try to, every time their turn came, try to encourage them to get further along or like to throw one ball and go from there.
Volunteer #5	Umm I could ask them if they want to take a walk with me, we can go outside or we can go the concession stand and get a snack and talk. If they just want time by themselves then I'm just happy to step aside. Maybe if I have a game on my tablet or phone they can play with it if they'd rather do something like that and go into a different world
Volunteer #6	... depending on how they are like they could have reasons... in the situation there could be someone that they just don't want to be around or they are absolutely adamant that they don't like bowling so like dependent on that if they don't want to play you don't force them to cause they are humans they have a right to refuse to do something...but like just continue to spend time with them and like again depending on how my relationship is with them I can keep bowling and in between my frames hang out

Name	Answer
	with them or just drop it completely and go and spend time with them but it's just dependent on your relationship.
Volunteer #7	...I'd try and umm try and get them to participate in the activity because it's fun and bowling can be fun but then if they strictly refuse and everything then I'd go up to Judy and say like this person doesn't really want to be here is there anything else that may appeal to them and then go from there
Volunteer #8	...I'd maybe ask them why they don't like it. Maybe it's the loud noise or just like a lot of people, maybe they don't like the competition or something like that. So if for example there were too many people in I'd be like well do you want to go step outside for a minute or something along those lines? Just try to sympathize with sort of why they might be feeling uncomfortable in that situation and try to address it but also try and encourage them to try new things and knowing when to disengage is also important.
Volunteer #9	I'd probably take them aside if they are around other members just so that they don't hurt anyone's feelings, and ask them why they don't wanna be there. ... I'd slowly try and integrate them in the activity and if they kept saying they didn't wanna be there, then I would just find a way to just tell them that other – everyone here is to get to know each other, let's not say something like that too loud we don't want to hurt people's feelings. If you don't want to bowl, how about you just chat with someone. Find a way for them to enjoy and benefit from the activity
Volunteer #10	...I generally don't believe in forcing anyone to do something that they don't want to do so if that's how someone feels I wouldn't in any way try to say "no we are here, we're doing it" but I mean I might initiate a conversation lightly about like "oh why don't you want to play, like is there something we can do that would make this an activity you do want to do?" Like, what is the stopping point here and if it was something that could be adjusted or addressed and then sort of taking action on those items but umm if the outcome of that was I just don't feel up to it or I don't want to bowl I'd feel okay fine umm maybe next time.
Volunteer #11	...Ask them what they would like to do in the immediate, uh what is not appealing about being there, is there something that we could immediately do that would make them more comfortable in the short term until we find other options.
Volunteer #12	...I would, you know, kind of gently try and engage them and see like, you know, – 'look at so and so, they're having a lot of fun. Why don't we try two frames and if you don't like it then we can do something else' but it's - you know, digging your heels in and getting into a power struggle with anyone with autism doesn't work 'cause they are – they are more determined than you. In my experience.

Question 11:

Would you consider expanding your social circle to include a person with Autism?

- *Follow up, if needed: Do you think a volunteer relationship can evolve into a friendship?
Query: Why/Why not?*

Name	Answer	Follow up:	Query: Why/Why not?
Volunteer #1	Yes.	Sure.	V: Um, because if we have similar interests, that usually what friends are based on. So that's really, ha, point blank that's my answer. Yes.
Volunteer #2	Yeah.	Yeah, possibly!	...like I said, I already have a family member with autism and it's like just a part of my life like I take my brother out with my friends all the time so I don't see why I cant take like a, not a stranger, but like a new friend...and try and connect with them like it- (sic) yeah it's not a big deal to me
Volunteer #3	Yeah, of course.	Yeah, 100%	like I was saying before, like I thoroughly enjoy getting to know somebody and seeing someone who may be a little different than I am and seeing how they interact in the world, and um, they can learn from me, I can learn from them. I think it'd definitely be a friendship.

Name	Answer	Follow up:	Query: Why/Why not?
Volunteer #4	Sure!	Oh, definitely.	I enjoy meeting people. I would enjoy being with them. You know what I mean? When you're on a weekly basis- ... It just- To me, things just do evolve to being a friend to them and caring about their well-being and, you know, possibly family.
Volunteer #5	Of course, yes.	Yes	I just know that some people that have autism they just need to be encouraged just a little bit more and they just need a little bit more one on one sometimes. So just having that one on one friendship is a good environment for that because it gives them the opportunity to open up without being in front of a crowd.
Volunteer #6	Oh, yeah.	Yep.	cause I've seen it happen... yeah like if they are good to be around there's no sense of not being friends with them
Volunteer #7	100% Yes	Um, yeah, 100%	... because you are being put in a situation where you get to talk to this person almost every single week and you know you are going to make a connection with the people and it will flourish if you let it and keep an open mind you know
Volunteer #8	Yeah, for sure	Definitely	...like having conversations like if it's someone who shares your same common interests or offers something new like a different perspective that can be enjoyable, then definitely you can form a bond there and turn that into a friendship like it doesn't have to feel like an obligation like I found I've befriended people who have autism in the past and I've had good enjoyable relationships with them and it's not just charity work ...
Volunteer #9	Yes, absolutely	It can absolutely evolve into a friendship	So, definitely it can evolve into a friendship, but obviously with boundaries in place given what I'm doing right now. So, it can definitely evolve into friendship...
Volunteer #10	Yeah, if it was a person that I felt connected with or I felt was a meaningful relationship, I would, yes	Yeah, I think it probably could	... I mean any relationship has the potential to become a friendship I think if you're interacting with someone there's the possibility that you maintain a sort of long term connection with that person. I feel like in this instance a volunteer is someone who is spending their time in a social capacity so there seems to be the possibility that if there was a meaningful connection that it could continue
Volunteer #11	Absolutely	Absolutely, yes	... If there are common interests, if there's a supportive relationship, if there's open communication between the two people to the best of each one's ability, uh it's somewhat inevitable.
Volunteer #12	I grew up with friends who were definitely on the spectrum so yeah, you know. I think just because the nature of my work and stuff like that so, that isn't a barrier for	it can	Yeah. Like, I think this model more than any other [AHB's community model], like more than any traditional, um, you know institutional service-type model does lend itself more. It definitely would.

Name	Answer	Follow up:	Query: Why/Why not?
	me as much as it might be for some other people.		

Question 12:

Given the opportunity, when the program ends, do you think you would maintain a relationship with any of the members you met?

Query: Why/Why not?

Name	Answer	Query: Why/Why not?
Volunteer #1	Probably if it's something the parents want. I'd be very cognisant if it's something the parent and the adult want. I don't know the perimeters, I don't know if that's something that Autism Base encourages or not. I'm just-I'm not sure so I'd have to see what the perimeters are on that.	n/a
Volunteer #2	Yeah I think so. Like I'll add them on Facebook and social media and stuff.	...just to stay connected, I I feel families like with children with special needs [have special needs]- by default they get like isolated, like I know that personally as my experience (sic), ya know? So I think I think like a community and connecting with others is very important and it impacts your health in a good way if you have la close knit group...
Volunteer #3	I would like to.	I'd like, be for it, yeah, I would be learning from them, they would be learning from me. I think it would be great.
Volunteer #4	Yes, if they um, enjoyed my company.	...Yes. Because um I know that they like kind of their routines and their set thing...And I wouldn't necessarily want to disturb that if (Sic) it was working for them.
Volunteer #5	yes.	... just because with my first point its more than just a group or a charity its community, they are people and these are very true relationships after all. These people do depend on us umm for their happiness and umm may think about us throughout their day or might be excited to see us and we need to honour that and respect that by giving them the attention they need even after the program.
Volunteer #6	yeah	...as long as they are willing to continue and depending on where I end up if I move back to Waterloo that relationship would be different, but I am more than willing
Volunteer #7	oh yeah, 100%	...It's always nice to have more friends, you know
Volunteer #8	Yeah, I could definitely make an effort...	... it depends like with logistics as well like right now with all the COVID 19 situation. We are all in the same place but like going to school in Toronto I do spend time in Durham and around Peterborough so I definitely could maintain some sort of a relationship even if it's just pulling up a video chat or messaging them and seeing how they are doing like it just depends on logistics and school ...

