



# A SAFE SPACE SOCIAL IMPACT REPORT

I CAN NETWORK LTD 2021 • CREATED BY DR JAMES ONG  
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>FOREWORD.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>AUTHOR PREFACE .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>I CAN ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAM .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>OUTCOMES PRODUCED BY THE NATIONAL ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAM .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>WHAT DOES THE ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAM MEAN TO YOU? LESSONS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE'S COMMENTS AND CREATIONS.....</b>	<b>8</b>
HAVING A POSITIVE PROGRAM EXPERIENCE .....	9
ESTABLISHING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS.....	10
INCREASING SELF-CONFIDENCE .....	11
STRENGTHENING AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE'S LINKS WITH THEIR SPECIAL INTERESTS.....	11
<b>UNCOVERING UNEXPECTED INSIGHTS FROM PARENTS ON THE IMPACT OF ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAMS.....</b>	<b>12</b>
POSITIVE PROGRAM EXPERIENCE.....	13
ESTABLISHING A COMMUNITY OF LIKE-MINDED PEERS.....	13
IMPROVED SOCIAL AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS .....	14
MORE POSITIVE VIEW OF SELF .....	14
IMPROVED MENTAL WELLBEING .....	15
CONCLUSION.....	15
<b>I CAN SCHOOL® MENTORING PROGRAM.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>QUEENSLAND PROGRAMS.....</b>	<b>16</b>
MENTEE ATTENDANCE DATA FOR I CAN SCHOOL® MENTORING PROGRAMS IN QUEENSLAND. ....	16
COMPILED SCHOOL EVALUATION RESULTS IN QUEENSLAND IN 2021. ....	17
CASE STUDY: ALEXANDRA HILLS STATE HIGH SCHOOL .....	19
<b>VICTORIAN SCHOOL PROGRAMS: CASE STUDIES.....</b>	<b>21</b>
GREATER MELBOURNE.....	21
NORTHERN VICTORIA .....	23
CASE STUDY: EUROA SECONDARY COLLEGE MENTORING PROGRAM.....	23
CASE STUDY: YEAR 7 TRANSITION PROGRAM IN ECHUCA .....	25
SOUTH WEST VICTORIA.....	26
BARWON .....	28
<b>I CAN AWETISM EXPO.....</b>	<b>30</b>
OUR ANNUAL EVENT. DATA FROM 2021 .....	30
<b>YOUNG PERSON'S PERSPECTIVE ON 2021 AWETISM EXPO .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>PARENT'S AND SCHOOL STAFF'S PERSPECTIVES ON 2021 AWETISM EXPO .....</b>	<b>31</b>
CONCLUSION .....	32
I CAN INSIGHTS.....	33
CONCLUSION .....	34

# FOREWORD

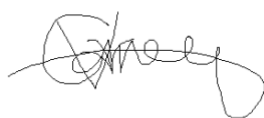
Welcome to our *2021 Social Impact Report: A safe space.*

One of our staff members is Brendan Freeman. Brendan was a student participant in our first I CAN School program at Marymede Catholic College (2014 – 15) in South Morang, Victoria. In a video testimony reflecting on the program Brendan said, *“I see it as a program that allows me to be myself in an environment that’s safe”*.

Brendan’s appreciation of the safety provided by the program has continued to be the most consistent feedback we have heard about the I CAN Network mentoring program. Brendan is now an I CAN Program Facilitator and is delivering the mentoring program he benefited from. Brendan is one of the 31 I CAN staff who have graduated from our high school mentoring program to our paid Autistic workforce. Many of Brendan’s afternoons and evenings are now spent delivering online mentoring to groups of Autistic/ neurodivergent young people throughout Australia as part of I CAN Online.

As a founder and CEO, it is the most humbling experience to see the dream I had in my mid-20s now facilitate such positive change for people. The first person who supported my dream was James Ong who bravely joined me in sharing the I CAN vision with others. James has worked tirelessly to build up the evidence base informing our programs. The whole team – now over 100 people – are extremely grateful to James for his integrity and adaptiveness in continuing to pioneer our Autism-sensitive outcomes framework and evaluation tools.

Thank you to our many partners and collaborators for their support. This report is a vehicle through which I CAN Network can report back to the Autistic community and transparently share our progress in facilitating the ‘I CAN’ attitudes of our young people.



**Chris Varney**  
Founding Director & Chief Enabling Officer





# AUTHOR PREFACE

For many people, 2021 has been a difficult year due to the COVID-19 pandemic still impacting all facets of life. In particular, Autistic young people continue to be negatively impacted by the lockdowns and remote learning of 2021. Despite the difficulties in 2021, I CAN Network continues to grow from strength to strength, with programs that are making a positive impact to Autistic young people and their parents and school staff.



On behalf of the I CAN Network, I would like to present you the evaluation results of I CAN Network's programs in 2021. Our programs are many and varied, ranging from online and school mentoring programs for Autistic young people to the 2021 AWETISM Expo and professional development sessions for parents and school staff. This report describes the outcomes our programs are achieving in Autistic young people via a variety of data sources, ranging from survey results to comments and even creations made by Autistic young people participating in our mentoring programs. There is always a good news story to tell in each program which I encourage you to read.

This report has been the culmination of the evaluation work undertaken in 2021 in I CAN Network across all programs. I hope that you enjoy reading and learning more about I CAN Network's programs as much as I have conducting, compiling and reporting on the evaluation results in this report.



**Dr James Ong**

Co-founder, Evaluation Manager and Policy Analyst, I CAN Network

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact people's lives in 2021. Most notably, the lockdowns, particularly in Victoria and New South Wales, have disrupted school programs and forced schools to run classes remotely. These have made a negative impact to students' mental health, particularly Autistic students who already face difficulties in schools and classrooms. I CAN Network has continued to fulfil the unmet needs of Autistic young people in building social connections with Autistic peers and stimulating change in themselves. This social impact report details the positive results we have achieved among Autistic young people participating in our online and school mentoring programs in 2021 and parents and school staff engaging with us through the 2021 AWETISM Expo and professional development sessions.

The National Online Mentoring Program maintained its strong growth in 2021, engaging 788 Autistic young people over 154 programs across 7 cycles. Autistic young people enjoy our online mentoring programs, with satisfaction rates over 80% in each of the seven cycles. In the mentoring programs, Autistic young people feel more comfortable to be themselves and to interact with other people, as shown by the 9% increase in mentees being able to be themselves in the group and the 14% increase in participants feeling more comfortable to chat with other group members. Additionally, mentees' creations and parents' comments reveal new impacts of our mentoring programs on Autistic young people such as stronger links with their special interests and improved mental wellbeing. Collectively, these results detail the positive impacts our mentoring programs are having to Autistic young people, both in expected and unexpected ways.

School Mentoring Programs in Queensland and Victoria are seeing strong participation rates from Autistic school students who continue to benefit. In Queensland, we have engaged 259 Autistic students in 16 state schools, with an 86% satisfaction rate. Autistic students participating in these programs felt improvements in themselves, with an 11% increase in feeling more positive about Autism and a 14% increase in their self-confidence, and built social connections with other Autistic students, evidenced by a 23% increase in feeling connected to other Autistic students. Similar results were seen among individual schools in Victoria that ran mentoring programs within and/or outside lockdown periods. Despite the lockdowns, Autistic students were willing to participate in I CAN Network's school mentoring programs, with average weekly session attendance in Greater Melbourne programs around 60-80% while programs were delivered remotely. Collectively, these results show the positive impact our school mentoring programs can have to Autistic students and the ability to run them face-to-face or online with no loss in engagement from mentees.

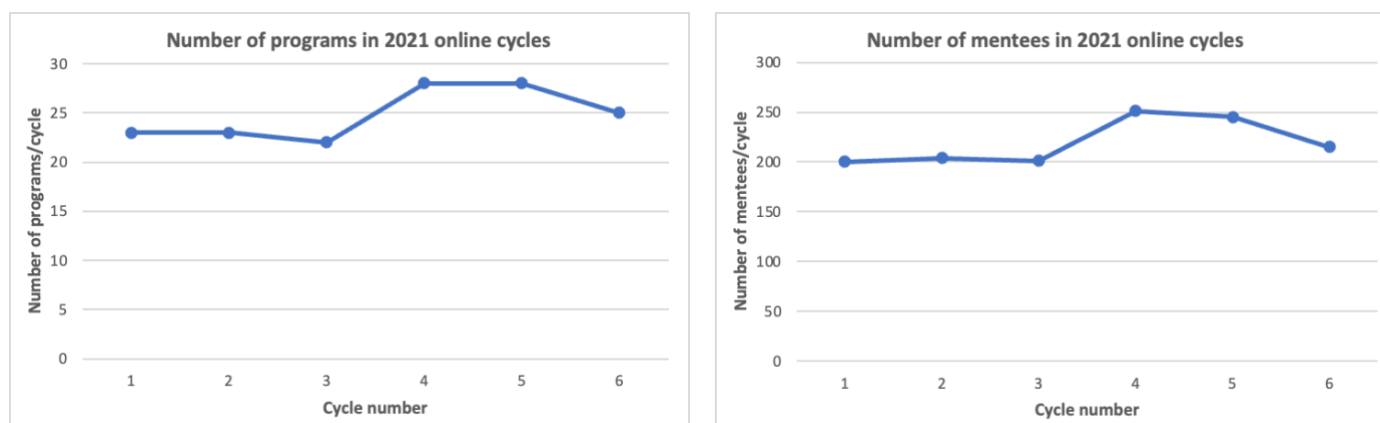
Lastly, events outside the mentoring programs continue to see strong engagement from both Autistic young people and their parents and school staff. Autistic young people, parents and school staff had a positive experience with the 2021 AWETISM Expo, with 98% young people and 96% parents and school staff enjoying it. In the Expo, Autistic young people, parents and school staff enjoyed listening to presentations from Autistic young people, with young people listening what their peers enjoy and parents and school staff learning about the lived experiences and special interests of Autistic young people. The professional development sessions continue to be well-received, with 96% school staff enjoying the sessions, and are driving changes in practice, with 99% feeling they can apply what they have learnt from the sessions to their work.

