“Reaching Kids, Supporting Families”

The Campaign for
Emerald Coast Autism Center
OUR MISSION

ECAC
The mission of ECAC, a non-profit school and therapy center for children on the autism spectrum serving Okaloosa and surrounding counties, is to improve the lives of young children with autism and their families by providing effective treatment and education options during the critical early education years and beyond.

Keaton started at ECAC in 2014.
FROM THE CAMPAIGN CO-CHAIRS

Tiffany Edwards and Ashley Phillips
Campaign Co-Chairs

When ECAC co-founders Staci Berryman and Heidi Blalock asked us to chair the capital campaign, we answered immediately with an emphatic “Yes”!

We are thrilled to help such a great organization that has done so much to support children with autism and their families’ right here in our community.

It has been truly inspirational to watch ECAC grow from five children just five years ago to almost seventy children and forty-five therapists today. We think this speaks directly to two issues. First, it demonstrates the unbelievable and increasing demand for services for children with autism in communities around the world. And second, it is a testament to the outstanding reputation ECAC has built for providing quality services in Northwest Florida.

ECAC is truly a unique place where children on both ends of the autism spectrum are given the opportunity to reach their full potential through scientifically proven methods. Especially for children on the lower-functioning end of the spectrum, ECAC is focused on educating these children and improving their behaviors, often when nobody else is willing or able to take on that challenge.

We can think of few things more heartwarming in life than to watch the parents of children with autism witness their children accomplishing routine functions such as speaking or feeding themselves for the first time. While most parents take these milestones for granted, these families do not. We have the privilege of watching these stories play out on a regular basis when we visit ECAC.

ECAC is now taking the next step to improve the lives of the families affected by autism on the Emerald Coast by building a facility to allow them to help more children. ECAC has found a unique solution to benefit not only families affected by autism, but the community as a whole.

ECAC has entered into an agreement with Northwest Florida State College to build a facility on their campus. This partnership will allow the students of ECAC to have access to the various facilities that a college campus allows. In return, NWFSC will benefit by being able to offer their current Education students an opportunity to gain hands-on exposure to children with autism with the possibility of expanding their existing curriculum.

We are asking for your financial support to build a better ECAC and to help build a better community.
WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is a developmental disorder that affects a child’s ability to communicate, understand language, socialize with others and function within the community.

AUTISM FACTS

Autism currently affects 1 in 68 children in the US.
More children will be diagnosed with autism this year than with pediatric AIDS, diabetes and cancer combined.
Autism is the fastest growing serious developmental disability in the US.
THE CAMPAIGN

“I was first introduced to Emerald Coast Autism Center in 2012 when I collaborated with the families of ECAC to pass legislation to support autism education in Florida. I have seen firsthand the wonderful work that ECAC does to improve the lives of children with autism in Northwest Florida. The new school and therapy center will enhance the high quality educational system already in place in Okaloosa County. Please join me in supporting this Campaign for the benefit of children with autism in our community.”

Representative Matt Gaetz
Florida House of Representatives

“This is one of the most important things that has ever happened in our town of Niceville. I personally am familiar with the hardships that autism creates for families. Support is needed from everyone. Look at your children and count your blessings. I am truly honored to be a part of this.”

Mayor Randall Wise
City of Niceville

ECAC has grown from five students to sixty-six students since our inception in 2009. We are thrilled to be helping so many children and their families.

With an incidence rate of 1 in 68, we continue to witness more and more families desperately seeking quality services for their children with autism.

We have seen our unique approach of combining a one-to-one student-to-therapist ratio with high quality Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy transform the lives of so many students and their families. We have watched children say their first words, learn to read, overcome severe problem behaviors and acquire the ability to function independently. Not only do these skills change the course of these children’s lives, but also those of their families.

In order to continue to help additional families and provide the highest caliber services for our students, we have entered into an agreement with Northwest Florida State College to build a 14,500 square foot standalone center for autism on their Niceville, Florida campus.

We are launching a $2.5 million fundraising campaign to help achieve this goal.

With your help, we will be able to fulfill a long-term commitment to families of children with autism on the Emerald Coast for a permanent facility to help their children reach their highest potential.

Trey started at ECAC in 2009.
ECAC

Emerald Coast Autism Center (ECAC) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to educating and improving the lives of young children with autism. ECAC was founded in 2009 to fill a tremendous void that existed in our community with respect to the education and treatment of young children with autism.

The rise in autism of epidemic proportions has left schools, both public and private alike, ill-equipped to teach these amazing children. And likewise, it has left parents unable to find effective education options for their children during the critical early years. ECAC was created as a therapy-based, year-round private school and therapy center that serves the needs of these children and their families.