Name	Answer	Query: Why/Why not?
Volunteer #9	Definitely.	I know the member that I'm meeting I hope that once we kind go back to regular activities they join, um, there's definitely one activity that I host that Judy kind of hopes that they join. So, I definitely hope to see them at some of our other activities, for sure.
Volunteer #10	...yeah, I think it's certainly possible	...I mean I think in general I approach life in a way that my circle is not closed, like I have relationships that I really value from different periods in my life... so there's no hard line in the sand of "now I have enough friends" so any instance of meeting a new person there's the potential that that person could become more of an influence in your life as time goes on so that's yeah so that's why I think it's probably a possibility
Volunteer #11	...Uh, I'll use the train club as an example. ...if they decided to become full-time members of their own accord, uh they'd- I'd still have the opportunity to engage with them. Absolutely.	...Um, there's gonna be numerous social activities that they're gonna want to engage in. There's gonna be common ground between them whether it's bowling, movies, cooking classes, -um, just having an ear to lend, um taking the dog out for a walk. Whatever the case is. Um, you'd be hard pressed to find something that wouldn't end up being um a basis for a continued friendship.
Volunteer #12	Potentially	... Again, like the - it's all about the interests. So, if we – if I was volunteering with the – the games group and we had a good, you know, weekly game of DND or Super Smash Bros. or whatever, and they – if everyone was down to keep hanging out. Like, you don't need the framework of the organization, but it helps to get things started, right

Question 13:

Do you have anything else you would like to share?

Name	Answer
Volunteer #1	this program particularly is new to me, so I'm just- yeah I'm just looking forward to learning more about it. And seeing what actually is out there for adults with autism.
Volunteer #2	N/A
Volunteer #3	N/A
Volunteer #4	N/A
Volunteer #5	N/A
Volunteer #6	N/A
Volunteer #7	N/A
Volunteer #8	N/A
Volunteer #9	N/A
Volunteer #10	N/A
Volunteer #11	I'm actually working with my employer to get additional resources to support this, to get additional people involved in this. I've got people at the train club who are aware of the organization and have done things for similar groups in the past and wanna uh refresh and revitalize that. Uh, so, it's not just me. It's, you know, it's we. It's how many people uh can we bring to bear for this?
Volunteer #12	N/A

Post-Program Interview Responses (Member)

Question 1:

Tell me about your (and/or son/daughter's) experiences taking part in this program. (e.g., did you enjoy it? What did you think about the activities you took part in? How did you feel about the people you met?)

Name	Answer
Independent Member #1	...it was really great 'cause um, I don't have anyone and my family's not into um, anything I like. They don't like – they don't like when I talk too much. I was just talking to um, [Redacted Name] on the phone every Sunday for like, half an hour to an hour
Independent Member #2	...I think I did quite enjoy it...I did find I enjoyed conversing with her and I think the conversations we had came to be something that I quite enjoyed looking forward to each week
Independent Member #3	...it was nice... especially during the phones calls to talk to somebody that I normally wouldn't get to see. There was like, nobody around and it was just nice.
Independent Member #4	...I think that you know this pal program is pretty good... I mean uh, with this COVID stuff going on, it kind of sucks or so 'cause I can't get out as much or so but you know, chatting with her occasionally is a good alternative. It's a good distraction, for now.
Independent Member #5	... I'm kind of liking this program. It kind of changed my life a little bit, being new – making new friends, learning something new from them.
Independent Member #6	It was nice. It was nice until the coronavirus and then I had to email my person, but... – I liked the activities that I did with my partner.
Independent Member #7	...well I mean I was planning on being friends with him anyways, so. But it was very fun.
Independent Member #8	...Um, yeah it was really good. [Redacted Name]'s been calling me every week and we've been talking for about an hour once a week, which is really cool because um it's, someone to talk to haha... It was really good support to have - there's been not much else going on and um a lot of really stressful things happening in the world...
Independent Member #9	It was great... I really looked forward to it every week. I loved it.
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	He [Adult son on the autism spectrum] started out with the train club but then uh, the, you know, because of the COVID back in March, so then it became um actually a weekly phone conversation with the um, with [Redacted Name] from the train club and [Adult son on the autism spectrum] absolutely loved it.
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	...this one's for me because he's [Adult son on the autism spectrum] non-verbal it was more me as a parent um, doing the calling. So, slightly different but uh, like I said, it was quite enjoyable. It was nice to chat with somebody outside of the autism community. Um, for [Adult son on the autism spectrum], I don't know... that for somebody that's non-verbal, it leans more on the parent... but if I'm happy and more social and um, connect with people, then it makes him happier because I'm in a better mood, do you know what I mean?
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	He seemed to enjoy it... he likes talking to people and people who are interested in what he is interested in. It was a younger person so they connected with the same stuff.

Question 2

Overall, how did you feel about the involvement of volunteers (or non-members)?

- **Query:** positive or negative experiences? Benefits or Drawbacks? Why?

Name	Answer	Query: positive or negative experiences? Benefits or Drawbacks? Why?
Independent Member #1	...she was very um good 'cause sometimes there were things going on with me and she – and we worked around the schedule and she	Very positive.... No drawbacks or benefits to think of.

Name	Answer	<i>Query: positive or negative experiences? Benefits or Drawbacks? Why?</i>
	would ask me when I was free or what time would be best for me.	
Independent Member #2	I think it provided quite a good deal of benefits	the conversations came to be something I looked forward to each week. I thought the person I conversed with had a very positive attitude. Yeah I think it was something good for me.
Independent Member #3	Doing this, helping us and everything...I don't know, it's just great. I like it.	... it's more people you get to talk to and meet and all that stuff that you normally wouldn't get to meet or talk to without the program, right?
Independent Member #4	I think it's pretty good. I think it helps keep me occupied and so for a while and I think it helps like get me out a lot more often or not.	...Because you know, I have a good companion to be with or so, and you know, I'm having a good amount of fun like normal. And you know, it's just, you know, a ...a great time
Independent Member #5	Oh, you know I felt pretty good. I volunteered at a few events and I get like, appreciated by everybody.	... 'cause if you have questions and anything you wanna talk about you – you know it's just a – they're there for you.
Independent Member #6	I liked the experience as well.	The person was understanding and would do things that I like to do, and we had fun...
Independent Member #7	I really enjoyed it	The person was easy to chat with, someone I wanted to get to know anyways! Very positive experience.
Independent Member #8	I thought it was cool...	...meeting anyone new was a really good experience for me and um, I think that it didn't have to be a volunteer or someone outside the program, but I think if I had been in the program longer and I knew more people, that that would make it more of a better experience outside that circle. Um, just because like, you learn more from someone when they're from outside your regular social circle and so it's even more opportunities to learn more and talk more or discuss more things – discussing things more in depth and at different perspectives and stuff – having someone who's uh, volunteer or um, someone that I haven't gotten to know yet.
Independent Member #9	It was great	Its always nice to have other people around... especially at AHB.
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	...as a parent, you're cautious. Uh, but I am well pleased with uh, the interaction that uh uh, [Son on the spectrum] has had with [Volunteer], yeah.	...for [Son on the spectrum] just to have that involvement and that interest, because up to now, like, it's been sparse and because of this, he's connected with somebody. [Son on the spectrum] looked forward to and it and so yeah, very – like, a good response to a volunteer.
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	I really enjoyed it.	Positive... talking about something other than autism and we had some great laugh, you know, talked about uh, everyday life and funny things that have happened. And just good - good laughs. Regarding [Son on the spectrum]: If it had have been like, the meet up, he could have got a lot more out of the volunteers...
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	Always good to have more people around.	For [Son on the spectrum]: Positive experience because he self-isolates normally, and this helped him open up.