Overall, the 2021 social impact report packs a lot of good news about our programs despite a difficult 2021. Our programs can not only help Autistic young people build their social connections and realise changes in themselves but can also help parents and school staff understand how to better engage Autistic young people via a strengths-based approach. We hope that you enjoy reading what we have found in our programs in 2021.

# I CAN ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAM

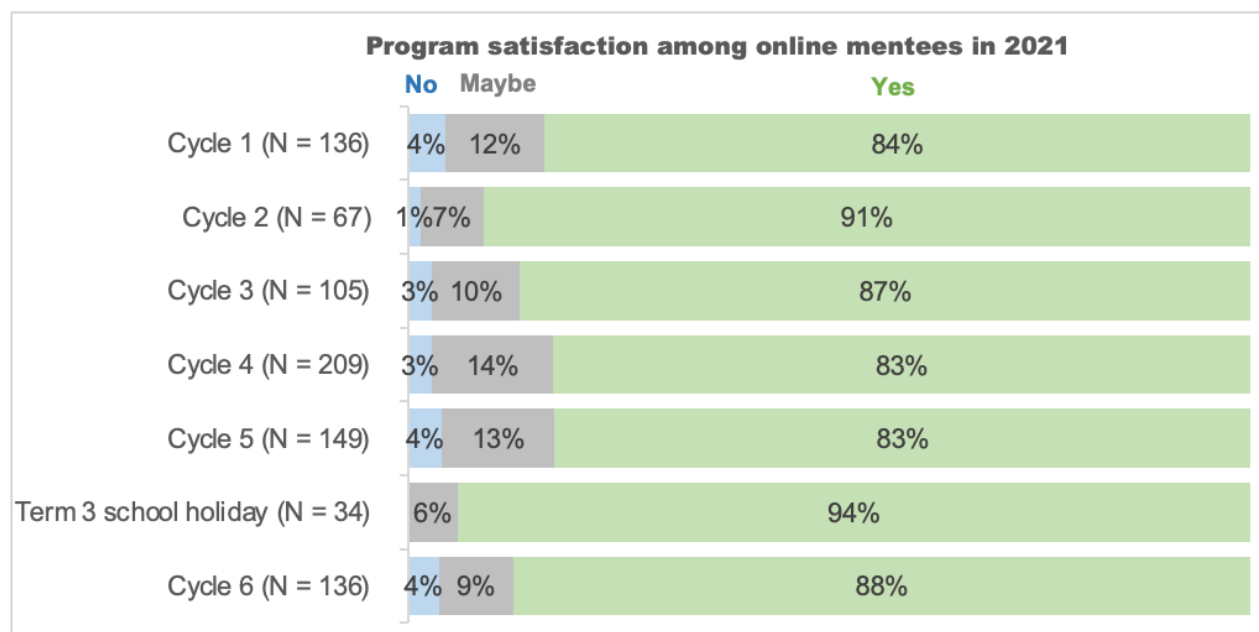
The National Online Mentoring Program continues to provide an essential service to Autistic young people across Australia, even in the face of uncertainty in 2021. Over seven online cycles in 2021 (Including an additional cycle during the term 3 school holidays), we have:

Run	Over	Engaging	Providing
924	154	788	1370
Sessions	Programs	Autistic young people	Spaces in programs



**Figure 1: The number of programs run (left) and mentees engaged (right) in each major online cycle of 2021.**

For online cycles 1 to 3 in 2021, we ran an average of 23 programs per cycle, engaging around 202 Autistic young people across Australia (Figure 1). However, as Victoria and New South Wales went into extended lockdowns in the second half of 2021, demand for our online mentoring programs rose. For online cycles 4 and 5, we ran 28 programs, reaching out to around 250 Autistic young people across Australia (Figure 1). The extended lockdowns also motivated us to run an additional 5 programs during the term 3 school holidays that engaged 42 Autistic young people. Cycle 6 was slightly smaller in scale compared to cycles 4 and 5, at 25 programs for 215 Autistic young people (Figure 1).

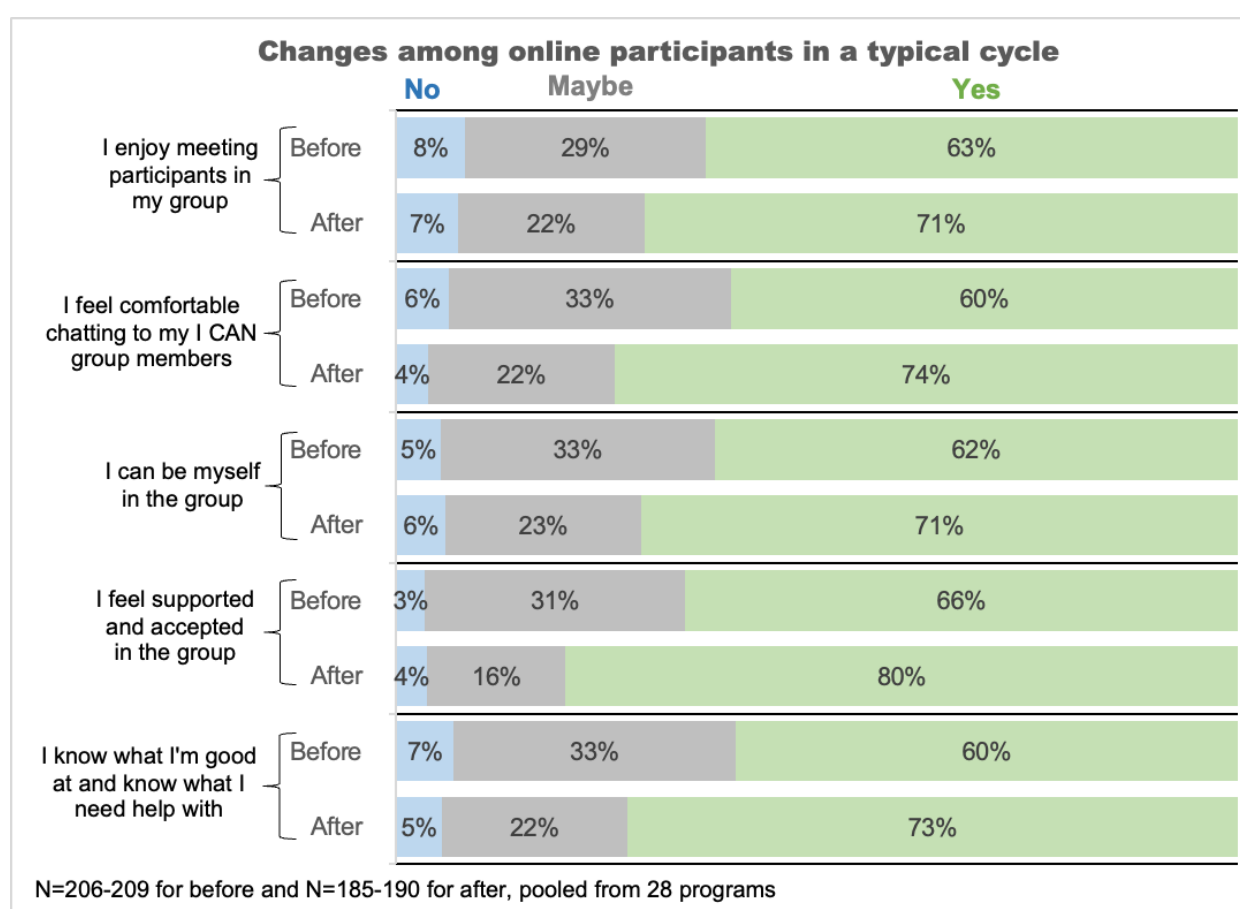


**Figure 2: Program satisfaction of the online mentoring programs across different cycles in 2021.**

Despite variations in the number of online mentoring programs for each cycle, Autistic young people are continuing to enjoy them (Figure 2). Across all the online cycles in 2021, satisfaction rates have remained high, with more than 80% Autistic young people saying that they enjoyed the online mentoring programs. The high satisfaction rates are a testament to the hard work of the administrative and mentoring staff who continue to run high-quality online mentoring programs for Autistic young people.

