

## Autistic students forge friendships across the channel

Dorset-based Autism Unlimited has hosted young autistic students from France and now hopes to collaborate on an exciting new exchange programme.



**CONNECT-4 – Evan and Robbie (first left and third from left) who are students at Autism Unlimited’s sixth form in Christchurch, enjoyed spending time with Noam (second from left) and Maye (right) who are supported by Autism Action in France.**

Autism Unlimited is one of the UK’s leading autism charities and provides support to autistic people through education, residential and supported independent living.

The charity owns and operates Portfield School in Parley, near Christchurch, which provides specialist teaching and care for students aged 4 to 19. It also operates a sixth form and “Futures”, which helps prepare young adults, from 18 to 25, for life and work.

French students Nathan, Noam and Maye are all supported by the French charity Autism Action which is situated in Paris.

The boys and Autism Action Director, Hawa Diakite and colleague, Kamélia Becarbi, spent three days in Christchurch, visiting Portfield School, attending lessons, playing sports, enjoying a session in the school swimming pool and cooking with their English peers.

Autism Unlimited CEO Siún Cranny explained: “I went to Paris in March 2022 for an autism conference and while I was there I visited Autism Action. I was deeply impressed by the charity’s work to support autistic young people and their families.

“There and then the charity’s Director Hawa, and I decided we wanted to cement an alliance and friendship across the waters and we set to work on making this happen.”

She continued: “Having their students with us for their first visit and watching them bond with our students over football, food and board games, without a common language, but with such enthusiasm, has been absolutely wonderful.

“We were very fortunate that one of the French students learned English at an accelerated pace and was able to translate for those of who whose French had become more than rusty!

“We now hope to build on this collaboration further, enabling our charities to learn from each other, to work together and for our students to travel and form friendships.”

Autism Unlimited Sixth Former Robbie agreed: “We’ve had a lot of fun, especially cooking. We don’t speak each others’ languages but we don’t need to when we can play games and have a good time.”

Kamélia Becarbi from Autism Action said: “Our young people have enjoyed their trip. It is the first time they have travelled abroad and it has been an amazing experience for them to meet autistic students from England.

“We have been amazed by what we have seen here at Autism Unlimited. The education facilities are incredible and we especially loved the use of arts and music therapy. We have been learning many things and have collected many ideas to take back with us.”

Ends.

[www.autism-unlimited.org](http://www.autism-unlimited.org)

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