

# be yourself in the waves

SWELL, SEA AND SELF-ESTEEM: HOW SURF THERAPY BOOSTS THE CONFIDENCE OF DISADVANTAGED YOUNGSTERS

Words by Yayeri van Baarsen



ABOVE: ANTHONY AUSTIN.  
PHOTO: NICK OUSBY



LOUIS SUTTON.  
PHOTO BY JESS  
STEWART



PHOTO: NICK OUSBY



“So we bring our knees to our hands, put our front foot in the middle, twist to the side, and pop, we’re up.” The three boys who were previously running around like madmen, listen intently to the short explanation given by their instructor before dragging their boards into the water at Gwithian beach. The waves are tiny, but that doesn’t stop them, as for these children, the next two hours are an opportunity to be themselves and have

fun, without having to worry about their learning difficulties or mental health problems.

The Wave Project is a volunteer-led organisation that provides one-to-one surf coaching for children and young people with mental health problems and learning difficulties. The project began in 2010, when a group of Cornish surfers came up with the idea that surfing would help youngsters suffering from stress

and depression to feel more confident about themselves. This idea was supported by the local NHS, who funded a pilot scheme. The benefits of surfing therapy were proven by the results of the pilot, and now the Wave Project offers regular six-week courses as well as surf clubs. In these lessons, disadvantaged youngsters not only learn to surf, but also overcome their fears, rediscover their confidence and have a lot of fun.

Surf instructor Dan Morse shouts encouraging words when the boys manage to catch a wave, while keeping a close eye on how far they paddle into the sea. “It’s all about fun. I try to keep the surfing interesting for the children by making it as physical as possible. They don’t have a long attention span, so it’s difficult to keep them engaged. That’s why I don’t talk for long, but I rather let them get into the water and get on with it,” Dan explains.

I get paired up with 12-year-old Ed Penrose, who completed a six-week course last summer and now regularly joins the surf club. “Everyone understands you here. You can just come here, get involved and be yourself, forget about your worries,” Ed tells me. “I tried it out and I liked it,” he explains. While wading through the water, Ed tells me enthusiastically about the coloured flags on the beach and their meaning. During the surfing session, he alternates riding waves with diving and more talking, so that after a few hours I don’t only know everything about coloured flags, but also a whole lot more about quantum physics, gravity and black holes.

His mother Melissa, who watches her son from the beach, is not surprised at the amazing facts Ed has told me. “Ed is diagnosed with Asperger’s, a form of high-functioning autism. His short-term memory is not that good, but he is brilliant at remembering random facts,” she explains. “When we heard about the Wave Project, Ed immediately was keen on learning how to surf. He tried it and loved it; it gives him a sense of freedom.”

Melissa believes children like Ed feel restricted by how society wants them to behave. “Ed is in a normal school, where he’s constantly trying to fit in. It must be a real strain for him to always

try and be somebody that he’s not. Here he seems very relaxed, because he can be himself,” she says. “All the children come out the water looking happy and proud. It took Ed five weeks before he could stand up on the board, but because the volunteers were so encouraging, he didn’t get disheartened.” Melissa also notices how the sense of self-esteem children get from surf club, makes a difference at home. “When Ed has been surfing, he feels better about himself for a few days,” she says.

Surfing indeed gives these children a sense of achievement and wellbeing, as project manager Joe Taylor explains. “A lot of children with different challenging behaviours have been given the feeling that they can’t do the things normal kids can,” Joe tells me. “Once they ‘get in the zone’ and realise they’re able to do something they didn’t think they could, such as surfing, they have taken a big hurdle in their life. It gives them their self-confidence back, and from there they can go and achieve all sorts of other things,” he says.

In the surfing lessons, the volunteers and coaches from The Wave Project encourage the children to set their own pace. “We try and treat them as a normal bunch of kids, and don’t focus on the problems they have,” Joe explains. “By teaching in supervised, small groups, we allow the children to express themselves and, within safety boundaries, do their own thing. Also, the coaches are working on social interaction in the group and provide emotional support.” As for the positive influence from being outdoors in the fresh Cornish sea air, Joe adds: “There are tons of educational studies that prove how all children benefit from going outside and being active.”

After an hour or so, Ed manages to ride a wave all the way in to the beach, standing steady on his board. The look on his face when he drags the surfboard back into the water for another go, tells me more than any study does. He meets my cheers with a proud smile, looks me straight in the eye, and declares: “It’s awesome.”

For more information, or to volunteer, visit: [www.waveproject.co.uk](http://www.waveproject.co.uk)



MAIN IMAGE: FISTRAL  
SURF COMPETITION.  
PHOTO: MATT CARDY