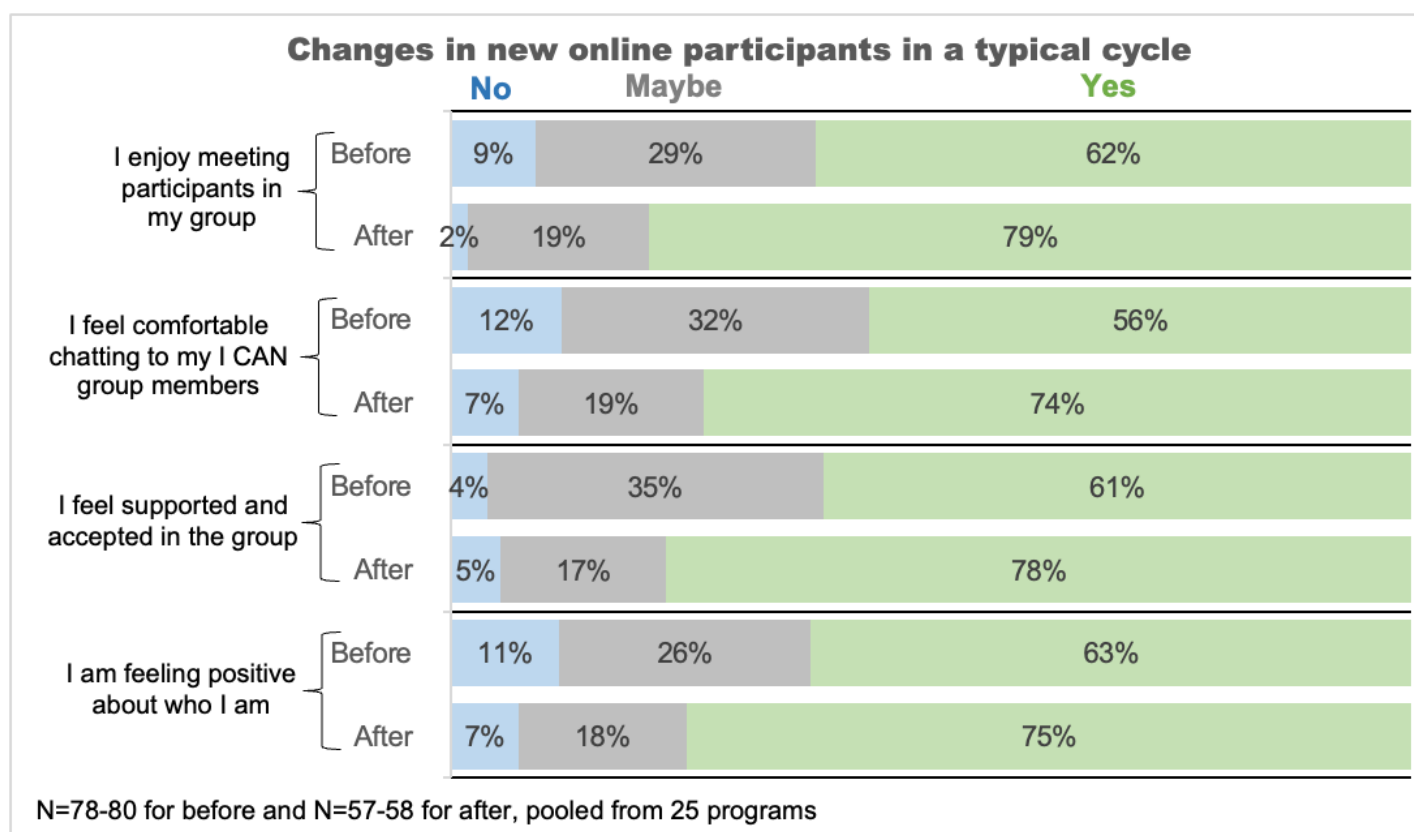
## OUTCOMES PRODUCED BY THE NATIONAL ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAM

I CAN Network's National Online Mentoring Programs are producing outcomes for Autistic young people such as social connection and self-acceptance. These outcomes are important in a year of continual upheaval and uncertainty in 2021. The following results provide a spotlight of the positive outcomes Autistic young people across Australia are achieving in the National Online Mentoring Programs.



**Figure 3: Changes in the distribution of responses to statements among participants before and after the online program in a typical six-week cycle.**

The online mentoring programs allowed Autistic young people to feel more comfortable to interact with other people (Figure 3). There was an 8% increase in Autistic young people who enjoy meeting other participants in their group and a 14% increase in feeling more comfortable to communicate with other group members. The online group environment also supports Autistic young people's personal growth. Autistic young people being able to be themselves in the group increased by 9%, and their feelings of support and acceptance in the group increased by 14%. Lastly, the online mentoring programs made Autistic young people more aware of themselves, with a 13% increase in Autistic people knowing more about their strengths and areas of need after the program.



**Figure 4: Changes in the distribution of responses to statements among first-time participants before and after the online program for a typical six-week cycle.**

The outcomes among Autistic young people are noticeable when looking at those who have participated in an online mentoring program for the first time (Figure 4). Among these first timers, there was a 17% increase in Autistic people who enjoyed meeting other participants in their group, and an 18% increase in feeling comfortable to chat with other I CAN group members. There was also a 17% increase in first timers feeling supported and accepted in their group, important for finding a sense of belonging, and a 12% increase in feeling positive about themselves, important for fostering positive self-identity.

Collectively, these results highlight the positive changes we are making to Autistic young people participating in the National Online Mentoring Programs, particularly those who are going into the program for the first time. These positive results are reinforced by the positive impacts and experiences Autistic young people felt in the online mentoring programs.

## WHAT DOES THE ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAM MEAN TO YOU? LESSONS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE'S COMMENTS AND CREATIONS

Participant evaluation data can tell us how the online mentoring programs are making a positive impact to a large number of Autistic young people. However, the data by itself do not provide the full story as they cannot describe the experiences of Autistic young people participating in the online mentoring programs.

These experiences are contained in Autistic young people's comments and creations which we collect in each online cycle. By analysing and interpreting them, we aim to learn what the online mentoring programs mean to Autistic young people.

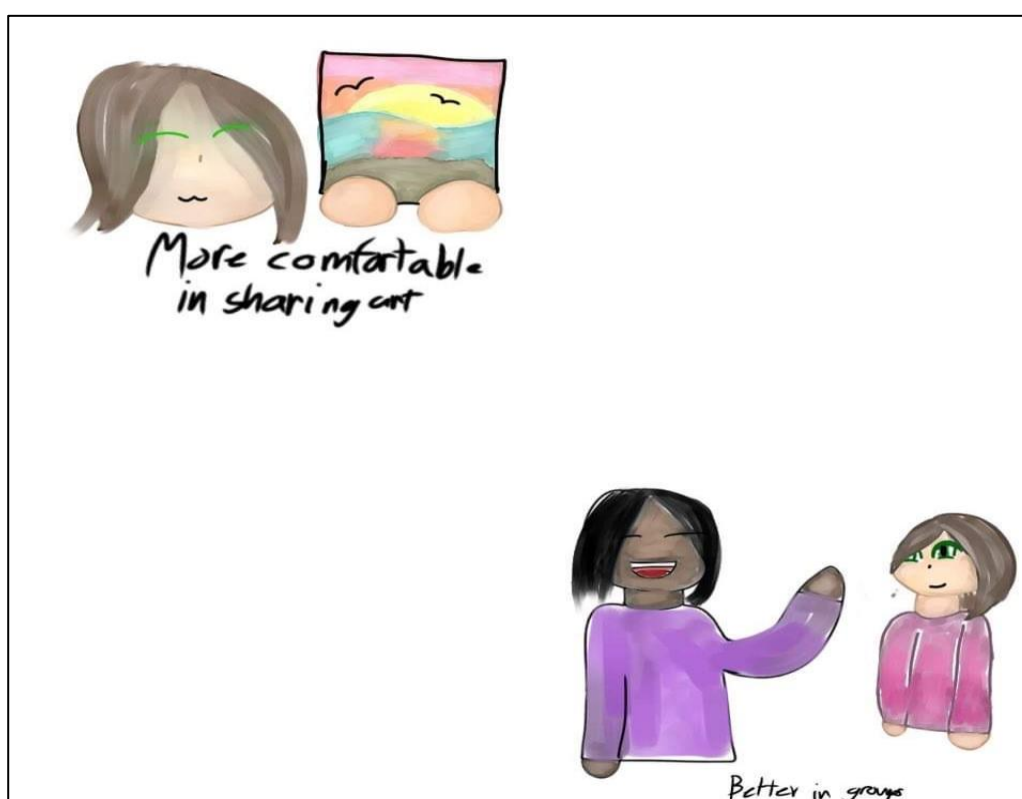
The comments and creations of Autistic young people participating in the online mentoring program can be grouped into four themes.



## HAVING A POSITIVE PROGRAM EXPERIENCE

Generally, Autistic young people loved participating in the online mentoring programs as they had fun. In the online sessions, participants played games, engaged in activities and socialised with like-minded peers. The positive program experience was supported by a group environment that was positive, safe and welcoming, where Autistic young people were accepted for who they are. This allowed Autistic young people to relax, to be themselves and to interact with like-minded peers without fear of being judged. This reduces the stress Autistic young people feel in masking their true selves, as outlined by one 13–15-year-old participant:

*“I have been in a lot of social groups. This is the only one that has actually let me be myself. I had to pretend to be someone else [in other social groups] when I really didn’t want to, which was really hard. With this [I CAN] group, I managed to build that self confidence in order to be myself.”*



*“More comfortable in sharing art. Better in groups.”*

**Figure 5: Creation from a Drawing and Art participant.**

The above picture from a Drawing and Art participant also describes the impacts of a positive online environment. Here, the positive online environment allowed the participant to feel more comfortable to share their artwork and to interact with other people in their group.

The combination of a positive online environment and a positive program experience allowed Autistic young people to feel more positive about themselves after the session and to look forward to the next session.



*"I CAN Awesome"*

**Figure 6: Drawing from an afternoon program participant.**

This is illustrated by the above picture from an afternoon program participant which shows how positive they felt after participating in the session.

## ESTABLISHING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

The majority of Autistic young people in the online mentoring programs commented that they enjoyed meeting and socialising with other participants. They valued being able to meet like-minded peers who have similar experiences and/or special interests as them. This relieved their sense of loneliness as they found an avenue to talk to and share their thoughts with other people. This is exemplified by one young adult participant who said they found people to talk to, opening what is possible for them: *"It means to me that I am not lonely & I can talk to some people like you. The program has helped me to open up. It's opened up some doors in my head."*



*"I CAN. I think they like you! I can make friends. I can enjoy Marvel"*

**Figure 7: Creation from a Marvel special interest group participant.**

The above creation from a participant in the Marvel special interest group also summarises the benefits of meeting a community of like-minded peers (Figure 7). The special interest group made a positive impact on their self-esteem, having met a group of peers who were like them and did not judge them, and strengthened their special interest in Marvel.

## INCREASING SELF-CONFIDENCE

By participating in the online mentoring program, Autistic young people became more confident in themselves. This increased self-confidence is generated from Autistic young people feeling more comfortable to try new things and to talk about themselves and their special interests with other people. The latter point is particularly important as some Autistic young people found they improved their social and communication skills by conversing with other like-minded peers in their group.