Question 3:

Thinking of the time you (or son/daughter) spent with the volunteer (or non-member), are there any qualities they had that made your experiences more or less enjoyable?

Name	Answer
Independent Member #1	...she had a brother who was also autistic, so it was good 'cause she understood and I have trouble like, talking over and interrupting, so she would let me talk and she would even say 'sorry' and let me continue and stuff so that was very good.
Independent Member #2	...can't really think of any qualities that made them less enjoyable. Um, I think – think the volunteer I was paired with was really uh, was really understanding and really welcoming, uh. The um, yeah even uh, even a couple of meetings I missed because I got involved in a volunteer job in the community again and I apologized to the uh – I got in touch with my volunteer to apologize and she just uh, she was really understanding about that, so I appreciate that as well.
Independent Member #3	...They uh, they enjoyed hiking and stuff and uh, we talked like, about all the hikes we went on and it was really nice.
Independent Member #4	...they were just pretty normal or so nothing bad or nothing – we're just having a good time on our own. Maybe like, you know, like uh, we could chat a little bit more about things, but I think that all depends on how we could bring up you know, some topics and stuff. But maybe you know, maybe like a little more discussion would be good.
Independent Member #5	...I enjoyed it. You know, he knows I'm a sports guy and happy when sports are returning and how am I coping with nothing – on – on TV.
Independent Member #6	...my experience with them was enjoyable because my partner chose to be understanding, um listening to what I was interested in t- in doing and I think the game that I wanted to play, she joined...
Independent Member #7	They were kind, patient and understanding... really easy to get along with.
Independent Member #8	...she's good at listening and um, uh, I guess just good at conversation skills. The conversations went really smoothly and were not – um, it wasn't awkward or uncomfortable talking to her it was like talking to an old friend, but I don't know what qualities that are – that make the conversation like that...she had a sense of humor and so we could laugh at jokes or point out the things that are still good in a situation even if they're just little so that we remember that there are some good things still going on...
Independent Member #9	I really enjoyed my time with my partner, I get along well with people who don't seem so judgmental, and my partner was like that.
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	Um it was um a common interest, so [Son on the spectrum] always loved trains and [Volunteer] is from the train uh, club so there was that that (sic) uh, you know, bit of common ground that uh, brought them together.
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	... it's virtual but um, just going from experience because he had – he knows this person ok, from before? Um, her – her qualities? She's genuine, she always has a smile on her face, she's very bubbly and um, that uh - that's a big connection for [Son on the spectrum], he loves people like that.
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	Having someone closer to his own age, and with common interest certainly helped.

Question 4:

Thinking of Autism Home Base, would you say the involvement of volunteers (or non-members) provided benefits or drawbacks to the AHB community? (e.g., did it make AHB feel more or less inviting?)

- **Query:** What kinds of benefits/drawbacks?

Name	Answer	Query: What kinds of benefits/drawbacks?
Independent Member #1	...I really liked it 'cause it's good to be involved and try to teach other people about autism... its great having other people who are not autistic be involved.	it just teaches people more about autism and not that it's just all one um one level of everything and it's not something to be scared of.
Independent Member #2	...definitely more inviting I'd say. The person I was with was very welcoming with me.	...it's hard to think of a lot of ways volunteers could contribute with social distancing right now... volunteers could help – could help run uh, group events or um, help provide resources to uh, provide resources for – to uh group events or social events...
Independent Member #3	Benefits.	... just getting us out in the community, like I would have never really gone out if it wasn't for AHB. I would've never really made new friends. I would have just – yeah.
Independent Member #4	It's a huge benefit for me.	...it's a lot more involvement and what not and like, I have - I have a lot better time than my previous group 'cause I'd say it was a lot better than normal and just doing fun activities and such... I'd say that AHB is a lot better than my – the previous one I attended. And I think it would be way better or so than anything else and I absolutely love partaking in this group possibly for years to come. 'cause I've been enjoying this so much in the last two years.
Independent Member #5	...I think it's benefiting you know, the more volunteers you get, the more the merrier.	So, if there's like, more people coming to certain events and then they need more volunteers to help out. You know, there's people that you know, need a parent and some are independent.
Independent Member #6	I would say like the volunteers is a benefit	The only drawback is when we had to self-isolate right now... would have preferred to have been with them In person
Independent Member #7	Definitely a benefit	Helps us [AHB community] be more social... practice socializing with other people. Its helpful.
Independent Member #8	I think very large benefits.	...I think that um, any time you can bring someone new into uh, uh, this bubble um, and they're – if you bring someone into a bubble whose willing to learn and uh, and and (sic) take benefit
Independent Member #9	Benefits for sure	Its just great to have more helping hands, people to spend time with too.
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	if it weren't for Home Base, there wouldn't be that connection with the volunteer and for the community, so kudos to Home Base for doing that. Like, oh, huge, like you, you kind of sign up with them and and (sic) like, they go above and beyond uh, you know, helping their members.	ok so from what I've gathered, it's kind of a benefit that Home Base is willing to go above and beyond and you know, connect with people um, from the autism spectrum community with you know, people outside of that community and (unintelligible).
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	I would say it's a benefit.	... I just feel that sometimes um, as a member or a person with autism, you sometimes feel left out because you're focusing so much on the autism. So, with the volunteers and the community you're - at least feel a little bit connected to the outside world.

Parent/Caregiver Member #3	Benefits	We haven't been doing as much stuff since the pandemic. But they always had bowling or cooking classes. And he seems to enjoy those activities. Volunteers help organize all the activity and help get all the young adults together to socialize.
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Question 5:

Parents/Caregivers only: To your knowledge, would your son/daughter consider staying in touch with the person they were paired with?

- **Query:** Why/Why not?

Name	Answer	Query: Why/Why not?
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	Absolutely.	...my [Son on the Autism Spectrum] looked forward to the Friday conversations. You know, he would talk about it beforehand, he would then talk about it after the phone call was done.
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	Yes, he would.	... it's kind of hard –because he [Son on the Autism Spectrum] wasn't on the phone calls, but I know what he's like with her. So, I just know that he loved her, just because she's got a sparkling personality and that he's drawn to that.
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	Yes	Because he [Son on the Autism Spectrum] only has a handful of friends, its hard for them to always stay in contact. Its not always easy for him to meet friends.

Question 6:

Independent Members only: Would you consider staying in touch with the person you were paired with?

- **Query:** Why/Why not?

Name	Answer	Query: Why or Why not?
Independent Member #1	Yeah, I even asked if that would be okay. We are going to still talk for while, until maybe things get better or until I start go- going out and doing things hopefully	...'cause she's just extremely nice.
Independent Member #2	Yup	...After our calls were finished, I got talking with her enough to friend her on Facebook. So, for sure, yeah... she seemed very talkative and easy to uh, easy to speak to I think and um, well, it seemed like uh, like she had a lot of uh, like she had a lot of uh, interesting opinions on the things we talked about and uh, and she uh, and she was an artist as well. Uh, not the same kind of artist I am, but I think something here laid over so thought I wouldn't mind the opportunity to stay in touch with her.
Independent Member #3	Yeah, for sure.	...she's a nice person. I like her.
Independent Member #4	Yeah...but if he like can't then I'm like okay with a new partner or whatever. It doesn't matter as long as like, you know, they're good.	...Yeah I know mine – as long as they're kind and nice, that's all I ask.
Independent Member #5	Yes.	...I like chatting and I know, because, you know, I'm miss my friends and we get to hang out at certain events and there are times that we can't and trying to understand we have to, I don't know-

Independent Member #6	Yeah, I would.	...I like having her around and she's a nice person and I don't mind if we get to know each other more.
Independent Member #7	Yea for sure	My partner was nice... wouldn't mind staying in touch.
Independent Member #8	Yeah.	...We actually talked about that last week too um I would've been counting weeks and realizing it's almost up, so I was asking if she was wanting to be done talking to me since we've done the eight weeks ... but she said that she'd be happy to and that it would be nice to carry on talking so she called me and talked earlier today um, which is already past then the eight weeks now I think because she seems like someone that I could be friends with and that um, it would be I think if we were to spend actual time together, not just talking on the phone, I think that we have - would get along pretty well and we have a fair number of common interests and the – a lot of the stuff I can learn from here because she knows a lot more about art than I do, but it's something that I want to learn more about. Um, so, yeah.
Independent Member #9	Definitely	Our weekly meetups were so fun, I looked forward to them. I'd like that to continue.

