



# **I CAN NETWORK'S 2019-2020 SOCIAL IMPACT REPORT**

**A POSITIVE FORCE IN AUTISM**



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## CEO'S FOREWORD

Welcome to I CAN Network's 2019-2020 Social Impact Report.

Autistic students, parents, families, schools, governments and philanthropic organisations place an enormous amount of trust in I CAN Network to develop positive identity in Autistic young people and to achieve this through mentoring programs which keep them safe.

Our transparent reporting to governments, our Board of directors, the community and to the Autistic young people in whose name we exist, is one of the best ways we can continually earn this great trust.

I CAN Network faced its greatest test in 2020: COVID-19. As this report explores, we responded to COVID-19 with an aggressive upscaling of our National Online Program. The program grew by 300% in nine months. This growth was a testament to the laser-like focus of Autistic and neurodivergent staff. This Social Impact Report confirms that we maintained a quality program even amidst such rapid growth.

I commend the work of Dr James Ong in compiling this report. Not only has James developed this report, he has pioneered our evaluation framework since 2014. No words describe my appreciation for all that he has given to the framework underpinning I CAN Network.

Thank you for your support and trust.

**Chris Varney**

Founder and Chief Enabling Officer



## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Evaluations and social impact studies are integral to our work in I CAN Network. We run evaluations and social impact studies in all our programs with different stakeholders, particularly Autistic young people and adults. The results we generate from these evaluations form an evidence base behind our programs, enabling us to secure funding to expand the outreach of our programs. The results also reinforce the idea that our strengths-based approach to Autism has a positive impact on the lives of Autistic young people and adults who will play an increasingly important role in society.

Contained in the Social Impact Report are highlights of the positive changes we are seeing over the 2019-2020 period. The report covers the huge breadth of programs we run, from online and face-to-face mentoring programs to events such as camps and the AWETISM Expo. In each section, you will see a mixture of numbers and words that tell a story of how we are a positive force for Autistic young people and adults. By reading this report, you will learn the unique but important work I CAN Network is doing in the Autism space and the evidence showing the real impact of our work. Hopefully, this report will motivate you to support the I CAN Network as we look to reach out to more Autistic young people and adults across Australia.

I hope that you enjoy reading the report and learning about the amazing work we are doing to Autistic young people and adults.

**Dr. James Ong**

Evaluation, Program Support and Policy Analyst



# GLOSSARY

**Program Facilitator:** Please note in the following report 'Program Facilitator' is the name given to the lead facilitator of an I CAN program, whether face-to-face or online.

**Mentor:** Mentors are paid staff in I CAN Network who support the facilitation of group mentoring in schools, communities and online.

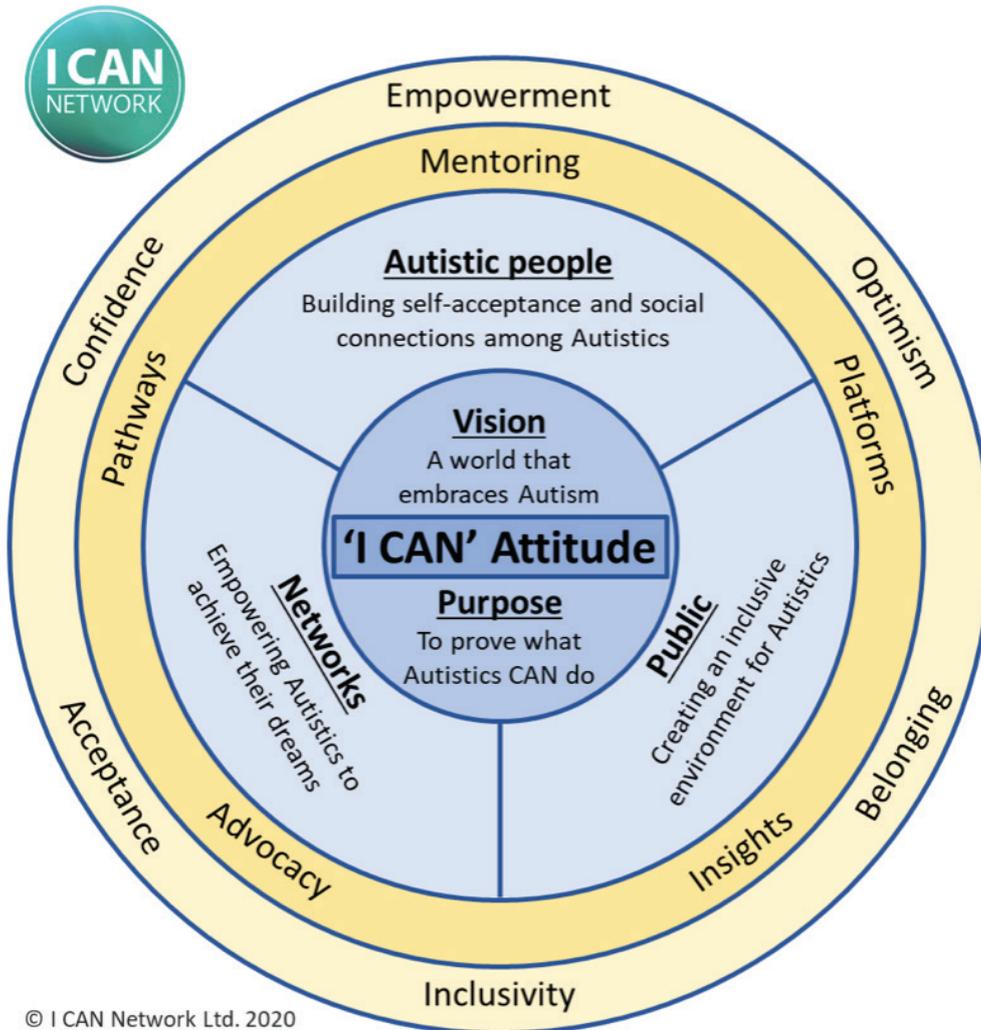


# WHAT DOES I CAN NETWORK AIM TO ACHIEVE?

Our purpose at I CAN Network is 'To prove what Autistics CAN do'. We achieve this by promoting a respectful, strengths-based view of Autism and empowering Autistic young people to enhance their self-acceptance, self-confidence, optimism and sense of belonging. In the process, we demonstrate the high levels of innovation and positive social change that come from valuing Autistic insights and talent. It is not just our Autistic mentees and 59 staff (including 46 Autistic staff) who benefit from our strengths-based approach to Autism and neurodiversity. Every day, we see more and more people embracing our positive rethink of Autism.

## VISUAL SUMMARISING I CAN NETWORK'S OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK

I CAN Network has used our Outcomes Framework to inform our evaluations and social impact studies. This has in turn helped to build an evidence base behind our programs. The next few pages describe the positive impact our programs are having on Autistic young people.