*"Made me feel better at meeting new people. It made me more confident and I got to meet other people with the same dinosaur passion, like me"*

**Figure 8: Drawing from a dinosaurs special interest group participant.**

This is best illustrated by the above creation made by a participant from the Dinosaurs' special interest group (Figure 8). The dinosaur at the bottom says two things they gained from the program: their increased self-confidence and their meeting with like-minded peers who share the same special interest in dinosaurs as them. Additionally, the dinosaur thinks to themselves that the program made them feel better in meeting new people, implying they were aware of their improved social and communication skills. Hence, this creation describes the improved self-confidence the Autistic young person felt during the program.

## STRENGTHENING AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE'S LINKS WITH THEIR SPECIAL INTERESTS

Lastly, the online mentoring programs, particularly the special interest groups, strengthened Autistic young people's relationships with their special interests. By participating in the online mentoring program, Autistic young people became more confident in openly expressing their special interest by talking about it with like-minded peers. Additionally, Autistic young people either enjoyed their special interest more or got back into it after participating in the online mentoring program.



*"I CAN helped me go out of my comfort zone and talk about things I don't really talk about and helped me really get back into Minecraft."*

### **Figure 9: Creation from a Minecraft special interest group participant**

These are summarised by the above creation from a Minecraft participant (Figure 9). The participant had a positive experience in the mentoring program as shown by the thumbs up in the picture. The participant exhibited increased self-confidence by going outside their comfort zone and talking about their special interest with other like-minded peers. Additionally, the participant got back into Minecraft after participating in the special interest group, highlighting the impact special interest groups can have in restarting or strengthening engagement with young people's special interests.

Overall, these themes paint a picture of how the online mentoring programs are making a positive impact to Autistic young people. Regardless of the online program, Autistic young people can still have a positive experience in the online programs and achieve the same outcomes in building social connections, experiencing positive changes in themselves and strengthening their engagement with their special interests.

## **UNCOVERING UNEXPECTED INSIGHTS FROM PARENTS ON THE IMPACT OF ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAMS.**

The social impact of the online mentoring programs can be observed not only by Autistic young people themselves but also their parents. Analysing over 120 parent comments has revealed five themes describing how, from a parent's perspective, the online mentoring programs have made an impact to their young person. These five themes are:

- Positive program experience;
- Establishing a community of like-minded peers;
- Improved social and communication skills;
- More positive view of self; and
- Improved mental wellbeing.



While the first three themes mirrored what was found in participant comments and creations, the last two themes were not apparent in Autistic young people's comments and creations, being uniquely shared by the parents.

## POSITIVE PROGRAM EXPERIENCE

Similar to the program satisfaction ratings from Autistic young people, parents commented that their young person enjoyed participating in the online mentoring programs. Before the program started, parents observed their young person's doubts and anxieties of coming into an unfamiliar environment and meeting new people. These doubts and anxieties; however, vanished as their young person enjoyed engaging in the online sessions and participating in the games, activities and discussions. Consequently, their young person felt more positive about themselves after the session and looked forward to the next session. This is exemplified by one parent who said their young person *...gets himself set up and ready for the Thursday session and literally buzzes after finishing*. This leads to their young person being more willing to participate in the next online cycle. One parent remarked how, after participating in an online mentoring program, their young person wanted them to *...keep an eye out for other I CAN programs he could join...*

## ESTABLISHING A COMMUNITY OF LIKE-MINDED PEERS

Parents found that the online mentoring programs are a place for their young person to engage with other Autistic young people and young adults who share similar experiences as them. This has provided their young person with a sense of community where they feel welcomed and a chance to establish social connections. Being able to interact with other Autistic peers has been a highlight for some young people, with one parent remarking that *...the interaction with similar individuals was a bright light in an otherwise dark week...* Another parent echoed these sentiments, outlining how the program opened a communication channel for their young person *...to network and link in with people he would not normally do...*

The idea of meeting like-minded peers in an online community gave their young person social connections with like-minded peers and normalisation of their lived experiences. Both of these things relieved the young person's sense of loneliness, by connecting with other Autistic people with similar experiences and/or special interests, and enhanced their self-acceptance, by informing them that there are people who can accept them for who they are. One parent remarked how the National Online Mentoring Programs were:

*...the first experience where he was in a group with, and run by, neuro-divergent peers... Taking part in this mentoring group allowed him to see that there was a community of people out there, with strengths and talents and challenges just like him. After being isolated for a long time, he didn't feel so alone. He felt connected.*

Another parent recalled how their young person found a community of like-minded Autistic peers who accepted them for who they are. Before the program, the parent described how their young person was *...getting really depressed thinking 'I didn't fit in with people my own age'...* However, after participating in the online mentoring program, the parent observed that their young person found a community that accepted them, giving them the sense that they *...can get along with others now...*

In particular, the special interest groups gave Autistic young people a community that shares the same special interest as them. These groups provide an environment where Autistic young people can freely talk about and discuss their special interest with other Autistic young people, building up value and enthusiasm towards their special interest. As one parent muses, the special interest groups allow Autistic young people to *...feel value for their interests and confident in sharing their knowledge with others who accepted the topic of interest...*

## IMPROVED SOCIAL AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Parents also observed that their young person improved their social and communication skills. Parents found that, by participating in the online mentoring program, their young person felt more comfortable and confident meeting and socialising with other people. Parents commented that their young person *...felt more comfortable meeting new people... or opening up and speaking out loud...* during the online sessions. The online mentoring programs also allowed Autistic young people to learn the social rules and skills of interacting with other people such as active listening and taking turns. In turn, this improved the young person's confidence in expressing themselves and interacting with other people. This is evident in one parent comment that said the online programs increased their young person's confidence of *...interacting with others, following rules and knowing what is expected...*

The improvements in Autistic young people's social and communication skills are enabled by a positive, safe group environment. This environment enabled Autistic young people to be themselves and to talk about themselves without fear of being judged, allowing them to practise their social and communication skills in a safe space. These observations are best exemplified by one parent who said that the online mentoring programs:

*...removes a lot of the stress as it is a safe space in which she can ask for clarification without being thought "silly".*

The environment is also more accommodating to Autistic young people as they can set the level and method of participation that is most comfortable to them. One parent noted that their young person's social skills improved as the online environment *...has taken away some of the sensory issues... and impulse control when in [face-to-face] groups...* making it *...A safe way to develop social skills.*

## MORE POSITIVE VIEW OF SELF

Autistic young people who participated in the online mentoring programs felt more positive about themselves and their Autism after the program. These changes are enabled by a positive, non-judgemental group environment, where the young person could be themselves, talk about their experiences and learn from other people. This was observed by one parent who said that the online mentoring program gave their young person *...a safe space to talk about her struggles and embrace her strengths...*

The positive online environment contributed to an array of benefits for Autistic young people. Firstly, the online groups allowed Autistic young people to normalise their experiences, enhance their self-acceptance and improve their self-esteem. This is echoed by one parent who said that the online mentoring programs:

*...gave him a lot of confidence that he was just like everybody else. He felt comfortable in his own skin and believed us when we told him he was just like everybody else...*

Secondly, Autistic young people were more able to identify the positive things in their life, improving their self-esteem. This can be seen by one parent, where during the good news story, their young person went from passing the activity as *...she couldn't readily identify the positive points in her life...* to having *...an answer ready in anticipation and... to have multiple answers...* From the good news story activity, the young person learnt that *...there are many positives in her life, but also that the focus doesn't need to be on the negatives, which are much smaller in number.*

Thirdly, the positive online environment allowed their young person to feel proud of their Autism. This was outlined by one parent who said that the online mentoring programs have given their young person *...a new sense of self, of identity, and of confidence to be who she really is...*

The parent also learnt that during one session:

*...It actually brought tears to my eyes one evening, when I accidentally overheard her taking pride in being Autistic, and celebrating her differences...*

Lastly, the online mentoring programs helped Autistic young people who identify themselves as LGBTQIA+ to be more accepting and confident in their transgender identities. One parent remarked that the online mentoring program made their young person *...more outwardly positive, open and accepting about her identity, and more accepting and positive about questioning her gender identity too...* while another parent commented that the online mentoring program *...helped them feel more confident expressing their transgender identity publicly...*

## IMPROVED MENTAL WELLBEING

One of the things parents observed with their young person that is not apparent in participant comments and creations is their improved mental wellbeing. Some Autistic young people who initially participated in I CAN Network's online mentoring programs had mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. These were exemplified by two young people. One young person felt anxious as they experienced *...confusion about herself, who she was and why she was different...* The other young person felt depressed as they *...saw himself as broken, defective, weird, and became very depressed...* and had suicidal thoughts, saying they *...no longer wanted to be here as life was too hard...*

However, the online mentoring programs improved the mental wellbeing of Autistic young people. These programs not only reduced their anxiety and depression but also improved their sense of self. For the anxious young person, the online mentoring programs *...improved her self-confidence and reduced her anxiety.* The online mentoring programs were also important for the young person with depression as, for them:

*...he was no longer ashamed of who he was. He now speaks openly about autism and no longer sees himself as broken... [online] mentoring has become an absolutely essential part of our schedule. It is so important for his mental health.*

The online mentoring programs also have a positive impact to other parts of the young person's life which contribute to improved mental health. This is best described by one parent who said the following:

*The impact I CAN mentoring has had on my child's mental health has been overwhelming. She's coping better in school, talking more with family, and has enthusiasm for things again. It has definitely helped her out of a dark period, and I am so, so grateful.*

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, these themes describe how parents can offer a unique perspective of how the online mentoring programs have made a positive impact to their young person. Combined with findings from participants' comments and creations, they can provide a more detailed picture of how the online mentoring programs have made a positive impact to Autistic young people participating in these programs.