Question 7:

Thinking about the future, would other initiatives involving people outside of the AHB community (like this Pal-Program) be something you (and/or son/daughter) would be interested in?

- **Query:** Why/Why not?

Name	Answer	Query: Why or Why not?
Independent Member #1	Yes	I just like to try to expand my circle of friends. Not just have to – just not have the people that are in the AHB as my friends.
Independent Member #2	Yeah	...I think if you're uh – if you have volunteers like the first person – like the person I conversed with over the phone, I certainly would, yeah.
Independent Member #3	Oh, yeah, definitely.	...: I just like the people around. It's just nice.
Independent Member #4	Yes, I'd say.	I think it could be good for like you know certain like autistic people or what not, like they'd be having a good time with us and someone could get them out and going, get them socially interacting a lot better no matter how challenging it may be. It would be great to have like you know, participants to find this program they could really be good for them, for the benefit.
Independent Member #5	I would.	...I do like uh adult charity events where I meet people with teams some people have a disability and some people don't have a disability and we like to play like, sports and do like dance – do like, dances. ...You learn something new every day and maybe be like, a role model to some of them.
Independent Member #6	Yes. I am definitely interested in the pal program.	Of course, yeah. I like having people around.
Independent Member #7	Yes for sure	The Pal-Program was great, if there are more things like this in the future I'd be interested definitely.
Independent Member #8	Yeah, I think so.	... I think that I could learn more and be just a better person if I kind of took the time to get to know and interact with more people...because I don't really like crowds and stuff, so it's hard to find opportunities where I can meet anyone new and I tend to be just be in my little world where there's five or so that I'm in

Name	Answer	Query: Why or Why not?
		contact with and that – it um – but I’m realizing that that’s not a very - that we need more community and that if I want people to be more open and tolerant to each other and get to know each other, then I kind of need to get to know other people too. I think it would give me an opportunity to just potentially make friends that I wouldn’t otherwise have...
Independent Member #9	Yea	Because its just great to have new people around, people who are nice and comforting...
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	Very much so.	it just gives [Son on the autism spectrum] somebody to talk to and associate with and connect with you know? Like, there’s not a lot of that for kids with autism. Like, they’re very isolated and it’s not a nice place to be in.
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	Yes, I believe so.	...just because he’s [Son on the autism spectrum] very outgoing, uh, just because he’s non-verbal, he’s still very social and he loves to see other people, he loves new faces.
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	Definitely	[Son on the autism spectrum] would be interested because it gives him someone other than mom and dad to be engaged with. Especially with younger people who have more in common with him.

Question 8:

In your opinion, do you believe that AHB is taking initiatives to improve the well-being and reduce any social isolation felt by the Autism Spectrum Community?

- Query: Why/Why not?

Name	Answer	Query: Why or Why not?
Independent Member #1	Yes	They’re always doing something for us... the Pal-Program or even activities at the hub.
Independent Member #2	Yeah	The Pal-Program gave me the chance to connect with somebody and practice social skills.
Independent Member #3	Yeah ‘cause I feel that there isn’t enough around so like they’re – they’re actually helping with that.	... I feel like when I go out, it’s like there’s nobody that - I don’t really know anyone who has autism - I just, yeah. It’s just nice to know there are other people out there like me, right?
Independent Member #4	I believe so, yes.	...if you know autistic people you know they need some social interaction to help them. I mean, it certainly helps for me or so.
Independent Member #5	I think so.	...’Cause people I know are bringing their friends like– they don’t know this exists so they want – they want to give an experience. Interviewer Prompt: you’re saying that Autism Home Base kind of provides uh, an experience that they wouldn’t otherwise have. Is that what you’re trying to say? Oh yeah, experience like, meetups, you know, we do like, guys’ nights. Guys’ nights is always fun, I enjoy that, hanging out with the other guys, and there’s arts, there’s music.
Independent Member #6	Yes.	Because I’ve seen how they have done things that would help me and then after helping me, I saw what they – um I saw that they helped others.
Independent Member #7	Yea.	Its just great that I made friends with people like me by being with them [AHB]... even the Pal-Program has helped.
Independent Member #8	Yeah.	..., it’s really neat that they’ve done this program and it’s cool the other activities that they’ve been trying to – they’ve been maintaining on Zoom on a normal daily basis for the duration of the COVID outbreak and so um, they’ve been providing a

Name	Answer	Query: Why or Why not?
		lot of inter – or opportunities to interact and not be isolated way more than I would normally ever encounter
Independent Member #9	For sure	They're always trying to find ways to let us experience things we wouldn't be able to on our own...
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	Absolutely.	...they've got a wide spectrum of activities to encompass the whole range of – of uh, kids on the autism spectrum because you've got some kids that are say, independent, say such as Eric or you have some high-need kids with autism who who (sic) need sort of uh, that that (Sic) regular um, like um, oh gosh, what do you call that? Like, where it happens everyday. Um, a routine. Yeah, so, they need that routine and also they need to be uh, part of the community and brought out to go the arts program or to the swim and gym. So what Home Base has done is they understand the full range of of (sic) the kids with autism and they gear programs and activities to every level of those kids and and (sic) you know, I refer to them as kids, but you know, adults. Yeah.
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	Yes	...to see them being on Zoom and seeing the interaction between uh, even you know, the members themselves it's pretty cool to see how happy they seem when they see each other. Even though it's a virtual world right now, they're still - you can really see that they seem connected.
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	Most definitely	They organize lots of activities for the community, and it gives Jaime a chance to get out and be around them. It lets Jaime get out and forces him to learn to be more polite and have proper conversations.

Question 9:

Given that we are experiencing more social isolation during this pandemic than normal, do you feel that the Pal-Program had an impact on these feelings of isolation (whether positive or negative)?

- **Query:** Positive or Negative impact?
- **Query:** Why or Why not?

Name	Answer	Query: Positive or Negative impact?	Query: Why or Why not?
Independent Member #1	Yeah	Positive	...helped a lot 'cause I don't have anyone in my family that's like, into the things I want to talk about and stuff. So, it was very good. 'Cause I my pal was into mostly everything I was into.
Independent Member #2	Yeah	Positive	...the opportunity to talk to somebody new, that is interested in socializing with you. To make a connection when we're uh, when we're more socially isolated. I think uh, I think that's a really good thing.
Independent Member #3	Yes, definitely.	Positive	...I was alone and sitting at home and then started getting phone calls. It was just nice. It was great to talk to somebody week after week about like, just, life and everything.
Independent Member #4	Yeah, pretty much.	Positive	...it's a good program and what not and it's good to have interactions and you know it's good, so.