The visual above summarises how we engage different target groups, what we want to achieve and how we will reach the desired outcomes. Going from inside to outside:

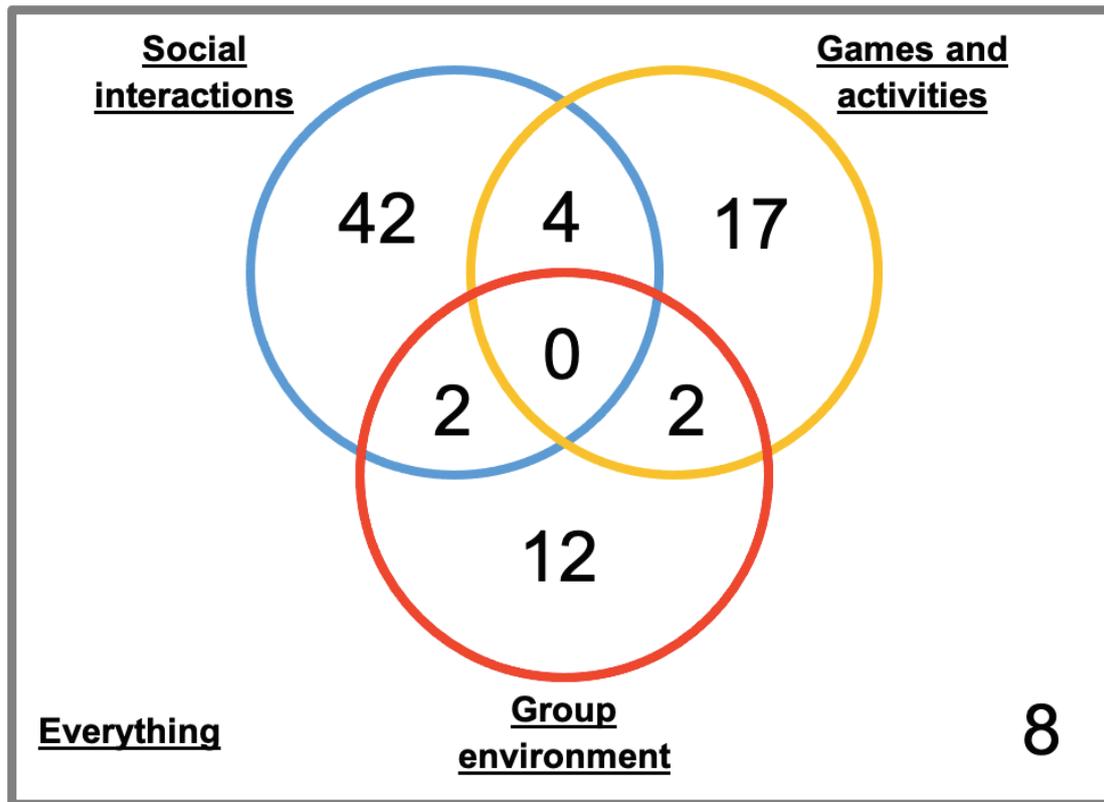
- 1. 'I CAN' Attitude:** Everything that we do is built on an 'I CAN' attitude. We promote an 'I CAN' attitude to Autistic young people and adults so that they can seize their opportunities and push themselves to grow, but not to breaking point. As a team, we embrace an 'I CAN' attitude in all our work, from planning and running new services and events to expanding our services to reach out to more Autistic people across Australia.
- 2. Vision & Purpose:** The work which we do will ultimately lead to us fulfilling the vision of I CAN Network 'A World That Embraces Autism'. By achieving the outcomes among our stakeholders, we hope to build a world in which Autistic people are understood, accepted and celebrated for who they are.
- 3. Stakeholders:** To achieve our Vision, Purpose and practice our Values we have three audiences we engage: (1) we work with **Autistic people** to build self-acceptance and social connections (2) we empower the **immediate networks around Autistic people** to empower their Autistic family members, Autistic students or Autistic colleagues to achieve their dreams and (3) we engage the **general community of Australians** to create an inclusive community for Autistic and neurodivergent people.
- 4. Services and Programs:** I CAN Network's services and programs are oriented towards connecting Autistic young people aged 9-20 years with **mentoring, platforms to build their confidence and post-school pathways** and influencing their wider communities through **advocacy and insights**.
- 5. Outcomes:** Per the visual's outer circle, I CAN Network has identified six outcomes as the core tenets of our evaluation framework to inform all of our work. These include acceptance, confidence, empowerment, optimism, belonging and inclusivity.

# NATIONAL ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAM



I CAN Ltd's National Online Mentoring Program runs Autistic-led online group sessions to build social connections, belonging, self-confidence and self-acceptance among Autistic young people aged 9-20 in Australia and New Zealand. Particularly for Autistic young people who have co-occurring mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression, or who are disengaged from school, the option of a program which can be delivered from the comfort of their own home allows us to attract participants who might otherwise go without positive peer support. The programs cover a broad range of topics from understanding Autism to discussing interests. The programs run activities and games to keep the sessions fun and engaging for participants.