The motto of ECAC is “Reaching Kids, Supporting Families”. Our approach is two-fold: provide the highest caliber Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy-based school for children with autism in our community and provide support for the families of these children.

Children on the autism spectrum can learn, but they learn differently. The services at ECAC differ from all other schools in the area because instructors use the principles of ABA in all educational activities. The goal of ABA is to find a way of motivating a child to speak and learn using a number of different strategies and positive reinforcement techniques. The primary objective is to increase language skills, socialization and functional behaviors, while decreasing inappropriate behaviors that interfere with learning.

Using ABA as our foundation, we implement a one-to-one student-to-therapist ratio for the vast majority of our students. This individualized attention ensures that our students progress as quickly as they are able. Students receive one-on-one therapy and teaching services, as well as one-on-one shadowed instruction in a classroom environment with other students of similar cognitive, verbal and behavioral levels. Students divide their time between classroom activities and individual tutoring sessions, as determined by the student’s needs. Our one-to-one student-to-therapist ratio is critical to the success of our children, and combined with intensive ABA therapy, is the crux of the ECAC program.

All of our therapists have Bachelor’s degrees in education, psychology or related areas of study. All new therapists participate in a four to six week in-house training program, in order to ensure consistency in teaching methods.

Among our 45 therapists, we have eight certified teachers, six individuals with Master’s degrees and several therapists.
taking Master’s level coursework toward Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) certification. We have four BCBAs and six BCaBAs on staff, as well as two Speech-Language Pathologists. Furthermore, we offer both Speech and Occupational therapy on-site as a service to all of our families.

In addition to our curriculum, a critical aspect of our program is the assimilation of our children into the community. Children with autism often have sensory and behavioral issues that make it difficult for them to participate in social and group activities. We take frequent field trips to various activities within our community in order to help expose our students to new environments and to teach them how to behave appropriately in new scenarios.

ECAC currently serves 66 students in its full- and part-time programs.
ECAC AT A GLANCE

**ECAC Students by Location**

- Mary Esther: 39%
- Ft. Walton Bch: 11%
- Crestview: 8%
- Niceville: 5%
- Valparaiso: 3%
- Shalimar: 23%
- Baker: 1%
- Military Base: 1%
- Destin: 5%
- Santa Rosa Bch: 1%
- DeFuniak: 1%

**ECAC Students of Military Families**

- Military: 32%
- Non-Military: 68%
IN THEIR OWN WORDS: THE ANDERSON FAMILY

My name is Arriell Anderson. My daughter, Madalyn, is ten years old. We moved to the Niceville area in July 2013 from New Orleans, Louisiana to attend ECAC.

At that point, we had hit a complete brick wall as far as trying to find resources for Madalyn. Her aggression was at an all-time high. At the peak, Madalyn had 227 assaults on staff, 161 head hits, 70 tantrums, and 32 self-injurious behaviors all in one day.

It took us eight months to get Madalyn back on track. Staff came into our home and helped us maintain a consistent program in-home and at school to get her to a point where she is now non-aggressive.

There are not a lot of “real deal” people that understand the hell you have been through and the hard times that you have been through and that are going to be there to help you get better no matter what – and that have the education and certifications to actually do it. But the staff of ECAC has all of that.

There are no words to say how thankful we are. I cannot imagine my life now without ECAC. I am impressed daily by their compassion, positivity, dedication and hard work. Please consider supporting this campaign so that ECAC can continue to grow and help change the lives of more families like ours.

Arriell and Madalyn Anderson
IN THEIR OWN WORDS: THE TRIPLETT FAMILY

My name is Rob Triplett. My beautiful little girl, Megan, was one of the very first students at ECAC when the fledgling school started in 2009. When assessing their services, I could already see the excellence and tremendous potential that has come to fruition today.

I was Active Duty military and faced the potential risk of a reassignment several times while stationed at Hurlburt Field. Even though the military ensures a base has “adequate care” before moving a family, in my search I found nothing even remotely comparable to ECAC. I can strongly state that ECAC offers "ideal care" for children with autism.

I believe so strongly in ECAC that I made an incredibly difficult decision to volunteer for a high-risk 1-year assignment to Afghanistan in order to delay a reassignment so that Megan could continue to attend ECAC. Although nine of my friends were killed in action and I narrowly escaped an IED attack, I never questioned my decision. The impact for Megan while in ECAC’s outstanding care while I was away made it absolutely worth it... I would make the same decision again.