Name	Answer	Query: Positive or Negative impact?	Query: Why or Why not?
Independent Member #5	No, it hasn't... I know we won't get to see each other, but, you know, we talk on the phone about how we're feeling. It's a big thing.	Positive	...'cause you know I'm usually on Zoom and first time on Zoom and obviously it gets a little tacky at first, but then you get used to it.
Independent Member #6	Yeah because we got to email each other if we wanted to or had time to.	Positive	...well, I felt respected. I felt like I was a real human being.
Independent Member #7	Yes	Positive	...It was comforting to have someone around, someone you know was there each week.
Independent Member #8	Yes.	Positive.	... I think that in a way, because I was in a very small social circle, the isolation it sort of doesn't feel very much different being in COVID than before COVID...talking to her definitely helped dealing with that stress. Also by being able to point out the things that are still good that are happening and but just – by actually stuff out loud to someone you can realize sort of how realistic or not realistic it is and so um, even just an outlet there to talk to...
Independent Member #9	Yes	Positive	It was very good, it went very well. I made a new friend, someone I would not have met without the Pal-Program.
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	It's been a positive impact.	Positive	Like, when you think 'oh we can't go to the train club anymore' then they opened up a new window with, like other means of communication when in a COVID day and age you cannot physically be together. So, so, there again, they've [AHB] gone above and beyond. You know, they could have very said 'all our program are done until, you know, everything's back uh, to normal you know, when the pandemic is uh, when it's been resolved', like, that could have very well been the case, but instead they've gone the other route and they've said 'how can we uh, you know, help our members?'
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	Yes, it would be positive	Positive	...I'm answering for myself kind of because again, he [son on the autism spectrum] wasn't on the calls, but it would've been positive, yes. Um, to have that connection with somebody else other than, like I said, just autism or your family.
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	Yes Positive impact	Positive	It provides chances to have conversations that were taken away by the pandemic.

Question 10:

Would you be interested in taking part in the Pal-Program again?

Name	Answer
Independent Member #1	Yes ... 'cause it was just even fun and she was even asking once things get better if we could get together and stuff.
Independent Member #2	Yeah, for sure. I definitely would. ...for me it's the opportunity to meet someone new, uh, you can tell it's a normal fairly social circle and to uh, just have an opportunity to practice your social skills with someone new and uh, be able to talk with them and uh, connect with someone that way...
Independent Member #3	Yeah, definitely. ...Just to have a friend out there just – it's just – I like having friends, plenty of people.
Independent Member #4	Yes. ...it would be good like uh, for (unintelligible) volunteers and what not things like that, like the only volunteer option I have right now. So I would, you know, take this program for like a year or whatever and like uh, continue on going forward with this plan, maybe when the pandemic you know, eventually ends, things will go back to normal and it will be a lot better or so.
Independent Member #5	I would. ... I can talk like – talk about how I'm doing and what my career is, you know, everything on sports and talk about like, what's (unintelligible).
Independent Member #6	Yes. ...because I do need to work on my social skills.
Independent Member #7	Yes ...I learned a lot, I felt more connected. I'd like to feel like that again.
Independent Member #8	Yeah. ...I would be really happy to keep talking to [volunteer] and we've discussed sort of carrying on with that...I think it's even made me realize that fact - or like talking for an hour a week, it seems like at the beginning, a bit of um, I didn't wanna like, disappoint her or what if I was – had something else going on that hour or whatever, but it – I wasn't sure really it seemed like a much bigger commitment than it actually was I realized that there's lots of hours in a week and taking one hour out of the week to talk to someone really doesn't take a lot away from me...
Independent Member #9	Yeah. ...Well it was a great time. We were all isolated and we found a way to connect and just laugh and chat together.
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	Definitely, without a heartbeat. ...just because of his reaction and the activities– it was a very positive.
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	I think so. I think for him [Son on the autism spectrum] personally, it would have to be in person, not virtual because he can't talk on the phone.
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	Most definitely. Its important for [Son on the autism spectrum] to learn to have conversations with people besides the few that he already knows. It teaches him manners and to have a proper conversation

Question 11:

Would you recommend the program to someone else?

Name	Answer
Independent Member #1	Yes ...it's just it's just fun to, you know, see other people like just talking to other people. Like the people with autism are good because of... but it's just nice to have people outside the community 'cause sometimes people are busy and it's just good to have other people involved and support.
Independent Member #2	I would. ...because it's once a week I don't think it brushes into anything too much and if you want, you can stay in touch with your pal after. It gives you a chance to build your social confidence a bit more and form – and form a new acquaintance um so I would really recommend it for that reason, yeah.
Independent Member #3	Yes. ...Just involvement. People getting involved with you and it just gives you a sense of community.
Independent Member #4	Yes, I would say so. It would definitely help them you know, improve their lives if they wanted like, like something to do like volunteer and what not. So it would be great to have like more people involved to help you with social interactions.
Independent Member #5	I do. Very. ...'cause I know people – I know they miss their friends or haven't contacted their friends recently so they talk to somebody on how they're coping with this pandemic and they'll tell you how they are.
Independent Member #6	Well, everybody's different and it depends on what their goals are in life and what they'd like to accomplish and what they'd like to work on. ...it allows them to have some experiences and to work on some things that they need to work on and – and it's nice to have volunteers um, being involved um – meeting people with autism and even learning about autism.
Independent Member #7	Yes. There's no downsides, everyone can benefit from it.
Independent Member #8	Yes. I think that the people would enjoy it and get a lot out of it and if they think that they wouldn't, they'd probably be more likely to get even more out of it because they'd think that it was so um, beneficial and enjoyable.
Independent Member #9	For sure. Its just a great experience. Its great to be connected with someone new, you learn a lot.
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	Yes. Oh, for sure. ...just because of what it did for [Son on the autism spectrum] and um, and also say, from a volunteer perspective. You know, that's gotta be – feel pretty good to be able help somebody else out as well, yeah.
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	Yes. I just thought it was an overall great experience uh, especially during these trying time we were able to come up with a solution and go virtually.
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	I think [Son on the autism spectrum] would recommend it, and I definitely would. Because my experience being around kids like [Son on the autism spectrum] is that they are isolated and don't have many opportunities to interact with others, and if they do they don't know how to have a proper conversations. Eye contact is really hard for them, [Son on the autism spectrum] would stare you down instead of having casual eye contact.

Question 12:

Do you have anything else you would like to share?

Name	Answer
Independent Member #1	No, just that I was extremely glad this was happening.
Independent Member #2	N/A
Independent Member #3	No, that's it. Just – I really like the program.
Independent Member #4	... I mean I'm up north for like a month or two so I may not be able to attend or so, but if I can maybe in September I could join back in the program but I will always keep in touch with [volunteer], just in case.
Independent Member #5	N/A
Independent Member #6	N/A
Independent Member #7	N/A
Independent Member #8	No, I don't think so, just thank you and I appreciate that you have gone through the effort of like finding volunteers and doing all the administrative stuff as well as the research stuff that you're doing to make the program possible. It's been fun and I appreciate it a lot, so thank you.
Independent Member #9	N/A
Parent/Caregiver Member #1	...no I don't think so. I'm just happy to be part of it and uh, you know, it was a lot of work, but we got there. My son is non-verbal - he loves new faces and new people. He wouldn't have been able to have a conversation, but you would be able to tell that he was happy to see somebody. But you can't do that like over a phone or something
Parent/Caregiver Member #2	N/A
Parent/Caregiver Member #3	N/A

Post-Program Interview Responses (Volunteer)

Question 1:

Tell me about your experiences taking part in this program (e.g., did you enjoy it? What did you think about the activities you took part in?)

Name	Answer
Volunteer #1	...I've been emailing somebody back and forth, so I've quite enjoyed that. Um, I haven't been able to attend anything else other than just the correspondents. But, it's been – it's been nice having somebody to correspond with back and forth
Volunteer #2	...Oh yeah, I really enjoyed it...it was very well organized...Honestly it was really great. if anything it was me learning kind of being a friend as opposed to like a worker, right?
Volunteer #3	... so [Redacted Name] and I, we chatted since COVID started...we chatted quite a few times and he would tell me what he's doing, I would tell him what I'm doing and we got to know each other that way so it was pretty good...
Volunteer #4	...I enjoyed it. I – I totally enjoyed it...That was great. It was actually a big help, yeah...it was just uplifting. Just to – just to I guess touch base with somebody that uh, well for me, that I've known for so