# WHAT DO PARTICIPANTS ENJOY IN THE ONLINE PROGRAMS?

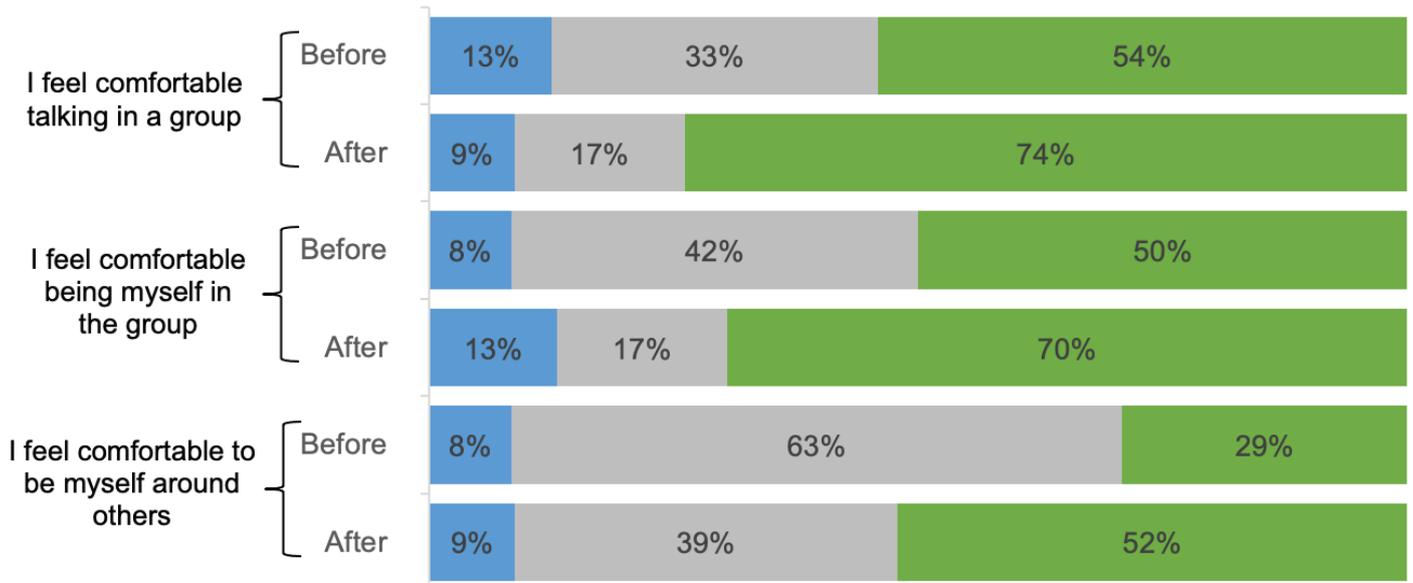


Participants enjoyed different aspects of the program as summarised in the above Venn diagram. Most participants liked the social interactions in the program. For them, they enjoyed meeting, talking and connecting with their mentors and other participants in the group. These social connections made Autistic participants realise that they are not alone and that there are other people like them who want to be friends with them or share their interests. Other participants noted that they enjoyed the games and activities of the online sessions with some participants naming specific games they liked the most such as Famous Faces and Positive/Negative. Lastly, a small group of participants enjoyed the group environment as they can openly share their interests with other people, particularly if other participants have the same interests as them. This provides an avenue to foster social connections among Autistic participants. Collectively, these results highlight how participants can get something out of the National Online Mentoring Programs, particularly in fostering social connections among other Autistic people.

# THE POSITIVE IMPACTS OF THE NATIONAL ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAMS

The National Online Mentoring Program has immensely grown during the COVID-19 pandemic as everyone spends more time at home. This year, we have run multiple online programs for various age groups in the late afternoons and early evenings to accommodate various time zones and preferences of participants. The most noticeable changes can be seen among participants in the 10-13-year-old, 13-15-year-old and LGBTQIA+ online programs.

## Changes among participants in 10-13 yr old online program

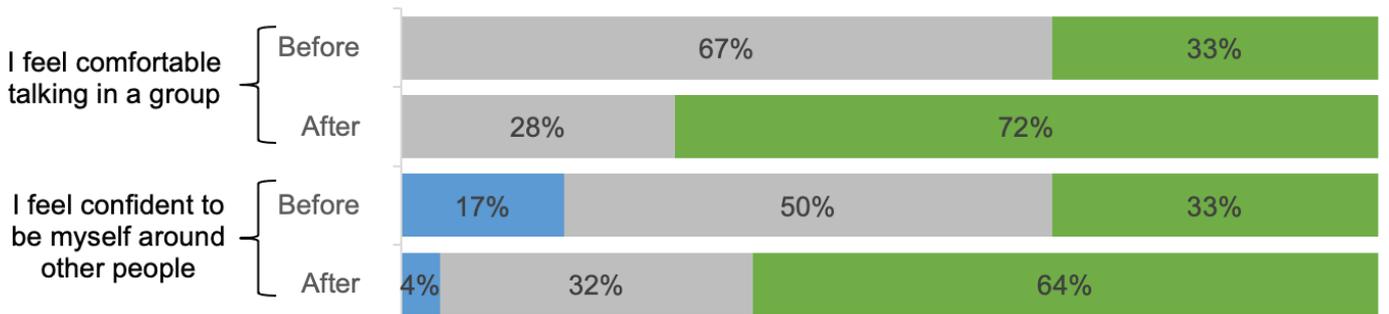


N=24 for before and N=23 for after, pooled from 4 programs

■ No ■ Maybe ■ Yes

Participants in the 10-13-year-old program improved their social interaction skills with other people. After participating in the six sessions of the program, participants felt more comfortable talking in a group and more confident to be themselves in the group and around other people.

## Changes among participants in 13-15 yr old online program



N=18-24 for before and N=25 for after, pooled from 3 programs

■ No ■ Maybe ■ Yes

Similar results can be seen among participants in the 13-15-year-old online program. After the program, these participants felt more comfortable talking in a group and felt more confident to be themselves around other people. The positive changes seen in participants from the 10-13-year-old and 13-15-year-old programs are driven by the friendly interactions and discussions in the sessions. Participants can not only interact with mentors to learn what they have done in their lives but they also enter a support network where they can share ideas which are beneficial for everyone. This generates a sense of belonging where participants are able to show their true selves in front of their peers and mentors. Particularly during the school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the online programs have been very important for Autistic young people to have that anchor of security and acceptance. For some participants, the online sessions are a highlight of the week as, for a small period of time, they can interact with other Autistic peers and enjoy the sessions.

Hence, I CAN Network provides an important service to Autistic young people at this time of great uncertainty. This is summarised by one parent of a 13-15-year-old participant:

*...[He] really enjoyed last night... he's looking really forward to it.*

*You guys continue to be awesome, we are so grateful for your existence which makes an enormous difference especially during these challenging times we are in. Thank you so much for all the work you do behind the scenes to make this happen for our kids.*

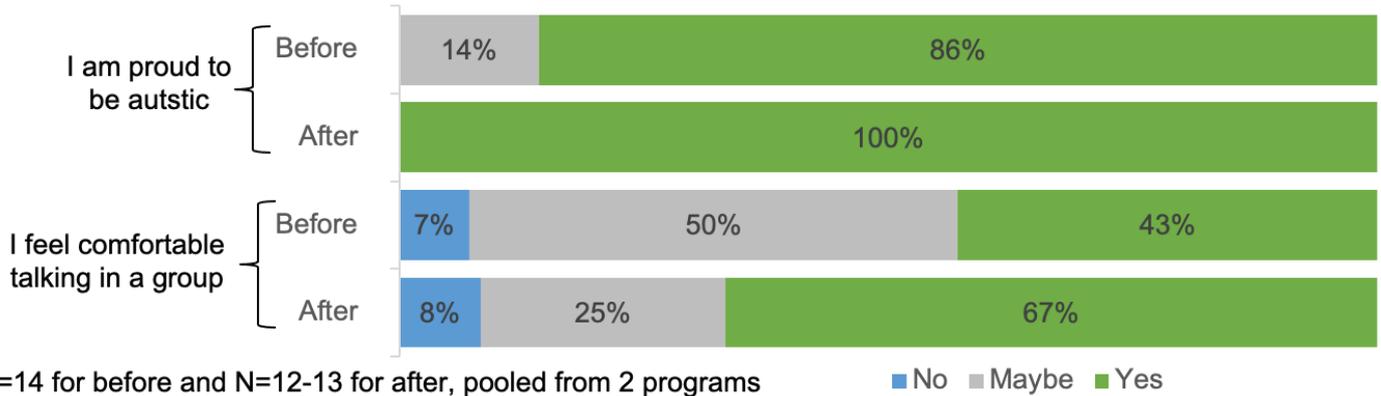
And another by a parent of a 10-13-year-old participant:

*Thanks so much for making him feel so at home. He came out of the last session and cried because it had ended. I don't think he's ever felt like he's belonged until this group and he also loved the mentors...*

# MENTORING AT THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN AUTISM AND LGBTQIA+

Many Autistic people who identify themselves as LGBTQIA+ or Queer (the preferred term among many young people) are at risk of not having meaningful support. To fulfil this unmet need, I CAN Network runs an online mentoring group for Queer Autistic young people. This group, run by a Queer Autistic young adult who is an experienced Program Facilitator, allows participants to share their interests and experiences in a safe, empowering environment with supportive mentors and peers. First piloted in mid-March 2020, the group is now run in every online mentoring cycle.