When Megan started her journey with ECAC, she couldn’t talk. A few months after I returned from Afghanistan, I proudly watched my little girl give a short speech at a podium as she transitioned to a program in a typical school. She later competed in a regional spelling bee with typical children. Even though I could have continued to serve in the Air Force and had received a promotion, I made yet another difficult decision to retire from the military so that Megan could continue to work with ECAC therapists. Success is measured in many ways. ECAC’s amazing therapists have quite simply worked wonders for Megan and they continue to teach her skills that will remain with her for life.

I cannot express my support for ECAC strongly enough. They provide an outstanding source of comfort and stability for our military families at Hurlburt and Eglin.

ECAC Supports our Troops

Located near both Eglin Air Force Base and Hurlburt Field, ECAC serves many military families. Currently, approximately 70% of our students are children of active or retired military families. While autism puts an emotional, financial and physical strain on all families, the challenges are greatly magnified for military families. These families must manage lengthy parent deployments and often struggle to find quality services for their children during frequent reassignments. Consistent with our mission to improve the lives of children and families facing autism, we are honored to work with our military families who sacrifice so much for our country.
OUR PARTNERSHIP WITH NWFSC

“Northwest Florida State College is pleased to be able to partner with the Emerald Coast Autism Center on this worthwhile project. Autism touches many lives and with our College’s mission to improve lives through educational opportunity we know that supporting the growth and development of the Center will result in a community educational asset we can all be proud of and that will, indeed, improve the lives of many in our region.”

Dr. Ty Handy, President
Northwest Florida State College

ECAC is thrilled to have the opportunity to partner with Northwest Florida State College (NWFSC). We believe that this is the best possible long-term solution for an ECAC facility. First and foremost, a facility on the NWFSC campus would allow us to help the maximum number of children with autism that we can and ensure that we have enough space for the long-term sustainability of the student population.

As we have grown, we have developed a better understanding of the type of facility that works best for our students and building our own facility would allow for a much more efficient use of space. Additionally, fundraising for this project would reduce our overall operating expenses and allow us to direct more money toward program services.

A NWFSC campus location also allows for us to expand our existing student rotational program with the Education department, establish an internship program for future therapist employment, partner on transportation and develop vocational training opportunities, among other benefits. Given these synergies, we feel that this option would allow us to provide the highest quality services to the most children with autism in our community.
Our Partnership with Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation

“Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation has been honored to play a role in the growth of ECAC over the past four years. Our community is very fortunate to have ECAC here to assist so many families. The planned facility on the campus of Northwest Florida State College will allow ECAC to greatly expand their critical support for children and families challenged by autism.”

John Russell, President
Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation

Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation (DCWAF) connects wine enthusiasts to raise money to benefit children in need in Northwest Florida.

Founded in 2005, Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation has donated more than $8 Million to Northwest Florida charities through hosting world class wine and culinary events. These funds have impacted the lives of over 60,000 youth, including those afflicted by health issues and abuse. DCWAF is recognized as one of the nation’s ‘Top 10 Charity Wine Auctions in the U.S.’ by Wine Spectator Magazine.

Our community is fortunate to have such an amazing philanthropic organization that is dedicated to helping local children’s charities. ECAC is privileged to have the opportunity to partner with DCWAF as a beneficiary charity.

DCWAF has been the foundational benefactor of our Capital Campaign. DCWAF has contributed over $300,000 in dedicated funds toward our future facility on the NWFSC campus. We are so grateful for the generosity of DCWAF and all the patrons who support the foundation. Their commitment has impacted the lives of so many families with autism in the community and we could not achieve this goal without their support.

Brayden started at ECAC in 2012.
A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN ECAC THERAPIST

An official work day at Emerald Coast Autism Center (ECAC) starts with Director Staci Berryman turning a dial right then left and right again. A heavy-weight door swings open, and behavior therapists file into ECAC’s vault to retrieve student data and clipboards.

Therapists bustle around the large building finding toys, cutting edibles into bite-size pieces and preparing student tables. At 8:30 AM, the cheery voice of Beth Leeper, office manager, fills the halls with the sound of students’ names over the intercom system. Each day, one therapist is assigned to one student, so when a student’s name is called, the therapist meets the student and parent at the front entrance with a bright smile and a good-morning greeting but never a demand to hang up his or her backpack because no demands are placed on a student until they are paired.

Ashley Falcon, behavior therapist, pairs with her student by pretending to be a dragon and giving enjoyable tickles. Staci explains pairing as delivering preferred items or activities to a child non-contingently before placing task demands.