Name	Answer
	long and just to uh catch up and see how you know, say like, her family was making out and whatnot. So – no, it was very nice.
Volunteer #5	...it was great, we ended up um not really doing any activities, but instead just indulging in like, we had similar interests, so just talking about our interests and going back and forth and stuff like that um, has been a pleasure. Um, but um, it was great. My participant was very social, so it did help going back forth in conversation.
Volunteer #6	Of course, it's not as nice as actually being able to get together with [Redacted Name] and uh, I think it's – but I just- it sounded like it helped both of us. Just on Thursday afternoon to have something to look forward to for him after work and for me, just without doing anything. So yeah, I think – I enjoyed it and we're going to keep talking as long as he wants to.
Volunteer #7	Yes, I did. I enjoyed talking to [Redacted Name] a lot. It actually kind of gave me something to look forward to during the week... it was really good. It was a lot of fun. I enjoyed it.
Volunteer #8	... it was uh, generally a good experience. It was great to be able to get to know someone and like talk to them. In terms of activities, it was great to be able to, in these times of social distancing, be able to join in on virtual meetups and just have a little bit of fun and engage with others.
Volunteer #9	...I'd say it was a good experience. It was nice getting to know [Redacted Name] and I think it was definitely like it just made me feel like I'm like, making a difference, helping him feel more connected and comfortable to hopefully attend some of our pro- some of Autism Home Base's programs once they can resume.
Volunteer #10My experience was really great...we just had a lot to talk about um lots of similar interests, we just kind of had had long interesting conversations. So overall, it was a really positive experience.
Volunteer #11	...very positive. Got to know someone I had met once or twice through another initiative with Autism Home Base and got to know a lot more about their upbringing, what their current lifestyle is, what their career is, and things that happen to be of interest to them and had a number of great conversations that allowed them to expand on those kinds of things.
Volunteer #12	It was interesting. The person I was paired up with was not someone I met previous to this process. I think it was perhaps a little awkward in the beginning, communicating over face-time. But I mean the conversations were good. I think if we had known each other a little bit prior to having a facetime communication then it may have felt a little more natural.

Question 2

Was there anything notable you learned through your experiences working with members from the home base community?

Name	Answer
Volunteer #1	Not specifically, no
Volunteer #2	Yeah like I'm paired with someone right now. And I talk with her over the phone or over text, like we just talk 'cause in reality, we'd be meeting at the Hub or something...But I learned a lot of stuff - just to look at life from a different perspective I would say and just kind of like, emphasize just like, things are harder for them, like things I didn't even realize, Like, Katie went to college and everything, and she still can't get a job. Like, stuff that's really eye opening, you know?
Volunteer #3	... I don't know, like, just chatting with [Redacted Name] was just an everyday normal conversation. There was nothing different um, with our relationship just talking to, just normal, just like talking to one of my friends that I talk to everyday.
Volunteer #4	...Just that they're amazing...it was great, haha.
Volunteer #5	...I suppose something notable is um, like everybody, they do have their special interests. His special interest was space and I guess different like futuristic worlds. So that was just an eye opener to me to hear him talk like that and just to hear his mind kind of going about.

Volunteer #6	...I don't think I learned too much because it wasn't so much of um, like... because we were doing it on the phone. Like, you know, when you're actually interacting in person that more problems can arise whereas we're just talking in person so he's - literally I can tell he's sitting on the computer looking up random facts so I don't – I think that there's a disadvantage because there wasn't too much learning, per say, but.
Volunteer #7	... no, just uh, you know, that sometimes we both get busy and that we have to reschedule 'cause I – 'cause I ended up going back to work and he was working, so we just had to work around each other's schedules.
Volunteer #8	...everyone there is really unique. They have their own individual needs and uh, their own uh interesting personality and they all – there's a lot to learn from all of them I think and uh, it was really great getting to you know, know some more diverse perspectives that are not just neurotypical. Yeah, that's important I think to get some more neurodiversity and uh, just like being part of this program and you know, and being part of this club it's like uh, a great opportunity to be able to get that.
Volunteer #9	...No, I don't think so.
Volunteer #10	... I don't know if I learned anything, I mean I feel like I really got to know someone. I feel like there were some specific moments where maybe I got insight into how she sees the world or how she thinks and that kind of thing, but overall it was more like I just sort of got to know her as a person and I'd say that's what I learned.
Volunteer #11	There was one person that I was talking with on a weekly or biweekly basis. He and I would connect on a Friday evening or a Saturday evening and talk about what had gone on in the week, uh, COVID, uh, things that we were doing to kind of keep ourselves positive and focused uh, and I think that was probably the key element of it. Was being able to connect with him and share things that would kind of brighten up the day, brighten up the week and uh, give us something to look forward to when we connected whether it be a week or two later.
Volunteer #12	Not specifically. It was just getting to know a person and the way that they communicate (individual on the autism spectrum).

Question 3:

How did you feel spending time with members of AHB and of the Autism Spectrum Community? (e.g., casual conversations; taking part in activities with them)?

Name	Answer
Volunteer #1	... I enjoy volunteering my time and spending my time with people, especially people who maybe are needing somebody to talk to if it's not as natural to them to have a bigger social group.
Volunteer #2	Yeah, I felt very welcome, I loved it. ... Like for example, I never interacted with a girl with autism before. Like, I never met one. I got paired with two, right? So, that was pretty cool. So, um, yeah it was just – it was different seeing how girls are affected compared to guys and stuff. Um and yeah just every interaction I had was a positive one.
Volunteer #3	Good. It was good. We got along. We're friends - everyday friends... it was really great and we got to know each other a lot better.
Volunteer #4	...I'm comfortable. Totally comfortable, yup.
Volunteer #5	...pretty normal for me um I do indulge in this community a lot in my um, in my career, in my personal life and with AHB as well. Um, so um, I'm fairly um, familiar with the environment of it um um and it's - it's always fun. Keeps you on your feet sometimes.
Volunteer #6	...I enjoyed it. Sometimes it just felt awkward 'cause it felt like I was taking him away from stuff 'cause sometimes the phone call just feels like you're taking away from someone rather than actually scheduling time in person, but, other than that it was good.
Volunteer #7	...I feel pretty good about it, yeah... there wasn't any um, any problems talking to [Redacted Name]. It actually came quite easy, to be honest.

Name	Answer
Volunteer #8	...good generally um, yeah, they're a lot of fun. Like uh, for example, we had a couple games night and you know joining in on games night was a lot of fun. Uh, some of them are really funny and some of them are really smart and – and so yeah, it was just generally left a good positive experience and feeling.
Volunteer #9	I felt great. I thought it was like – I don't think it was that much more different than like I'd say grabbing a coffee with anyone really. I think – no it was good. I helped give him um a bit of advice for like, following up on a job interview that he had so no, I think it was good.
Volunteer #10	... I mean I felt really comfortable throughout these many weeks– it didn't feel drastically different than engaging with anyone else so um. It was always a mutual exchange, so it was – it was pretty much from the beginning very comfortable...
Volunteer #11	...Um, a great experience. As I said, I'm looking forward to the opportunity to be able to continue it beyond what the initial program was and if there are other people that I can connect with or if there are other people that I can uh, engage with to connect with members of the community, all the better
Volunteer #12	In general, its sort of been a part of my life so it didn't feel unusual. The partner I was with seemed to enjoy the phone calls, but it was a lot of me trying to lead the conversation. But it wasn't a negative experience, just different.

Question 4:

Would you consider staying in touch with any of the members you met?

Query: Why or Why not?