# I CAN SCHOOL® MENTORING PROGRAM

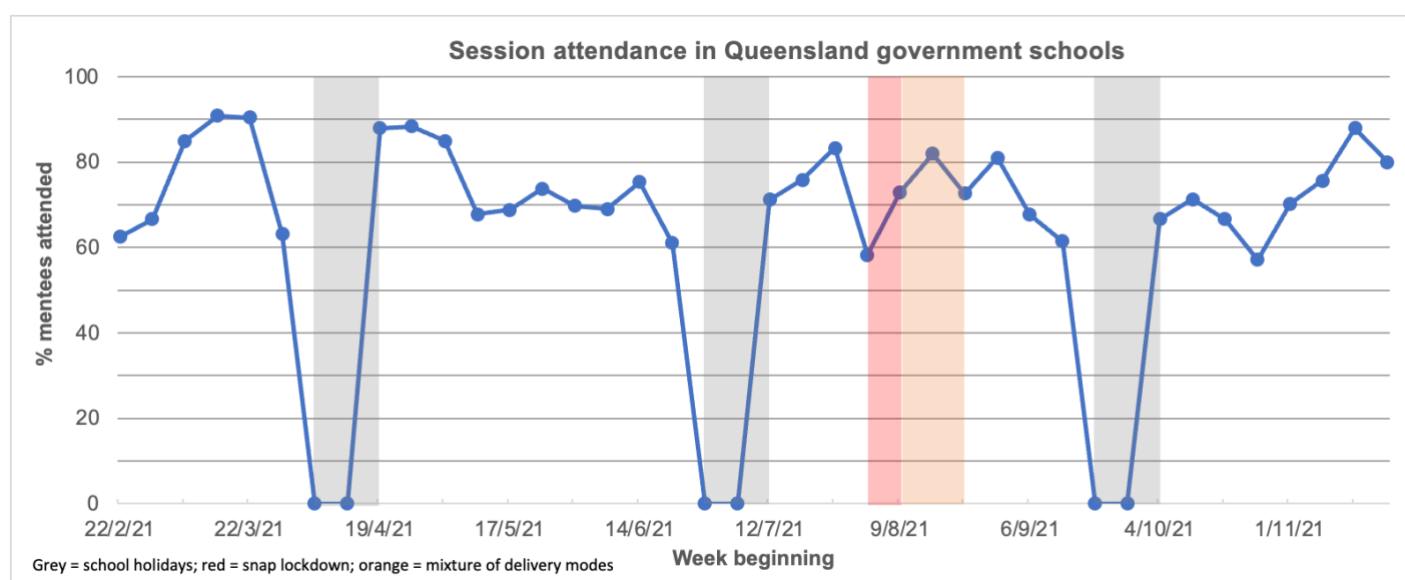
## QUEENSLAND PROGRAMS

In 2021, with support from the Queensland Department of Education, I CAN Network continued to run its school mentoring programs in Queensland. From September 2020 to November 2021, I CAN Network:

Ran	Over	Engaging
22	16	259
Mentoring programs	State schools	Autistic students

These numbers include seven schools running an I CAN School® Mentoring Program for the first time and one school each from the North and Central Queensland regions. Two out of the seven new schools initially ran four-session ‘taster’ programs that were eventually converted to ‘full’ ten-session programs. These numbers, and the following results, highlight the value of I CAN Network’s school mentoring programs for Autistic students in Queensland schools.

### MENTEE ATTENDANCE DATA FOR I CAN SCHOOL® MENTORING PROGRAMS IN QUEENSLAND.



**Figure 10: Weekly session attendance for I CAN School® Mentoring Programs in Queensland.**

There continues to be strong engagement among mentees participating in I CAN School® Mentoring Programs in Queensland, with 75% of them attending more than half the sessions. On average, weekly session attendance is around 60-80% for most of the year, even during the snap lockdown period and subsequent mixed delivery modes in August 2021.

In particular, Indooroopilly SHS, which had to be shut down for two weeks due to a COVID cluster, continued to run their weekly I CAN sessions remotely (Figure 11).



## I CAN Community Alliance Mentorship

Mondays during period four, we have continued to see a group of avid students participating in their I CAN lessons. I CAN is a social network for autistic people run by autistic leaders. During the first week of online lessons we had I CAN leaders – Ellie, Arthur and Sam, who will continue to use the zoom platform to deliver lessons for the remainder of the term.

After sharing good news, games were played where we found out that Hannah has NOT met the Queen of Denmark but Clay HAS met Malcolm Turnbull. One of the most popular (and challenging!) segments of the I CAN sessions is the I CAN Talk. Arthur shared his experience of overcoming his fear of public speaking by working in an anime convention. He attributed his success to the support and understanding of people he worked with.

Students then practised their public speaking with an activity called "This is better than that". Quinn successfully argued that a bamboo straw was better than a coloured bouncy ball, by using many examples. The feedback he received was that he spoke clearly with good pace and volume. The session, as always, ended in shout outs, where students had the opportunity to praise and congratulate others for their efforts and ideas.

**Hillary Morrison**

Head of Department Integrated Student Support



I Can's Ellie with Indro students  
Clay, Hannah & Stephanie



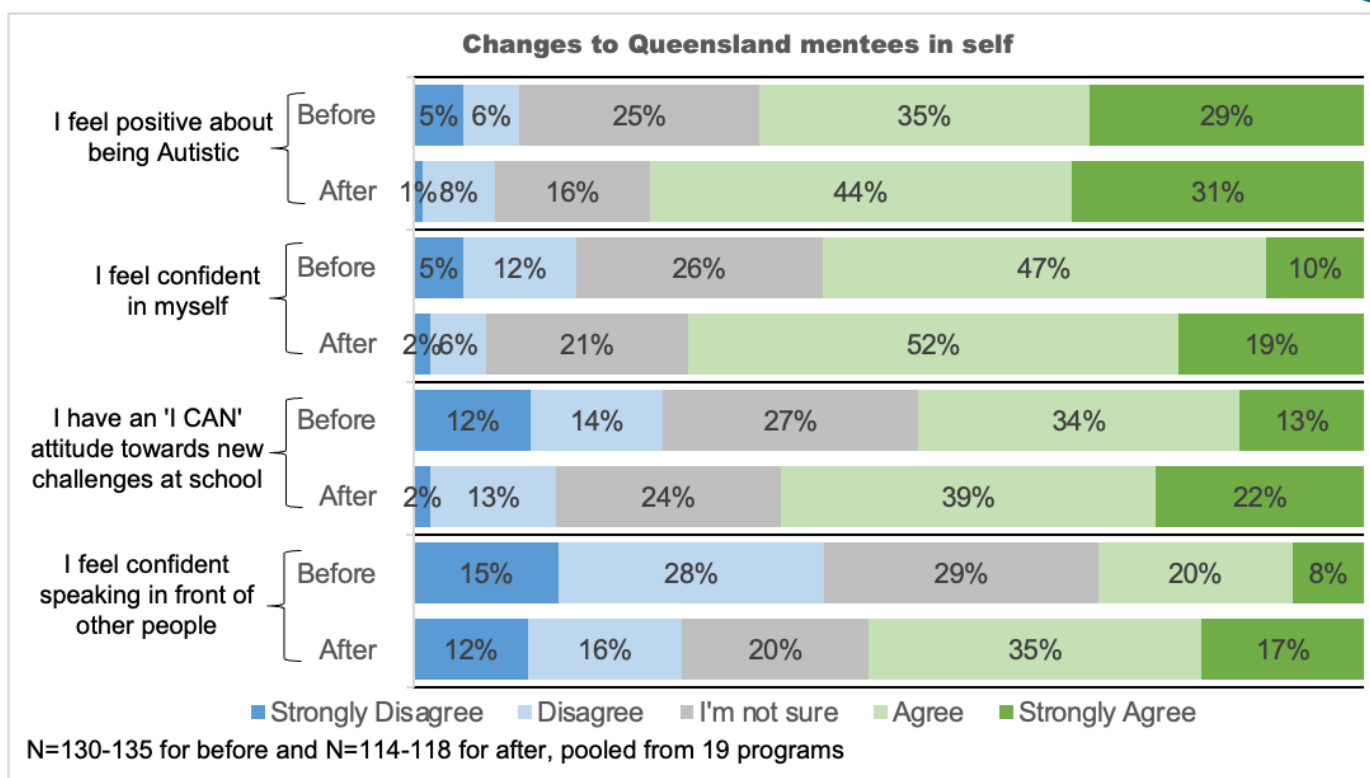
I Can's Sam and Arthur

**Figure 11: Newsletter extract talking about remote delivery of the I CAN School® Mentoring Program in Indooroopilly SHS. Source: [Indro News](#), 20<sup>th</sup> August 2021.**

These results highlight not only the desire for Autistic students in Queensland to attend I CAN School® Mentoring Programs, but also the willingness of schools to continue running I CAN School® Mentoring Programs to support Autistic students despite the snap lockdown period.

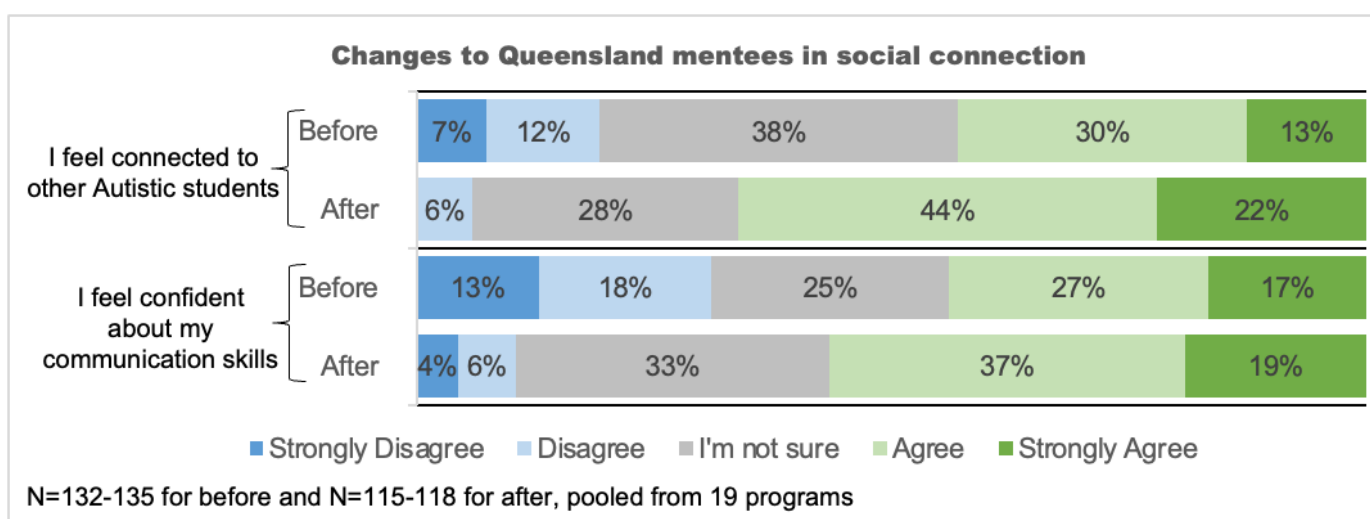
## COMPILED SCHOOL EVALUATION RESULTS IN QUEENSLAND IN 2021.