Once a student and therapist are paired, the behavior therapist holds toys in the air just out of reach from a student’s hand or withholds a favorite activity all in hopes to get the student to ask—a process behavior therapists call manding. This task is required of the student through the entire day whether they verbally ask for items and activities or use Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS).

Natural Environment Training (NET) is at the heart of a therapist’s session. Zanna Martin, behavior therapist, asks her student to “dial seven” and “say hello” while playing with a toy telephone. NET uses the child’s natural environment to facilitate language learning moments by using the child’s interests to guide the session.

At 9:20 AM, everyone in the building hears good morning songs kicking off group sessions. Students sit in bright colored square-shaped chairs in a semi-circle around a peppy group teacher who sings songs with students, reads a book and teaches the days of the week. Then students and therapists transition to the second part of group—table activities. Therapists assist students with activities including coloring, cutting and basic academics.

Abby Kaldahl, behavior therapist and group teacher, sings “Look who’s leaving group today,” and all students walk outside to recess with therapists. Recess is a time for some therapists to prompt functional-play skills while other therapists use this opportunity to catch up on notes and data.

As students master skills, therapists continue to work on skills long after they’ve been mastered to avoid regression. After recess, Taylor Munley, behavior therapist, works on maintenance skills with her student before saying “it’s time for lunch.”
At lunch, Munley says “first eat your ravioli then you can have a drink of juice”, which is based on Premack’s Principle—a notion of first doing an undesired activity then a desired one only after the first activity is completed. Lunchtime offers a new opportunity for therapists to switch students.

Along with NET and maintenance activities, group also is revisited in the afternoon with songs, a story and art project.

Around 2:30 PM, Beth’s voice floods the halls again with the sound of students’ names. Therapists prompt students to clean up, get backpacks and meet their parents. Each therapist delivers a hand-written note about the student’s day to parents.

Once students have left with parents, therapists dash back to therapy rooms to clean up final items and take end-of-the-day data, which is crucial to track student progress.

Some of ECAC’s dedicated staff stay and work from 3:00 to 5:00 PM with part-time students, working on talking, walking and even social skills. When these students’ sessions are completed, therapists take end-of-the-session data. And, once all therapists have exited the building, a loyal supervisor closes the heavy-weight door to the vault and locks up.
Staci Berryman, BCBA and Heidi Blalock, CFA

ECAC Co-Founders

Having worked with children with autism in both school and clinical settings, I learned that most organizations were simply not prepared to deal with the number and range of severity of students on the autism spectrum. Simply put, there were not enough trained teachers or nearly enough funding to help each child reach his or her potential.

It has been consistently proven that providing intensive one-to-one Applied Behavior Analysis therapy at as early of an age as possible provides the greatest opportunity for children with autism to reach their full potential. In order to provide this type of program, it is essential to hire and train the best therapists possible. At ECAC, we spend countless hours recruiting and training our staff.

As the school continues to grow at an unbelievable rate, it becomes vital to our future success that we continue to hire well-trained teachers and therapists. By building ECAC on the campus of Northwest Florida State College and partnering with their Department of Education, we are ensuring a natural pipeline of future ECAC teachers. Please help support ECAC in this important endeavor.

-- Staci Berryman, BCBA

As parents of a child with autism, my husband and I know the challenges that families of children on the autism spectrum face every day. We learned firsthand how difficult it is to find quality Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy and the challenge of incorporating these techniques into your child’s education and daily life. We also understand the emotional toll that autism takes on a family.

Staci and I founded ECAC with the simple goal of helping children with autism and their families have access to quality services in a fun and loving environment. Our vision was to bring the highest quality therapy services together under one roof to ease the burden on families and give them a safe place to educate their children. In the end, we want every child that comes through our doors to achieve his or her maximum potential.

As part of our vision, we promised families that our school would grow with their children. We have been true to this promise as our students now range in age from 2 to 15 years.

We now look forward to the next phase of our journey of providing our services to even more students, while partnering with Northwest Florida State College. Of course, we can only make this happen with your financial support. Thank you for believing in our mission.

-- Heidi Blalock, CFA
Emerald Coast Autism Center’s New Facility
You can be assured that your gift to the ECAC Capital Campaign Fund, no matter how large or how small, will have a meaningful impact on the children and families we serve. To learn about specific gift opportunities, please contact Heidi Blalock at 850.279.3000 or heidiblalock@ecautismcenter.org.
Capital Campaign Committee

**Co-Chairs**
- Tiffany Edwards
- Ashley Phillips

**Steering Committee**
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- Erin Bakker
- Kathryn Cope
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