Name	Answer	Query: Why or Why not?
Volunteer #1	Yeah, absolutely	... just because I don't feel like it's an obligation. I feel like it's just somebody I know that I talk to regularly, so, um, it doesn't seem like it's like, a job.
Volunteer #2	Yeah	... I told Nellie I would like to continue volunteering and um, I have Katie's number and like even if it's volunteering or not, we plan to talk every week or something...I added her on Facebook.... I think we both made a friend on both ends
Volunteer #3	Yeah, absolutely	I think him and I just got along so well and there was never a time where we weren't really able to talk about anything. There was always something to talk about and getting to know each other and we had a lot of things in common, which was nice that we were able to talk about.
Volunteer #4	Oh, for sure, yup.	...because they're special people. Like, the mum is just so amazing and you know, their outlook on life and just how they deal with things is just – just really great. You know, like they have a different outlook on life than a lot of people – having to deal with what they do, you know?
Volunteer #5	Yeah.	...actually we ended up – he has Instagram and Facebook, so we added each other on social media. Um, he does dabble in the arts and I do too, so we thought we'd keep connected by viewing our art every now and then when we post it.
Volunteer #6	Oh, yeah.	... Definitely want to continue to talk and hoping if I'm not living too far to actually – meeting Spencer and spending time with him... I like him. I enjoy – it would be nice to actually – and you spend – what we've talked for maybe three months now and uh, kind of like, I mean yeah we both know each other's faces but it would be kind of nice to – we're talking on the phone all this time it would

Name	Answer	Query: Why or Why not?
		be kind of nice to at least connect once and hang out and see if spending time together is good or not.
Volunteer #7	Sure, 100%, yes.	... I like talking to Justin and I like having somebody to talk to every single week about all the new things that are going on in my life and I like, you know, I like listening to him and asking him questions about work and about what he was doing and about um, how his summer was going and all that fun stuff.
Volunteer #8	Yeah, for sure. Probably will, yeah.	...because I felt like I was able to make a ton of friendships um, even though you know, it's virtual so like, building relationships with other people and you know, it would be great to talk with them and meet up with them in person eventually.
Volunteer #9	Yeah, definitely.	...we built a bit of a friendship. We talked about like – he recommended a show to me and I watched it and I enjoyed it and I think like, I think it was just nice connecting with someone outside of my typical group of friends who I normally connect with.
Volunteer #10	Yeah	... I do plan to stay in touch with Hannah and um, we – we -we talked about specifically kind of maybe moving forward now like this initial period is over um just talking about like what a continue conversation might look like...
Volunteer #11	Absolutely, yes.	... because we've established a rapport, there are things that we talk about, there are Youtube videos uh, for different things that we look for in order to share with each other during the course of the week. Um, there's uh, a friendship there absolutely and just having someone um, to share that with that we didn't before, uh, has - just has been a healthy, exciting uh, opportunity.
Volunteer #12	Potentially.	If I went to programming offered and I ran into my partner itd be nice to catch up and see them. A friendship outside of events has potential. If it was something we both were benefiting from then yea for sure.

Question 5:

Given that we are experiencing more social isolation during this pandemic than normal, do you feel that the Pal-Program had an impact on these feelings of isolation (whether positive or negative)?

- **Query:** Positive or Negative impact?
- **Query:** Why or Why not?

Name	Answer	Query 1: Positive or Negative impact?	Query 2: Why or Why not?
Volunteer #1	Um, possibly. Yep	Positive	...well just another person to touch base with. Um, and normalize what's happening.
Volunteer #2	Yeah	Positive	...I think the Pal Program was ...like helping during the pandemic...I guess everyone felt isolated and the Pal Program is just a good outlet to interact with people you usually wouldn't interact with and due to the isolation...
Volunteer #3	Yeah	Positive	I think because [Redacted Name] and I were communicating, we were still able to talk to each other so it wasn't like, there was nobody to tend to, there was nobody that I wanted to have a conversation with

Name	Answer	Query 1: Positive or Negative impact?	Query 2: Why or Why not?
			to text you say, you know, 'how's your day going?' or 'what are you doing?' or 'this is the great news I got today'. So, I think, yeah, I think it had a positive impact.
Volunteer #4	Oh, for sure, Yeah.	Positive	...it was uplifting, and it was um, again I guess just because you could speak to somebody else – an adult going through that as well, you know what I mean? Like, although we didn't necessarily talk about it but it was still just that reaching out and having somebody say 'hey I'm here and want to make sure you're okay' and you know, it was comforting, really.
Volunteer #5	Yes	Positive	...even the phone calls helped to be more engaged with people um I had at the time just been calling my friends as well uh, more frequently than I would have. And uh, so it was nice to engage in a volunteer opportunity but via the phone too so that was really cool...
Volunteer #6	Well my side, no.	(Not specified)	... Uh, 'cause I've had like a fair amount of socializing, like, got out – got a schedule through churches and stuff like that and I can't speak for Spencer – I hope it was – helped. I'm sure there was – I'm mean it did help for my Thursday afternoon 'cause Thursdays I don't have anything, so, I'd imagine it did help and made uh, isolation better.
Volunteer #7	Yeah, 100%, for sure.	Positive	...It gives uh it gives somebody I guess kind of a sense of comfort um every single week um I guess if uh, if a person's going – you know, like, feeling sad that day then they have something to look forward to, right? To talk to – to talk to somebody and they have that social interaction there that, you know, they need, right? That they may not get.
Volunteer #8	Yeah, definitely	Positive	... I feel like it made me feel more connected to people... generally I feel like I'm the type of person that just gets really- I really like being around people and throughout the pandemic, especially in the beginning, when you couldn't see anybody, like it was really difficult for me being isolated all the time so uh, being able to engage with others um, staying connected virtually was just a good way to try to alleviate that.
Volunteer #9	I would say they did, yeah.	Positive	... I think it was just speaking with someone outside of my circle, so it felt a bit more like you're getting out in the community.
Volunteer #10	Yeah, I think so.	Positive	...it was interesting to talk to someone on a on a regular basis like you – you could kind of count on that as a social moment in the week ... like it really felt like a moment of connection, I guess. Talking on the phone.
Volunteer #11	Yes	Positive	...for the fact that it gave them- uh gave them and me an opportunity to connect with somebody. Uh, there was a kinship. There were things that we talked about that I wouldn't have talked about with other people simply be – as an example, [Redacted Name] lives on a farm and tends to some of the heavy farm equipment and some of the livestock. I don't have any friends or colleagues that would be able to speak to their experience in that regard. So, it was kind of a learning experience for me and it was fun just engaging him to talk...

Name	Answer	Query 1: Positive or Negative impact?	Query 2: Why or Why not?
Volunteer #12	I don't think so. My social network didn't really change all that much like a lot of peoples did.	(Not specified)	My social network didn't really change all that much like a lot of peoples did. I still worked full time.

Question 6:

Would you continue to volunteer as a Pal in the future?

- **Query: Why or Why not?**

Name	Answer	Query: Why or Why not?
Volunteer #1	Yes, absolutely	It's just something I enjoy doing. I feel once things start opening up again it'll be um, a little but, you know, easier. I like to be more uh, present in person versus just online...
Volunteer #2	Oh, yeah.	Oh 'cause it had lots of positives and I just enjoyed it, you know. It's fulfilling. It's different.
Volunteer #3	Yes, yeah, absolutely.	...I just think it's a positive goal for everyone involved. Everyone gets to meet new people, you meet new friends. You get to find out what like, common – things in common and interests with each other.
Volunteer #4	Sure.	... just 'cause if I could do for somebody what that did for me, then I'd be happy to do that.
Volunteer #5	Yeah	... I still would love the opportunity to work with AHB in like a volunteer form and what not 'cause I do love it a lot...my reasoning behind it is I had worked with AHB for like 2 or 3 years before volunteering, um so I just love it, haha.
Volunteer #6	If I'm in the area and I have a vehicle, I'm more than willing to participate, yeah.	would prefer to – well at least right now, continue to just connect with [Redacted name] primarily. Um, but I don't know, going to an event to see if they're – if there's a place for me in the community, yeah.
Volunteer #7	Yes, I would.	...I think it stands for something really good and it's actually also very self-rewarding as well.
Volunteer #8	Yep. I probably would, yeah.	... I feel like it's uh, it's a beneficial experience for myself but also like it feels good to be able to you know, be more engaged in the community and give back to the community. It's just a great group of people and it's a great organization...grassroots.
Volunteer #9	I would, yes.	... I -spoke about topics that I would normally speak out. I learned a few things such as the program [Redacted Name] is studying. So it's definitely just, again, just widening your experience or broadening your experience I should say.
Volunteer #10	Yeah, I would be open to it.	...it's more a matter of time management than anything else. Like, I think that um, it's uh, yea, nothing that I would commit to in this moment, but it would be something that I had a positive experience and I would consider doing it again

Name	Answer	Query: <i>Why or Why not?</i>
Volunteer #11	I will, absolutely.	... I know that for adults who are part of the community, a lot of the programs that are available for younger people just aren't there for them. I think it's healthy to get them involved in the community and the Pal Program allows them to do it more so at their own pace and their own comfort level as opposed to having something that is structured and trying to get them to adapt and fit into it. It's instead structuring something around their comfort level, their needs, and their wants.
Volunteer #12	Yea I think I would.	I have been involved with AHB right from the get-go and working in a group home as well... to me AHB is different than the group-home. By seeing the programs that AHB are doing it gives me a good reminder that there's lots of ways to do something and support somebody. It keeps me fresh.