We are making a positive impact to Autistic young people in Queensland that participate in our school mentoring programs. Mentees were highly satisfied with our school mentoring programs, with 86% of them saying that they enjoyed the program. Additionally, mentees not only showed changes in themselves but also in how they socially connect with other people.



**Figure 12: Responses to statements relating to self among Queensland mentees before and after the program.**

The most notable changes in self among mentees in Queensland are in their self-acceptance and self-confidence (Figure 12). Mentees tended to be more accepting of their Autism, with an 11% increase in mentees feeling more positive about their Autism after the program. More notable is the 14% increase in mentees' self-confidence, with mentees becoming more confident of themselves after the program. Mentees were also more likely to tackle new challenges at school with an 'I CAN' attitude, evidenced by a 14% increase in agree and strongly agree responses after the program. This can lead to improvements to Autistic young people's public speaking skills, with a 24% increase in mentees feeling more confident to speak in front of other people.



**Figure 13: Responses to statements relating to social connections among Queensland mentees before and after the program.**

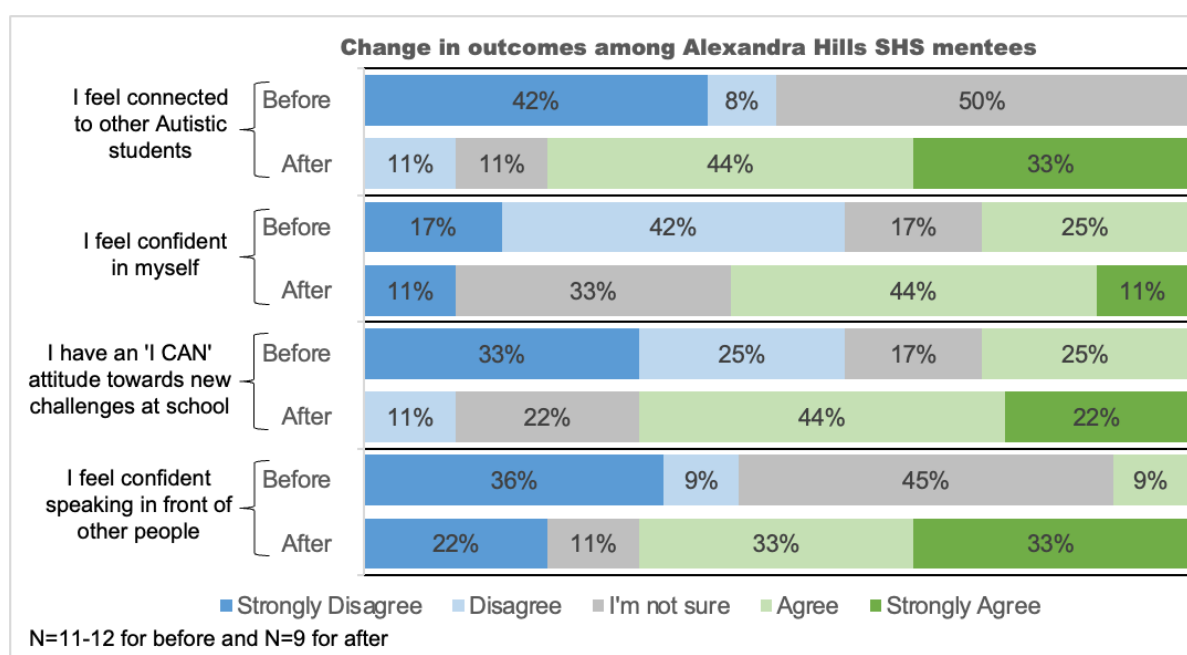
The I CAN School® Mentoring Program also builds a sense of belonging among mentees in Queensland, with 70% of them feeling like they belonged in the program (Figure 13). This sense of belonging is established on a foundation of an open, non-judgemental program environment. Here, mentees could relax, engage with other people and share their experiences. Consequently, the program environment builds a sense of understanding and acceptance among mentees who were more likely to feel positive about themselves. This can be seen by one mentee who said that the program was *...a place for people to share stuff about themselves, and feel more open to being silly.*

The sense of belonging established in the program allowed mentees to build social connections with other Autistic people, with a 23% increase in mentees who feel connected with other Autistic students after the program (Figure 13). By connecting with other Autistic students in the program, mentees not only made new friends but also established a social network at school, both of which can contribute to improved mental wellbeing. One mentee felt positively supported by other participants in the program, saying that *when I had a [mental] breakdown they supported me. They listen to what I have to say...* Additionally, bringing Autistic students in one place provided a safe environment for them to improve their communication skills by talking with like-minded peers. This has resulted in a 12% increase in mentees feeling more confident about their communication skills after the program.

Collectively, these results describe the positive impacts seen among mentees in our I CAN School® Mentoring Programs in Queensland, both in terms of changes in self and in building social connection with other Autistic young people.

## CASE STUDY: ALEXANDRA HILLS STATE HIGH SCHOOL

A school that has shown exceptional results in its I CAN School® Mentoring Program is Alexandra Hills State High School (SHS). Alexandra Hills SHS is a state secondary school in Alexandra Hills, Queensland, 18km southeast of Brisbane. I CAN Network initially ran a professional development session with teachers in January 2021. The success of that session led to us running a pilot of our I CAN School® Mentoring Program in Term 4 2021. Consisting of five weekly sessions from mid-October to mid-November 2021, the program involved 15 Autistic students. Despite the program only running half of the standard ten-session program, mentees still showed changes during the program.



**Figure 14: Responses to statements among Alexandra Hills SHS mentees before and after the program.**



During the program, mentees experienced stronger social connections with other Autistic students, with a 77% increase in mentees feeling connected with other Autistic students after the program (Figure 14). Additionally, mentees exhibited increased self-confidence, with a 30% increase in mentees feeling more confident in themselves and a 41% increase in mentees adopting an 'I CAN' attitude. The increased self-confidence among mentees was seen in the improvements to their public speaking skills, with a 57% increase in mentees feeling more confident to speak in front of other people. These positive results are backed up by mentee comments saying that they enjoyed and benefited from the program and were able to interact with other Autistic students. These results are summarised by one mentee who said that the program *...has been very helpful and kind to me and others.*

The supervising staff member of the Alexandra Hills SHS program also viewed the program positively as they witnessed immense change among Autistic students. From their perspective, they saw that the program allowed Autistic students to relax, seeing *...a great relaxing and lessening of stress amongst the students...*, and to feel more comfortable to interact with other people, with *...two students that I know very well have come out of their shells dramatically...* Additionally, from the staff member's perspective, the mentoring program has been beneficial for other school staff to learn *...another side of the students...*



Overall, the I CAN School® Mentoring Program in Alexandra Hills SHS has been positively received, with a range of benefits seen among mentees from their perspective as well as the staff member's perspective. Following the success of the program, the school has decided to re-engage I CAN Network to run a full ten-session mentoring program from mid-term 1 2022 for junior secondary students.

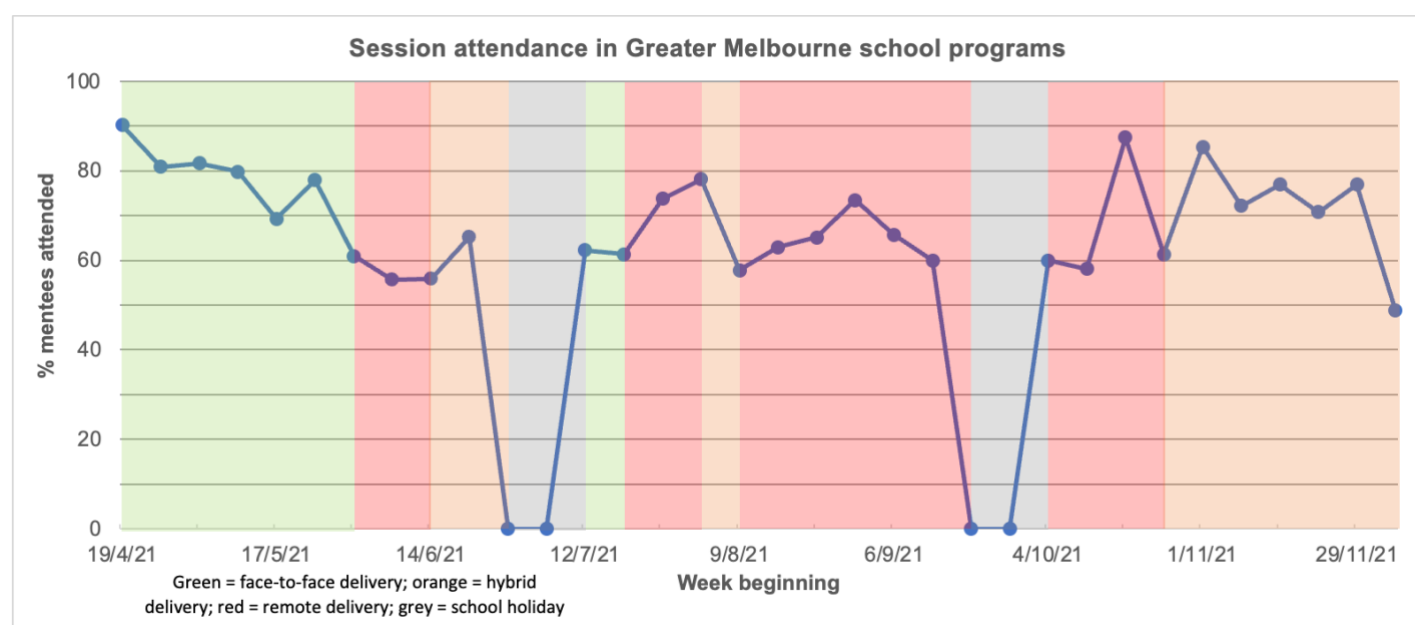
Featured: Some of the I CAN Queensland Mentoring Staff