**Changes among participants in LGBTQIA+ online program**



Participants in the LGBTQIA+ group tend to come to our mentoring program with a sense of Autistic pride already in place. However, during the program, mentees felt more comfortable talking in a group, driven by the thoughtful discussion topics and conversations held during the sessions. The feedback from mentees indicates that there is immense value in being able to connect with other Queer Autistic peers and mentors. This has allowed mentees to normalise both their Autistic and Queer identities and view them more positively. These benefits are encapsulated in some of the quotes from recent mentees:

*... the nicest part of this whole thing was just getting to see people who have such similar personalities to me... I really liked meeting people and getting to see everyone's different perspectives when they're so similar to me. So I thought that was nice to see and meet people who are so similar to me, yet have such different opinions.*

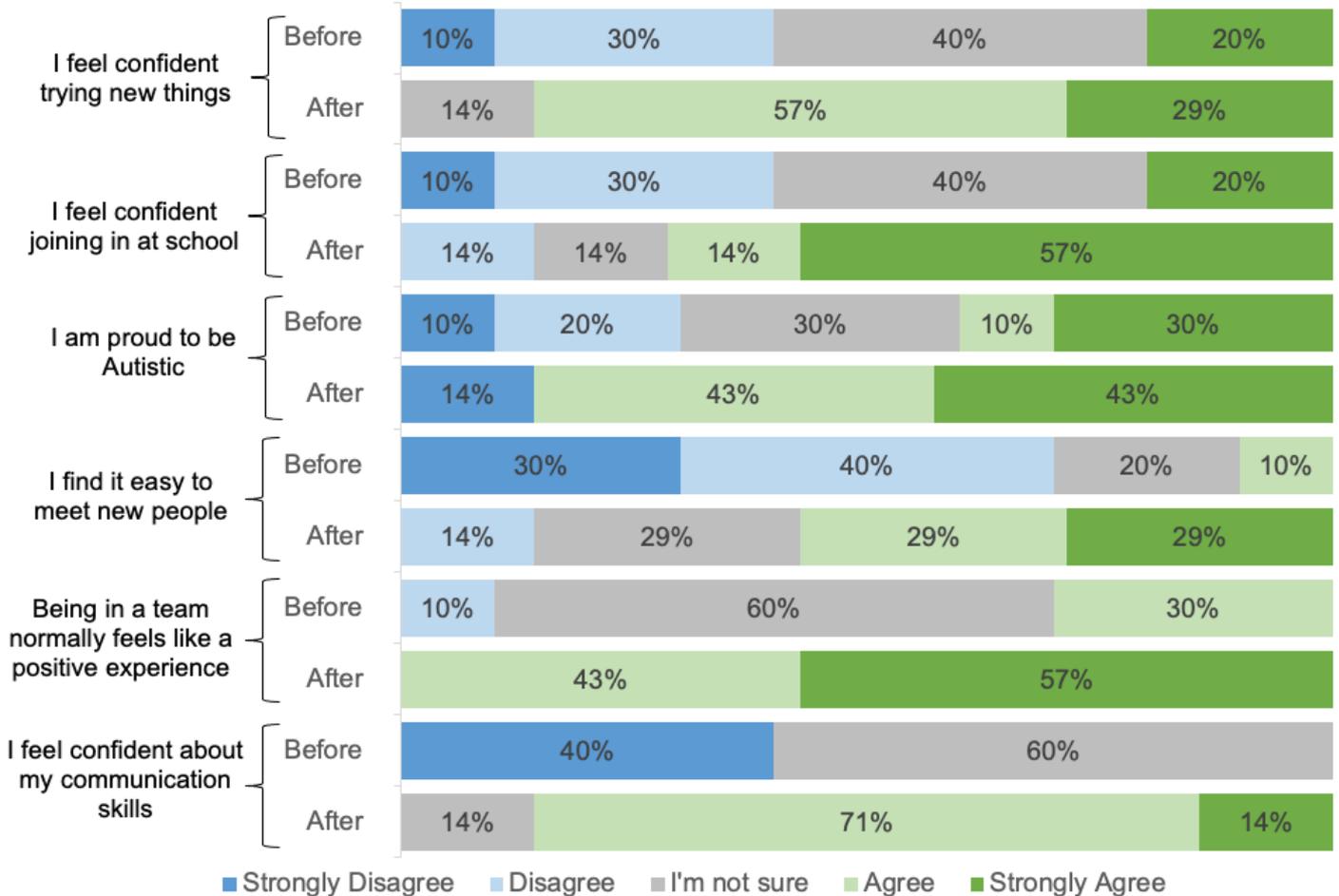
*I'm really grateful because I actually learnt a lot more about myself in this group... you're [the group] also very nice, friendly and weird and quirky like me.*

# FACE-TO-FACE PROGRAMS

I CAN Network is well-known for running face-to-face mentoring programs for Autistic students in schools. Called I CAN School® programs, they aim to build self-confidence, belonging, optimism and self-acceptance among mentees in the program. Mentees also develop teamwork and communication skills, essential life skills that will assist them in interacting with other people in the future. Regardless of where we run an I CAN School® program, we see changes among mentees participating in our programs. Numurkah Secondary College, located 60km east of Echuca, is a prime example of this.

## NUMURKAH SECONDARY COLLEGE FACE-TO-FACE PROGRAM

Changes among mentees in Numurkah SC face-to-face program



N=10 for before and N=7 for after

Mentees that participated in the program showed changes in themselves. They felt more confident to try new things and to join in at school and were prouder to be Autistic. The increased self-confidence was encapsulated in feedback from mentees with one saying that the program helped them *...say I can to things I feel uncomfortable...* Mentees also showed massive improvements in their social interaction, teamwork and communication skills. This enabled mentees to change how they interact with other people with one mentee being able to *...talk to people, meet new people*. Overall, the face-to-face mentoring program in Numurkah Secondary College has had a massive impact on mentees participating in the program, as encapsulated by one of the mentees:

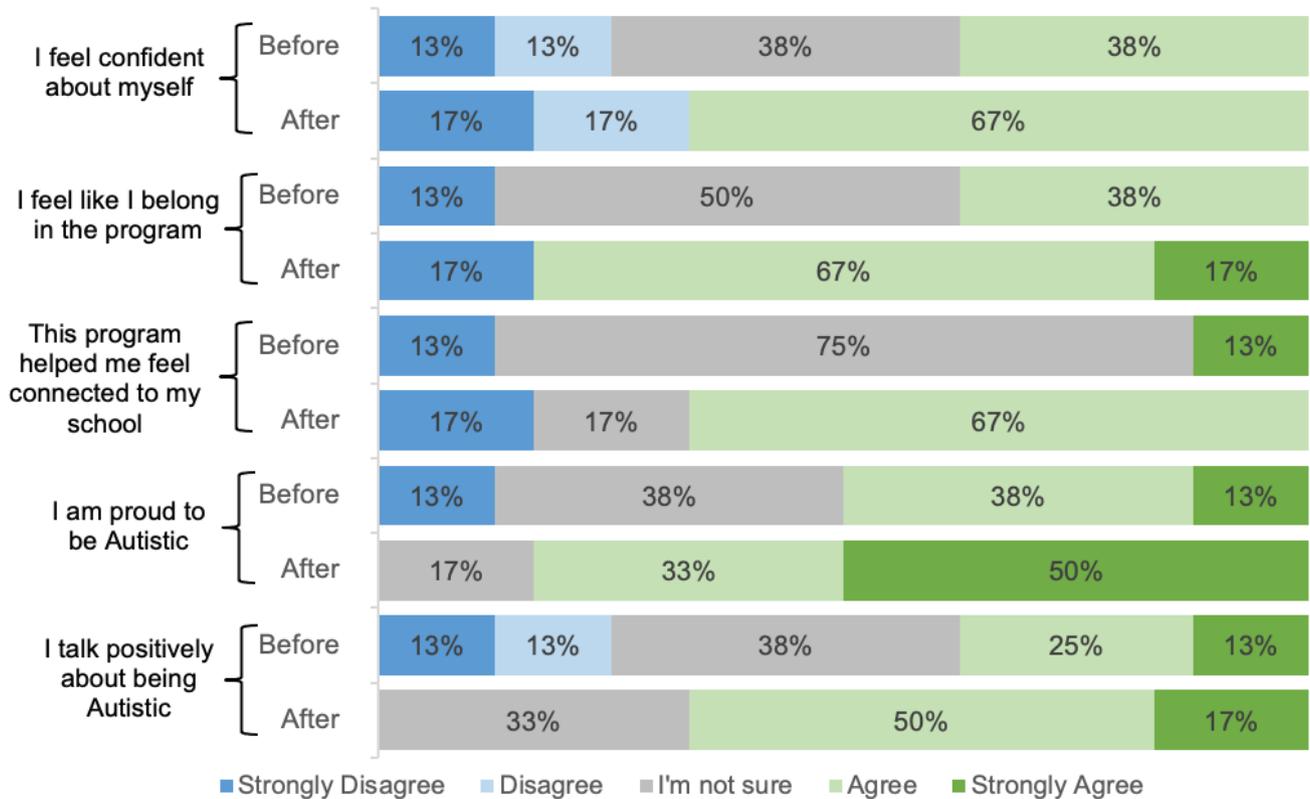
*It [the program] have help [sic] me develop my skills. I have noticed major positive changes in everyone around school and in the community. It has made me a better person.*

# ADAPTING THE SCHOOL PROGRAMS TO AN ONLINE FORMAT

The I CAN School® programs have a massive impact on the lives of Autistic students, even if they have to be delivered online. This was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic where many schools across Australia had to close and transition to remote learning from March to May 2020. The pandemic impacted the I CAN School® programs in 2020, but we addressed the challenge head-on with a laser-like focus on converting these programs to an online format. The three years of groundwork we had done with our National Online Mentoring program made the process less daunting than what other organisations might have faced.

Some schools were happy to transition their face-to-face programs to online delivery, where Program Facilitators and mentors delivered mentoring sessions online to students. For instance, we ran an I CAN School® program with students from Santa Maria College, a Catholic girls high school in Northcote, Victoria. In all, seven weekly sessions were run from late April to early June.

**Changes among mentees in the Santa Maria online program**



N=8 students for before and N=6 students for after

Despite the mentoring sessions being delivered online, we still saw the type of favourable impact that we've come to expect in our I CAN School® programs. Not only did all mentees enjoy the program but they also sensed positive changes in themselves. By participating in the program, mentees felt more confident about themselves and felt an increased sense of belonging in the program and connection to their school. Mentees were also prouder of their Autism and were more likely to talk positively about their Autism. These are generated by the opportunity to virtually meet and to connect with other Autistic people in their school, relieving their sense of isolation. The same sentiments can be felt from the supervising staff member of the mentoring program. They remarked that the mentoring program allows Autistic students:

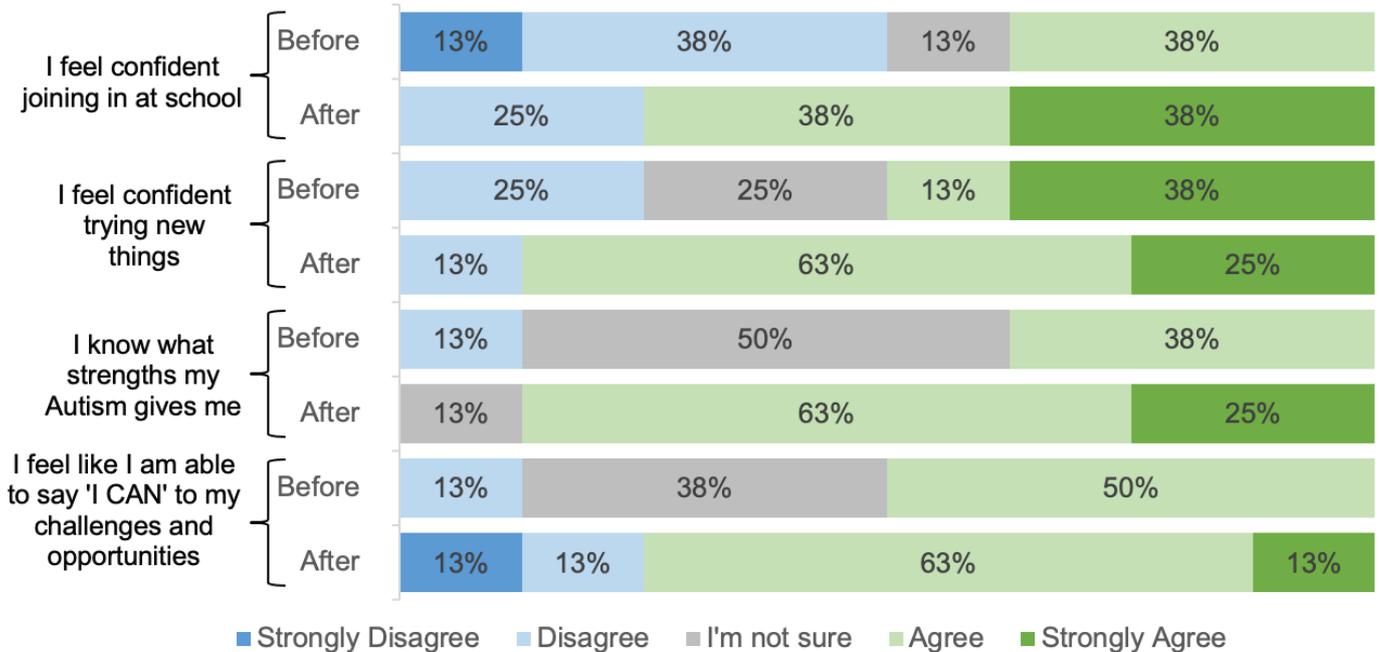
*...to come together comfortably and with a safe place to talk and connect... [and] come out of their shells in different ways and to different degrees...*

This case study, along with the Remote Online Mentoring Program, shows the viability of delivering school mentoring programs via online platforms. This option has not only served us well during the pandemic but it also showcases a vast opportunity to meaningfully engage with schools in remote areas or outside of our regional hubs where face-to-face programs are typically delivered.

