

NAVARRE BEACH

Beach events brings fun, support for autism

By **Jamie Gentry**
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Hundreds of children on the autism spectrum, their families, volunteers and community members flooded the Navarre Beach Marine Science Station Saturday for the fifth annual Autism OdysSea, resulting in record turnout.

This annual event brings together a community need with the science station's mission of educating the public on the marine environment and promoting conservation said science station Director Charlene Mauro.

She said the idea for the event came from watching a neighbor whose 3-year-old child has autism. Mauro and the neighbor shared a vacation to Disney World, during which she saw the challenges that these children and their families face every day from public scrutiny to dealing with a world not designed for these children. Autism OdysSea was designed to meet the unique needs of this group.

For Shonte' Torres, being an autism parent is a new experience. Her son Zachary, 5, was diagnosed



Zachary Torres, 5, plays in marine themed jello treats at the fifth annual Autism OdysSea at the Navarre Beach Marine Science Station.

Photos by **Jamie Gentry**

a year ago. She said being with others who face the same challenges was a great thing for her family.

"It has been a year, but it is a little overwhelming sometimes. But knowing people other than us out there have some of the same issues makes it a little bit easier to accept," she said.

The hundreds of participants at this year's event provided dozens of activities catered toward autism as well as marine education. Many of the volunteers had backgrounds in autism care and therapy.

Among other activities, Zachary played in a tub of water beads, finding and identifying sea creatures.

Torres said the educational portion of the event was right up Zachary's alley.

"He is loving it," she said. "He likes animals, and he likes learning new things. He is very inquisitive. He likes touching things. He is really, really smart. He likes the little animals, and he came to the marine science station last month for a class field trip. He was really excited

when I told him we were coming back here."

Many of the booths offered interactions with live animals. The Emerald Coast Wildlife Refuge allowed children to pet de-scented skunks, lizards and a snake. Stephanie Brooks' son Conner, 10, is on the spectrum.

He and his sisters were able to touch the snakes as well as a terrapin turtle, a favorite of the activities. Brooks said the favorite booth was the one set up by the author of "Sand and Sea Treasures" which al-

lowed children to find marine life figures in a miniature Gulf of Mexico and then find out facts about those animals.

"The best part is seeing how excited the kids are and all the new information they are learning," Brooks said. "It is a really cool event where the kids can interact a lot. There are lots of different stations that are sensory oriented. My son has run into some of his classmates that are also here, so it has been great for him to socialize."

Other activities had children painting starfish with local support organization Starfish Project and making ocean-themed

snack cups with Above Board Therapy.

Down by the water, children were able to participate in stand up paddle boarding and kayaking.

While the activities featured fun, socialization and learning for the children, parents like Torres were able to garner support and information.

"This is awesome," Torres said. "Getting to meet people who have children who also have children who are also on the spectrum it is really awesome because you have somebody who can tell you their experiences and possibly help you figure out what's going on yourself."



The "Sand and Sea Treasures" booth at Autism OdysSea helped children identify marine life.



Mascots such as a stingray, manatee and mermaids entertained children during the Autism OdysSea event.



Photos by **Jamie Gentry**
Children take to the surf with Autism Surfs Saturday along Navarre Beach watched over by trained volunteers. The fun is free.

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Every child loves the beach, regardless of whether they fall on the autism spectrum said Autism Surfs founder Ricky Weeks.

He and a group of volunteers, sponsors and families took to Navarre Beach Saturday for a day of surfing and fun.

"We don't consider it therapy or anything like that. We just consider it fun. A lot of these kids don't have much to do. They don't have friends to spend the night parties, so we fill their days up with stuff to do. And we stay busy," Weeks said.

From the time the cold weather departs the beach, Autism Surfs takes to the waters along the Gulf coast. Dozens



of surf boards are offered up for children to take a ride along the waves with trained volunteers close by.

Weeks said the group will post on their Facebook page when they are taking to the water. He said they have an event almost every weekend. The group also holds summer camps in the area.

"This is a grass roots

organization of basically community comes together for the kids every spring, every summer. We run three events, three surf camps for special needs children and adults," he said.

The program is completely free. Weeks pays for the group through sponsorships as well as partnerships with local surf shops. He said par-

ents should not have to pay and surfing is a relatively cheap sport.

When asked why surfing was good for children on the spectrum, Weeks said it is simple.

"It is for the same reason it is good for kids who are not on the spectrum. Kids are kids. We have labeled our kids autistic, we call them these things. But have you met a kid that is not different?" he said.

Weeks started on this path after his son was diagnosed with autism.

"My son is 14 years old, and he is nonverbal autistic. We found that was the one thing that broke through for us was the fact that he enjoyed the beach, loved the beach. Once we discovered what a difference made for him to exert that energy and

actually play rather than sitting down and entertaining himself, it just made a huge difference."

The group has been surfing the wake for three years now. He said the program is just taking advantage of what Mother Nature provides.

"It's not really a mystery," he said. "When you look around at what we have in this community, the beach is just a perfect place for any kid."

For more information or to find Autism Surfs events go to the Autism Surfs page on Facebook.

As of May 9, 2017 NBMS Weather STEM

Air temperature		
Low 66.7F	High 76.7F	Average 72.5F
Sand temperature		
Low 71F	High 74F	Average 72.8F
Peak wind gust: 15mph from 5 to 6 p.m. (May 8)		
Peak Humidity 91 percent		
Total rainfall month-to-date: 1.52 inches		
Peak ultraviolet radiation 10 or VERY HIGH risk on the UV Index, take precautions to protect skin and eyes		