# VICTORIAN SCHOOL PROGRAMS: CASE STUDIES

## GREATER MELBOURNE

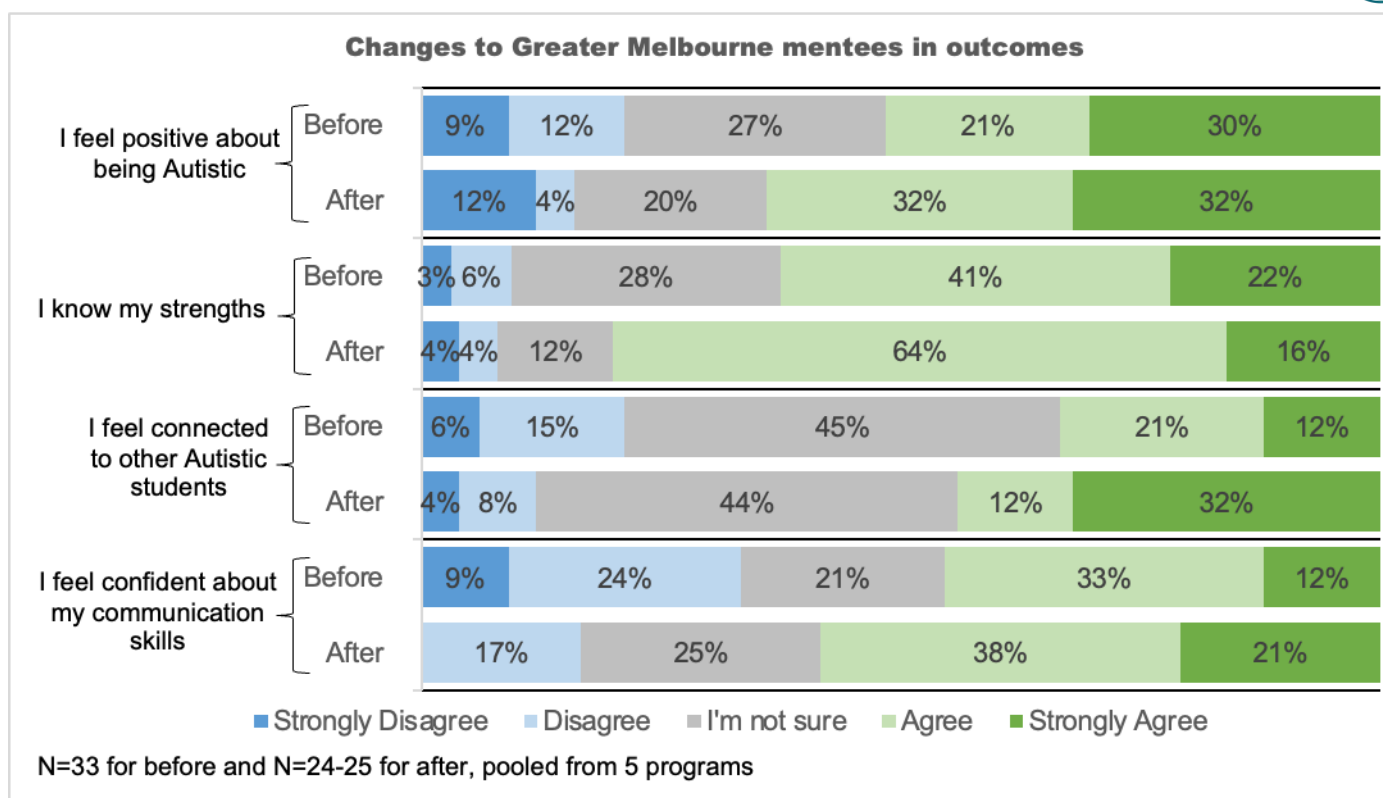
The Greater Melbourne region experienced four periods of lockdown in 2021 which has resulted in students frequently switching between onsite and remote learning. Three of these lockdowns affected the running of our I CAN School® Mentoring Programs in the Greater Melbourne region, with sessions having to be delivered remotely. Once onsite learning resumed for schools from late-October 2021, we ran most programs via hybrid delivery, with mentoring staff running the mentoring sessions online to mentees in school. There was concern that Autistic students might have been disengaged during remote learning periods which may result in reduced participation in I CAN School® Mentoring Programs.



**Figure 15: Weekly session attendance for I CAN School® Mentoring Programs in the Greater Melbourne region, Victoria.**

However, not only did we manage to run I CAN School® Mentoring Programs remotely during lockdowns, but we also maintained strong engagement with mentees participating in the mentoring programs.

Among all schools in the Greater Melbourne region that ran I CAN School® Mentoring Programs, average weekly session attendance during remote and hybrid delivery remained at around 60-80%, never falling below 50% in any given school week. This result indicates that mentees in the Greater Melbourne region still engaged strongly with I CAN School® Mentoring Programs despite the 2021 lockdowns.



**Figure 16: Responses to statements among Greater Melbourne mentees before and after the program.**

Additionally, we saw some positive outcomes among mentees from five Victorian government schools that ran program evaluations in 2021 (Figure 16). Firstly, we saw positive changes among themselves, with a 13% increase in mentees feeling positive about being Autistic and a 17% increase in mentees knowing more about their strengths. We also saw changes in how mentees interact amongst themselves, with an 11% increase in mentees feeling connected to other Autistic students and a 14% increase in mentees feeling confident about their communication skills.

Comments from mentees indicate how much they liked participating in the sessions and being able to connect with other people. Mentees liked playing games and activities during the session, finding them not only fun but also learning more about themselves. The games and activities were viewed as encouraging *...people to participate...* and also helped someone show *...how much I can achieve...* Additionally, mentees appreciated being able to connect and chat with other Autistic students like themselves. Mentees saw the other people in the program as ‘chill’, with one mentee seeing the other participants as *...really nice and they understand me...* Mentees also saw the program as an opportunity to connect and to chat with other participants. One mentee strongly agreed with this sentiment, saying that *I like how I get to talk to someone... about what happened in my week.*

Collectively, despite the small number of responses received from mentees in the Greater Melbourne region, the results show the positive impact I CAN School® Mentoring Programs can have to Autistic young people’s lives.

## AQUINAS COLLEGE RINGWOOD (VIC) CASE STUDY

Aquinas College is a Catholic secondary school located in Ringwood, 23km east of Melbourne. It is a large school, with 1684 students, 161 teachers and 88 non-teaching staff as of 2021. I CAN Network has been running a school mentoring program in Aquinas College since 2017. From mentee and staff interviews taken as part of their 2021 AWETISM Expo video, we were able to record the positive outcomes of the school mentoring program on Autistic students in Aquinas College.

Overall, mentees in Aquinas College enjoyed the program as they could talk to other Autistic people and did some fun activities. One mentee, in particular, appreciated the program environment that allowed them to be themselves, saying:

*...it [the program] makes me feel accepted for who I am. I can go to I CAN and no one will judge me for being Autistic, for being different... Goodness knows we have a lot of fun with how different everyone is.*

The mentoring program also resulted in positive changes among the mentees. They were more accepting of themselves and their Autism, and viewed their differences and strengths more positively. In particular, they were more empowered to not let other people define who they are, with one mentee saying they have learnt to not *...let others treat you a certain way because you're Autistic*. This was echoed in another mentee's comment, saying not to *...let others get you down. You are who you are...*

These mentee comments are reinforced by the staff member's comments. The staff member saw the mentoring program as a safe space for mentees to build their confidence and connect with other Autistic students from other year levels. In particular, they saw how mentees took on *...leadership roles in I CAN, which you don't see in the normal classroom...* They also saw how markedly different mentees were in the mentoring program from the classroom, becoming more animated and confident of themselves. In the process, the staff member learnt a lot about Autism from supervising the mentoring sessions, describing it as a positive process.