# REMOTE ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAMS

I CAN Network is pioneering online platforms to deliver its mentoring programs to Autistic young people across Australia. Besides our National Online Mentoring Program, I CAN Network also runs Remote Online Mentoring Programs to rural and remote schools in Australia. These programs deliver online sessions during school hours to groups of Autistic students and follow a similar content plan to our face-to-face programs. In 2019, I CAN Network ran five remote online programs for 40 Autistic students across multiple schools in rural and remote Queensland.

**Changes among mentees in the Mareeba SHS remote program**



N=8 for before and N=8 for after

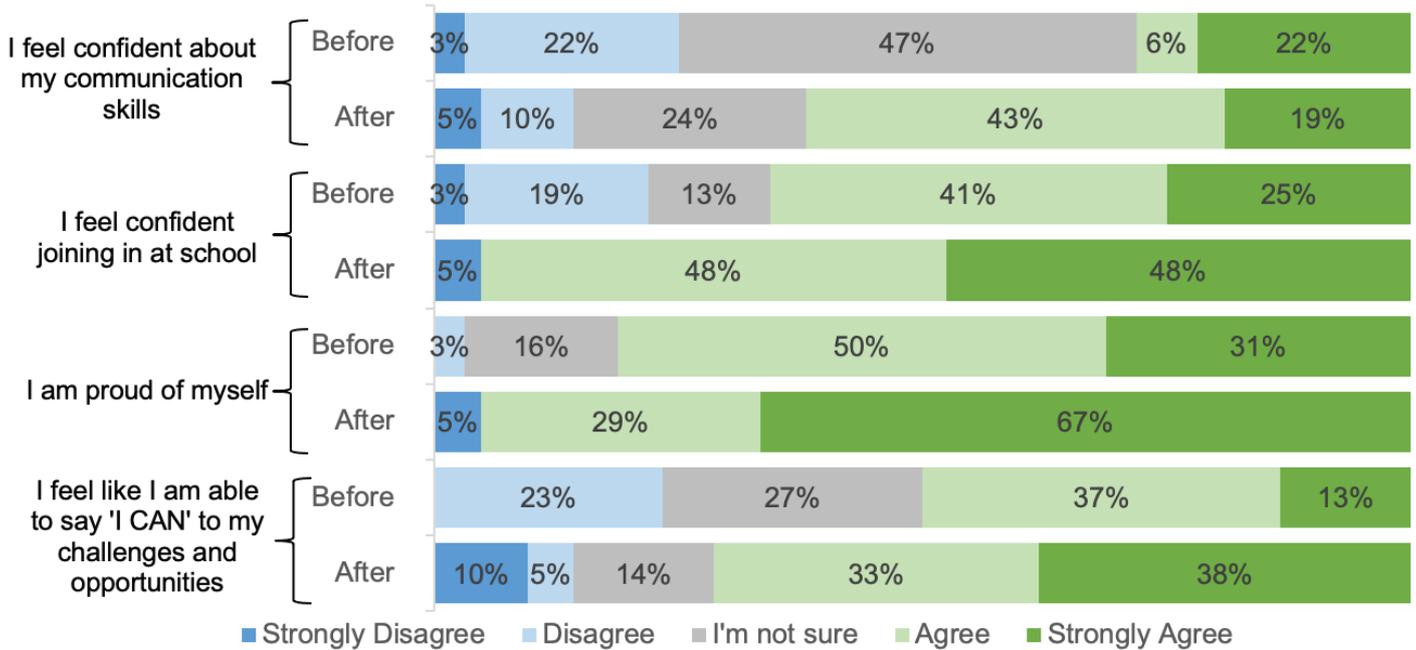
One of the first Queensland schools to participate in a remote online program was Mareeba State High School, located 40km south-west of Cairns in Far North Queensland. Having experienced eight mentoring sessions from early-May 2019 to mid-July 2019 and an in-person "program culmination activity" in late-July 2019, the eight mentees who were surveyed showed changes in themselves. Mentees in the program felt more confident to join in at school. They also showed increased self-confidence and self-awareness of themselves, understanding the strengths that their Autism gave them. In addition, they were more likely to adopt an 'I CAN' attitude towards their challenges and opportunities. In summary, the remote online program not only had a positive impact on how mentees in Mareeba SHS viewed themselves but they also had fun participating in the program.

This case study shows the impact of remote online mentoring programs in serving Autistic students in rural and remote areas of Australia. I CAN Network hopes to roll out online mentoring programs to more rural and remote schools across Queensland to empower even more Autistic young people in these areas.

# I CAN IMAGINATION CLUB®

I CAN Ltd runs I CAN Imagination Club® for primary school students who have learning differences or experience social anxiety who may/ may not have an Autism diagnosis. I CAN Imagination Clubs develop social connection, self-confidence, emotional literacy and resilience among primary school mentees. In the evaluation results which follow, primary school students who participate in I CAN Imagination Club® find it easier to connect with their school, their peers and feel more confident about themselves.

**Changes among mentees in Goulburn-Murray Interschool Imagination Clubs**



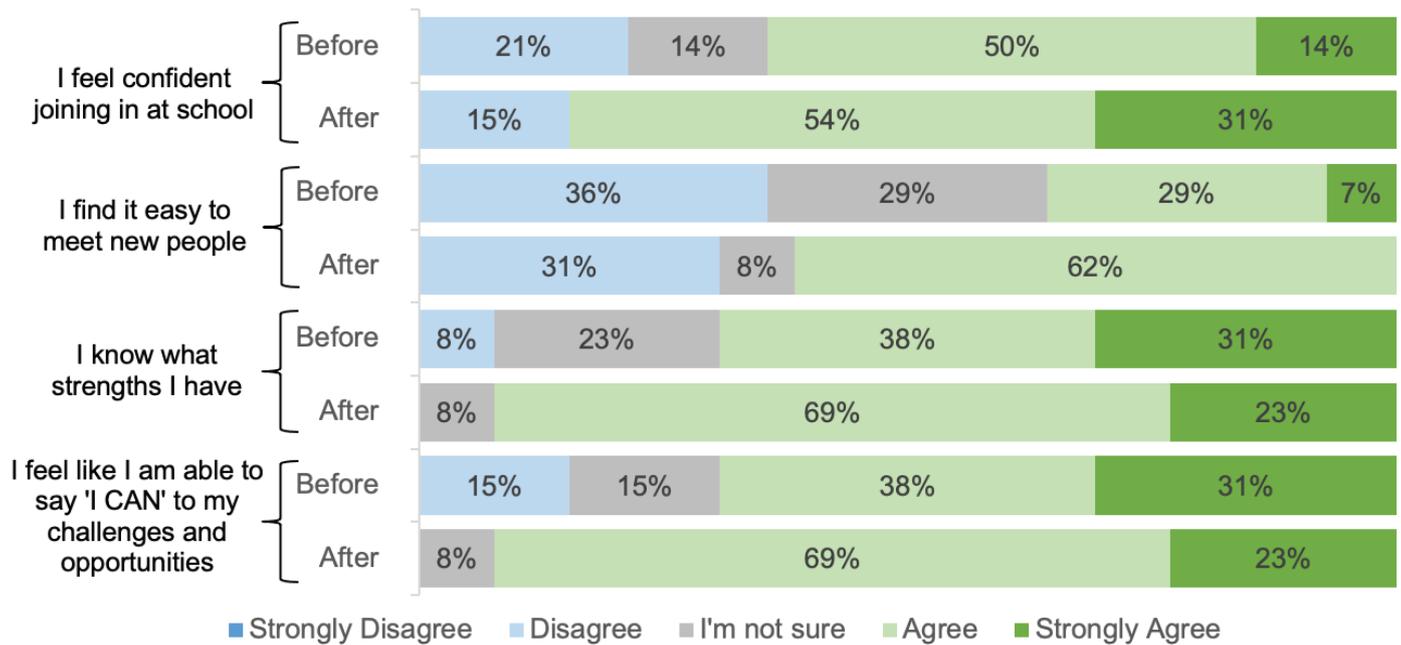
Before: N=32 from 3 programs After: N=21 from 3 programs