Question 7:

Would you continue to volunteer for AHB in a different role?

- **Query: *Why or Why not?***

Name	Answer	Query: <i>Why or Why not?</i>
Volunteer #1	Possibly in the future.	...before COVID I was just going to their mixers. And then um, currently just emailing. So, there – there was a time that I had said that I wouldn't mind joining maybe like a music group or um, a different group, but it just didn't happen in the time that I've been volunteering,.
Volunteer #2	Yeah, definitely.	...because it's just like, it's going towards a good cause, you know? I just – I believe in the program. I believe the individuals have a safe place so they can interact and be accepted so I – I don't mind being a part of that. Even if it's like – it's a party and I have to set up chairs and tables, whatever. I'm not there for myself, right?
Volunteer #3	Yeah	... yeah I just like getting to know new people and meet them and see how they're feeling, so absolutely, yeah.
Volunteer #4	Sure.	... just because I am comfortable with I guess, people on the autism spectrum and I have respect for their parents, you know. Just to be able to be there for someone and just – I respect them. I have a lot of respect for them.
Volunteer #5	Yes	...just to switch it up and um, see what else I can offer and just see how else I can support. Um, it would push my personal boundaries with working with individuals with autism and um, I'm always up to that.
Volunteer #6	Not that I know.	...Since I haven't been involved in anything in person, I would say no right now. But I'm not – if I'm around and enjoy um, uh, Autism Home Base in person then I could see that as possible, but right now I'd say no.
Volunteer #7	Yes, if my time permits.	...I have worked with AHB before in the past and like I said before with this pal program, it's uh it's a rewarding experience, right? You don't really ask for anything in return but you – but you make people's lives just you know, a little bit better.
Volunteer #8	Uh, yeah. I definitely would, yeah.	... it's just a really great organization. You know, it aligns with my values and it's close to my heart. Like, I have a brother on the spectrum so uh, yeah.
Volunteer #9	Yes.	I think overall this is just something that I enjoyed.
Volunteer #10	Possibly, yeah.	... I've had a positive experience with this so it's uh, in that sense like, that's an encouragement to continue volunteering because I had a positive experience...

Volunteer #11	Yes.	... personal value set. I'm very immersed with a couple of community groups at work. One of them is LGBTQ, the other is um, persons with disabilities, which extends to mental health, people with autism and we've been able to bring those two together and have overlapping initiatives. Um, the company I work for has supported AHB in the past. Um, and I just think that if I'm gonna show my efforts and my energy in supporting something in the community and giving back, um, what better place?
Volunteer #12	Yea for sure	Its about doing different things. The AHB policy is more about supporting families rather than just providing respite. There is something more holistic about an organization that provides support to a family as a unit. When I was younger my family could use something like that.

Question 8:

Would you recommend other people you know to volunteer with AHB?

- **Query: Why or Why not?**

Name	Answer	Query: Why or Why not?
Volunteer #1	Absolutely	Well there's a huge group of us that support students with autism currently and we support them in high school until they're twenty-one, so we're just seeing that there's a nice connection and if we can um, see more of what's happening when they're with the autism home base connection, we can almost help programs for them when they're in high school to help prepare them for some of those activities um, but there's quite a few of us that are quite concerned about what's happening after high school, so it's just a nice way to support them 'cause we kind of support students with autism right from JK through high – through the end of high school. So, it's a nice continuation for all of them.
Volunteer #2	Yeah, for sure.	... I found it was very unique to talk to adults with autism... I think it helped me learn about the spectrum..
Volunteer #3	Yes	...It is flexible, so the dates are flexible, the times are flexible, so it can fit into your schedule no matter what and you're still getting to, you know, meet the people, go to activities with them, see how it affects them, and how it affects you and yeah, anyone can do it.
Volunteer #4	Sure.	... the atmosphere is nice, it can take somebody out of their own head you know what I mean? And there again – just to be able to help somebody that could use it, you know? If somebody else is able to give time and that, you know? That's a pretty – a pretty good thing to be able to give.
Volunteer #5	For sure.	Because it's a great experience, very fulfilling.
Volunteer #6	...The few people that come to mind I would have to talk to them before I recommend. But overall yes.	so I might have mentioned this in the last call, but I was with the organization Larsh (sic) in Ottawa. The core members loved it and as well as even the volunteers just community – making more friends and doing more things with more people. Showing that there's no barrier and breaking that barrier that's still present.
Volunteer #7	Yeah, 100%	... it's a self-rewarding experience.

Name	Answer	<i>Query: Why or Why not?</i>
Volunteer #8	Uh, yeah.	...I think I have. I have a couple of friends who um, for example, one of them is studying music therapy in school and uh, she's looking for more experience so I suggested that she might help out with her music therapy program
Volunteer #9	I absolutely would.	... I think it's also – yeah definitely broadening your social circle and I think just helping somebody else feel a bit more connected during uh, an uncertain isolated time.
Volunteer #10	Yes, I would.	... it is rare to be just put into a situation where you're interacting intentionally with someone who has autism and I think that for a lot of people it would just break down some barrier and you know, increase a sense of understanding about what autism looks like and I mean, each – each experience is gonna be completely different, of course, 'cause you're dealing with different individuals, but um, I think it's good to meet people that you – new people who might show you a new way to see the world and um, connection is good. Connection is a positive thing, so it's – it's a way to learn something potentially within yourself, but um, it's just a – it's just a nice thing.
Volunteer #11	Yes.	... A) because they share similar value sets. B) because they're involved with other parallel groups C) one of the gals I work with, she and I have been talking at length about it, she lives in Vancouver but she has an adult child who is aging out of a lot of the programs and has picked out a lot of things that I have been able to share with her. I've also been able to put her in touch with Judy and others to share their experiences because they're far more insightful and knowledgeable than I am. Um, so to get other people who are in similar circumstances or – and/or want to be able to support the community, there's a growing list of them.
Volunteer #12	Yes I would.	Particularly younger people in the field, because it helps them see other models other than the traditional "institutional" type setting. If you get stuck in that in the get go its hard to see different ways to do things and help people.

Question 9:

Do you have anything else you would like to share?

Name	Answer
Volunteer #1	... I just think it's a great program. I think uh, [Redacted Name], [Redacted name] and everyone's working really hard to uh, give - give these adults with autism you know, a nice – a nice outlet so I just think it's amazing, so...
Volunteer #2	I think overall it was really good...
Volunteer #3	Uh, no I don't think so...a good few months doing it and get to know each other pretty well and yeah, I enjoy it.
Volunteer #4	N/A
Volunteer #5	N/A
Volunteer #6	N/A
Volunteer #7	N/A
Volunteer #8	N/A
Volunteer #9	N/A
Volunteer #10	N/A
Volunteer #11	If you guys could find a way to make this an ongoing program, that would be absolutely fantastic, especially in the midst of what's going on with COVID, social isolation, um, people's workplaces are changing, people's family dynamics are changing. Just to be able to have that engagement, have that interaction, um, is kind of like a ray of sunshine for so many people.
Volunteer #12	At times I think my partner and I struggled with out scheduling. There were times where we were missing sessions and we had to make them up later. I think if I were to do this again ide go in with more of a game plan. I kind of wanted it to be less structured and more casual.