The Goulburn Murray region runs three inter-school I CAN Imagination Clubs across Echuca, Kyabram and Waaia. These inter-school I CAN Imagination Clubs bring together students from different primary schools in the regional town.

Across the three inter-school I CAN Imagination Clubs, mentees exhibited positive changes in terms of how they viewed themselves. After participating in the program, mentees felt more confident in their communication skills and were more willing to join in at school. Mentees also expressed a stronger sense of self-pride and were more likely to adopt an 'I CAN' attitude toward their challenges and opportunities. Feedback from Imagination Club mentees highlighted how fun and enjoyable they found the program. In addition to making new friends in the program (*I have loved meeting new friends...*), mentees also expressed their increased self-confidence (*I have been more confident about myself*) and the skills and abilities they gained in I CAN Imagination Club® (*...I can get along with new people*).

## ST PATRICK'S PRIMARY SCHOOL IMAGINATION CLUB

**Changes among mentees in St Patrick's Imagination Club**



N=13-14 for before and N=13 for after

Similar results could be seen among I CAN Imagination Club® mentees at St Patrick's Primary School in Camperdown, located 165km south-west of Melbourne. Mentees in the program showed a stronger connection to school as they felt more confident to join in at school and to meet new people. These are reinforced by comments from mentees who not only found the program fun but were also able to socialise and make new friends (It [Imagination Club] helps me make friends). They also became more self-aware of themselves with a better understanding of their strengths and increased confidence to say 'I CAN' to their challenges and opportunities.

Collectively, these results show the positive impact I CAN Imagination Club® are having to the self-confidence and connections to school among primary school mentees. In particular, I CAN Imagination Club® provide an important service to neurodiverse children in rural areas whose parents find it more difficult to access support services for their child.

# THE POSITIVE IMPACTS OF THE TRAINEE MENTOR PROGRAM

A cornerstone of our work is our commitment to invest in and nurture Autistic talent. Some of our most outstanding mentor staff have been I CAN mentees themselves. The trainee mentor program provides a pathway for Autistic high school students to hone their skills in public speaking, facilitation and should they want it, pursue post-school employment with I CAN Network or other initiatives which support social/ emotional learning in education.

Mentees who show self-confidence, other-centredness and leadership can be invited to become trainee mentors. Working closely with the Program Facilitator and Mentor, they are responsible for supervising and running activities with a small group of mentees. They also refine the skills gained in the program and learn additional content, preparing them for future post-school pathways within and beyond I CAN Network. To learn what trainee mentors have experienced and gained in their roles, we interviewed trainee mentors across Victoria and Queensland in late 2019.

Overall, trainee mentors enjoyed their work, especially when interacting with mentees in their group. Trainee mentors relished the opportunity to meet with mentees in their group, becoming friendly and having fun with them. They also provide lived experience in embracing the positive side of Autism, which can influence the positive culture of the group and provide younger mentees with strong positive role models.

*...I've tried to actively participate in making all the other students feel comfortable by talking to them and I enjoy talking to them as friends and cool guys because they're all cool... I also have tried to remind others about their special abilities and how there is nothing weird about being on the Autism Spectrum and how your abilities... they can allow you to do something in great detail...*

Trainee mentors also developed a variety of important life skills. Besides gaining leadership experience, trainee mentors learnt to speak more clearly and confidently to other people. Their interpersonal skills also improved as they became more aware of how they interact with other people, maintaining eye contact and actively listening to other people. This allowed them to retain more of what was said and to demonstrate more empathy to other people.

*I think I've gained the ability to, sort of, differentiate different points of views with just people in general which helps with being able to be more empathetic of people.*

Lastly, the opportunity to lead a small group of mentees increased the self-confidence of trainee mentors. They learnt to take challenging situations in their stride and to become more adaptive to unfamiliar situations, improvising when unexpected events occur. These factors enhanced their overall sense of self:

*...with the belief one, at first I was a bit nervous with it, because he kept putting me in unfamiliar situations [sic]. And, so after a while, I got used to it because I [knew] that I could do it...*

Trainee mentors hope to continue working in their roles, taking on new challenges, tasks and responsibilities, to build their capacity to potentially become I CAN mentor staff in the future. Overall, the trainee mentor role provides opportunities for promising mentees to develop their skills and deepen their positive sense of self in a well-supported environment. I CAN Network is currently developing the trainee mentor program further to provide a viable pathway for mentees to become future I CAN mentor staff and build a school's sense of ownership in the program.

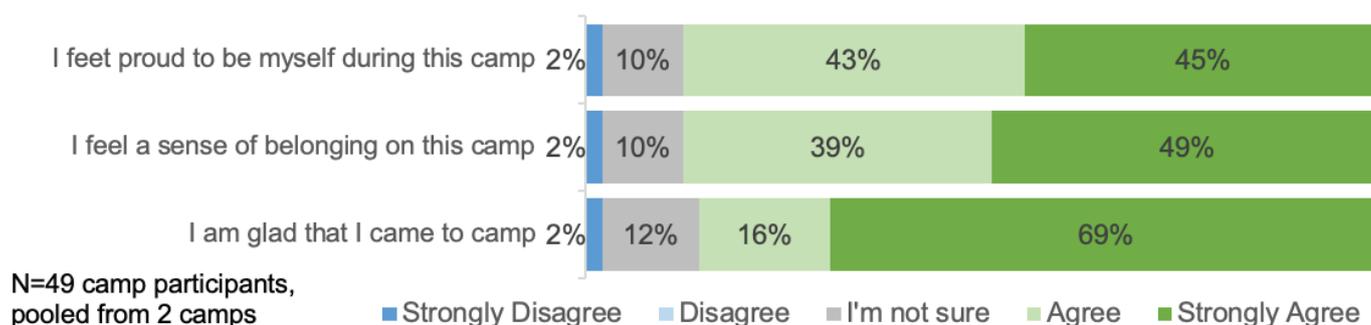
# EVENTS AND CAMPAIGNS

Besides face-to-face and online mentoring programs, I CAN Network also runs a variety of events and campaigns to engage members of the Autism community and the public. These events and campaigns aim to deliver lived experiences and insights on a strengths-based approach to Autism which will drive a rethink of Autism from negative to positive. The following results highlight the value of the events and campaigns we run in I CAN Network.

## CAMPS

I CAN Network runs camps for Autistic young people and adults within and outside our face-to-face and online programs. These camps involve running indoor and outdoor activities to increase the self-confidence and self-acceptance of camp participants and organising social activities such as 'Dress to Obsess' to build social connections among camp participants.

**Selected results from camp evaluations**



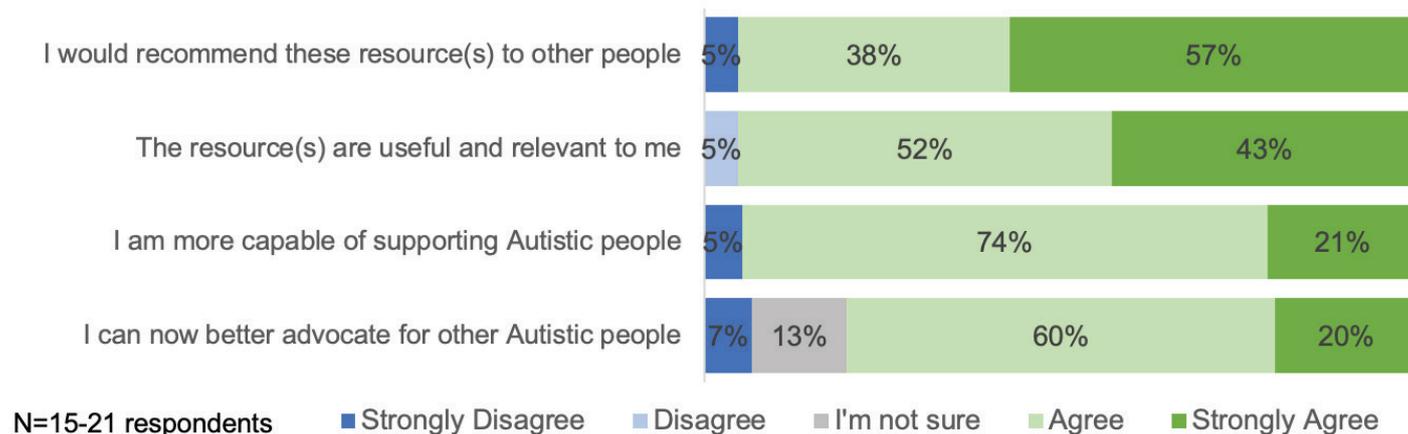
Two camps were held for Autistic young people aged 12-18 years in metropolitan Melbourne in May and August 2019. The camps were an overwhelming success with 88% camp participants feeling proud to be themselves and experiencing a sense of belonging at camp. There was also a high satisfaction rate among the camp participants with 85% of them feeling glad that they came to camp. Accompanying these results are comments which highlight how camp participants have met and made friends with other Autistic people (*'new friends and getting to know them...'*) and the fact that they could be themselves (*'...I don't need to feel ashamed of who I am'*). Also among the comments is a consensus that participants enjoyed the camp activities such as horsemanship (riding a horse) and archery (*I liked being able to do archery to my heart's content...*). Overall, the camps are a great way for Autistic young people to meet and bond with like-minded people and to form unforgettable memories.



## SHARING AUTISTIC INSIGHTS THROUGH RESOURCES, TIP SHEETS AND WEBINARS

In 2020, I CAN Network developed seven webinars and seven tip sheets for Autistic young people and adults and their networks. Sponsored by the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services' Victorian Disability Advocacy Futures Grant program, these webinars and tip sheets aimed to share lived experiences relating to self-advocacy and managing key life transitions.

### Survey results for tip sheets and webinars



The tip sheets and webinars were promoted on 18 posts on our Facebook page. Altogether, these posts reached a total of 212,700 Facebook users with 17,217 of them actively engaging the posts (shares, reactions, comments, clicks). Most engagement on the tip sheets and webinars came from parents and teachers who were supporting an Autistic person. They received the tip sheets and webinars very positively with 95% saying that they would recommend the resources to other people. In relation to this, they shared the resources with other people in their networks with one parent saying that they *...shared the LGBT+ tip sheet with several parents in my parent groups...* This example implies that the tip sheets (in this case, the "Autism and LGBTQIA+" tip sheet) fulfil an unmet need in the Autism community. 95% also said that the resources were useful and relevant to them as they built their capacity to support and to advocate for Autistic people. These arise from the resources providing a unique, lived experience of Autism which can influence how they engage and interact with Autistic people. One teacher found that the tip sheets gave them *...a better sense of what my students with Autism might be experiencing*, allowing them to adjust their teaching style to Autistic students.

These results highlight the value of sharing the lived experiences and insights of Autistic people through visual and audio resources such as tip sheets and webinars to other Autistic people and their networks. They provide a mechanism in which I CAN Network will drive a rethink of Autism in the Autism community and the public.

# CONCLUSION

In this social impact report we have presented the positive changes in Autistic young people who participate in our mentoring programs and the enhanced capacity of their networks to support Autistic people. These results support our Purpose 'to prove what Autistics CAN do' in pursuit of our Vision 'a world that embraces Autism'. The results also evidence the role I CAN Ltd's Outcomes Framework has played in providing a yardstick to measure I CAN Network's services and programs. We have the data to say that I CAN Network is proving to be a positive force in Autism.

I CAN Network stands ready to do the work to scale up our role in supporting Autistic young people to develop a positive Autistic identity and to feel connected with their school communities. We aim to expand our online and face-to-face mentoring programs to reach out to more Autistic young people and adults across Australia. We will also continue to develop our trainee mentor program to establish an employment pathway where I CAN mentees can become I CAN Mentors. Lastly, we will engage stakeholders to deliver our lived experiences and Autistic insights to inform policies and good practices for supporting Autistic people. For instance, we look forward to partnering with the Victorian Government to play a meaningful role in the implementation of the Victorian Autism Education Strategy.

There are many ways in which you can support our work in I CAN Network. You can:

- [Donate to I CAN Network](#). Donations to I CAN Ltd go to our Public Fund to help grow our program.
- Promote our [I CAN Schools](#), [I CAN Imagination Club](#) and [I CAN Online programs](#).
- Work for us in I CAN Network. Check our ['Work with Us' page](#) to find jobs that we advertise.
- Share an event or campaign of ours such as the AWETISM Expo and the Humans on the Autism Spectrum campaign.

We hope that you have enjoyed reading the social impact report and seeing the amazing work we are doing for Autistic people and their communities.

I CAN Network Ltd

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