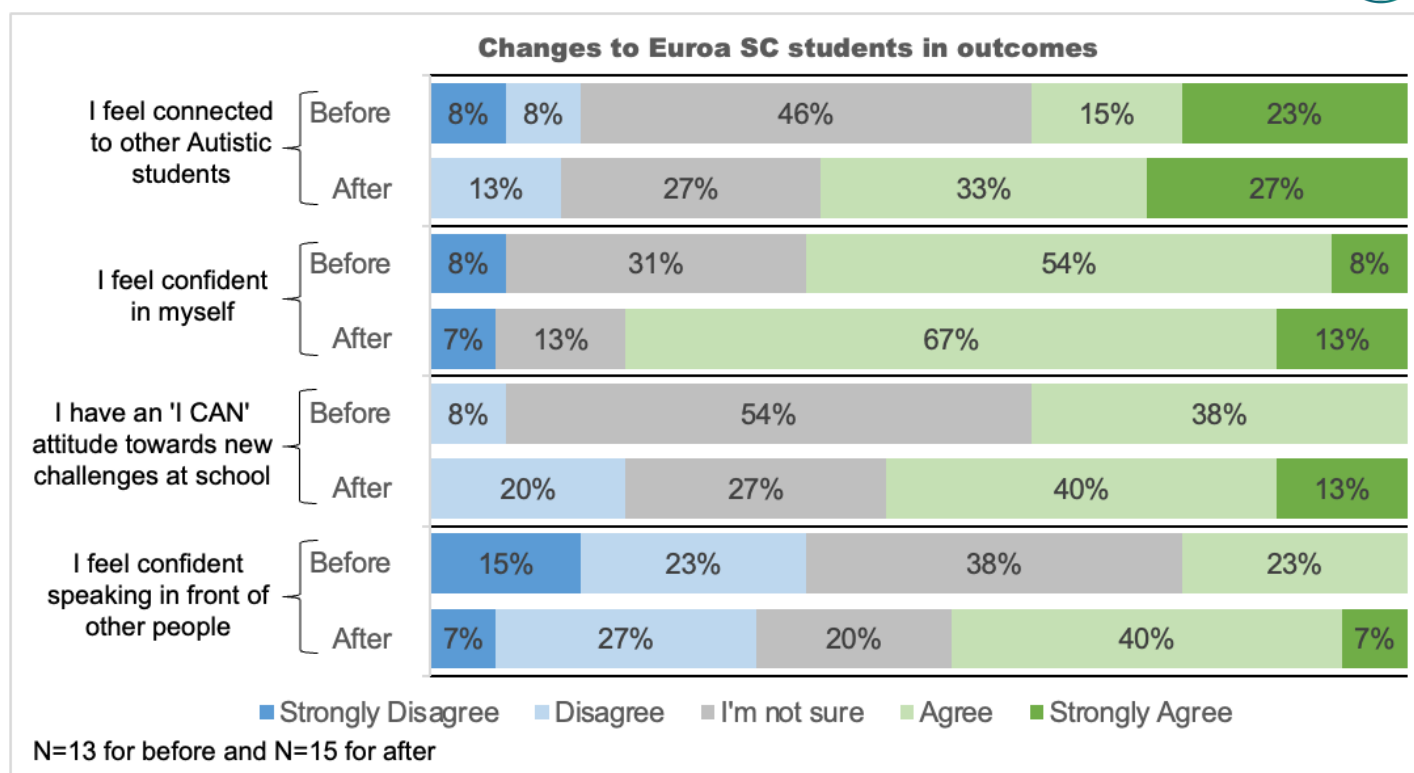
Collectively, the mentee and staff comments indicate that the I CAN School® Mentoring Program has been positively received in Aquinas College and has a positive impact to the students in school.

## NORTHERN VICTORIA

Despite challenges in running I CAN School® Mentoring Programs in the Northern Victoria region in 2021, the Northern Victoria team has embraced opportunities to connect with schools in the region. Thanks to their efforts, some schools such as Euroa Secondary College (SC) successfully delivered their I CAN School® programs remotely by supporting students in accessing the sessions. The Northern Victoria team has also been successful in piloting a year 7 transition program for neurodivergent year 6 students in Echuca. Both case studies not only highlight the positive impacts of our programs to Autistic students in the Northern Victoria region, but also underlines the ability of the Northern Victoria team to innovate and adapt to the changing circumstances.

### CASE STUDY: EUROA SECONDARY COLLEGE MENTORING PROGRAM

Supported by School Focused Youth Services (SFYS), I CAN Network was able to deliver a staff PD and an I CAN School® Mentoring Program to Autistic students in Euroa SC, located 125km north-east of Melbourne. With the help of the school's Wellbeing Officer who provided valuable feedback to adapt the program to Autistic students in school, the Northern Victoria team successfully delivered the Euroa SC mentoring program.



**Figure 17: Responses to statements among Euroa SC mentees before and after the program.**

The I CAN School® Mentoring Program in Euroa SC was positively received by mentees, with 12 out of 15 mentees (80%) saying that they enjoyed the program. The program had a positive impact on mentees, both in terms of their social connection with other people and in themselves (Figure 17). Firstly, mentees' social connection improved, with a 22% increase in mentees feeling connected to other Autistic students after the program. This result is backed up by mentees commenting that they enjoyed meeting other Autistic people in the program, with one mentee enjoying the program as '*...some of my friends are in it*'. Mentees' confidence in themselves also improved, with an 18% increase in their self-confidence and a 15% increase in mentees adopting an 'I CAN' attitude. The increased self-confidence can be seen in the improvements to their public speaking skills, with a 24% increase in mentees' confidence in speaking in front of other people.

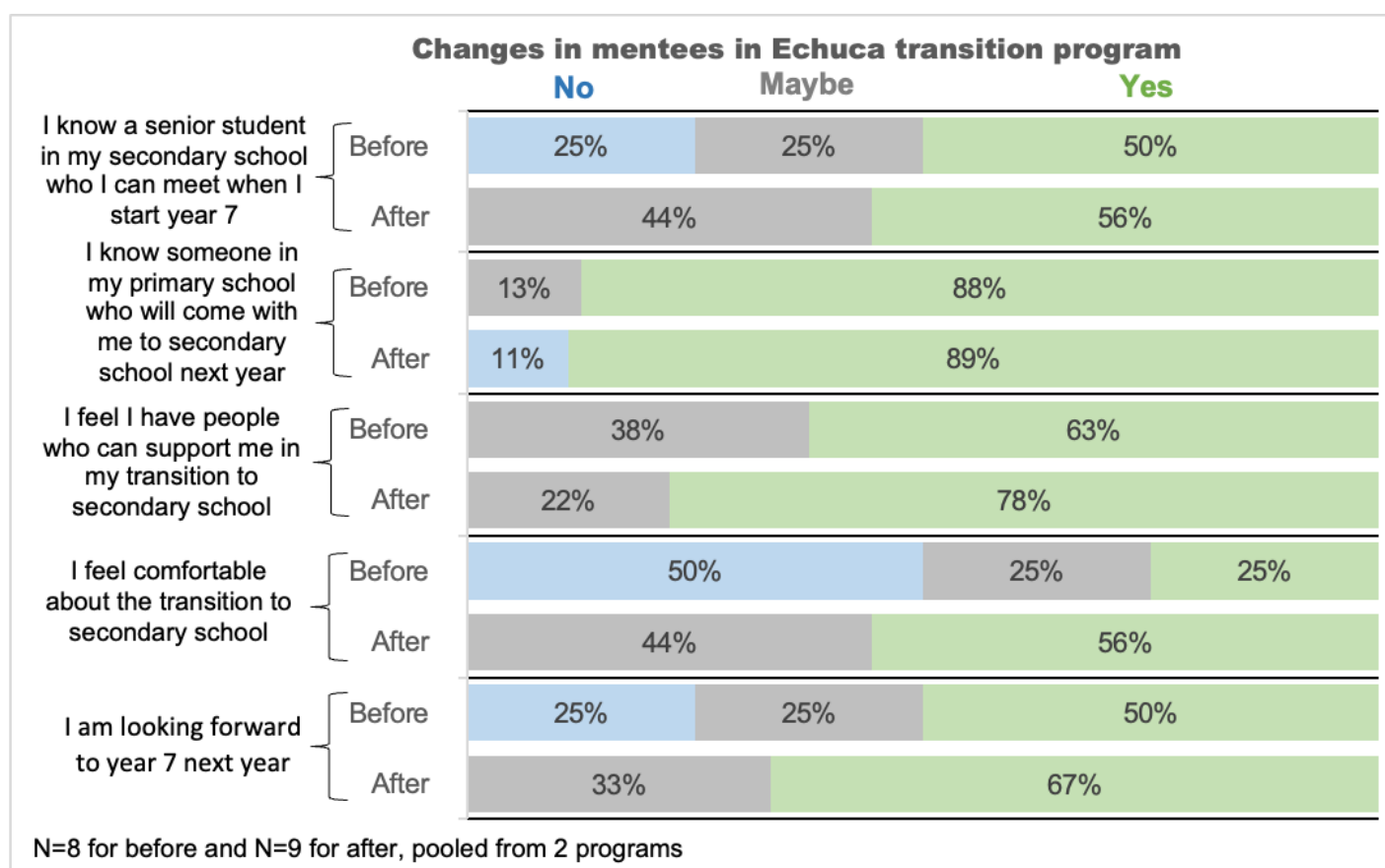
Additionally, Euroa SC mentees were able to build their leadership skills by setting up and leading a year 6 transition program. With the help of I CAN staff and the school's Wellbeing Officer, Euroa SC mentees created a digital presentation where they talked about their experiences of transitioning to year 7 to year 6 students and their families. The program further strengthened mentees' sense of belonging and Autistic identity. Additionally, mentees were able to identify and leverage their strengths to create a digital presentation for year 6 students.

Collectively, these results paint a positive picture on the impacts of the I CAN School® Mentoring Program in Euroa SC. Further insight into the I CAN School® Mentoring Program at Euroa Secondary College can be gleaned from [the students' showcase presentation at AWETISM 2021](#).



## CASE STUDY: YEAR 7 TRANSITION PROGRAM IN ECHUCA

In 2021, the Northern Victoria team has worked with all primary and secondary schools in Echuca as well as CCLLEN (Campaspe Cohuna Local Learning and Employment Network) and SFYS to run various mentoring programs in Echuca. The lockdowns and remote learning in Echuca during Term 3 suspended most mentoring programs. Despite this, during Term 4 2021, the Northern Victoria team was successful in piloting a secondary school transition program for year 6 neurodivergent students in Echuca entering year 7 in 2022. The transition program involved bringing together Year 6 students from different primary schools in Echuca with I CAN mentors and a Year 7 student and staff member from the secondary school they would be attending in 2022. Held online, mentees were given information about their secondary school, participated in discussions and activities designed to foster self-confidence, resilience and self-acceptance, and time for Year 6 students to share their thoughts and feelings about Year 7 and the school.



**Figure 18: Responses to statements among mentees participating in the Echuca transition program before and after the program.**

Despite being in the pilot stage, the transition program is already making a positive impact on mentees' preparedness to enter Year 7 in 2022. There was no change in the level of knowledge Year 6 mentees had on who they can meet in Year 7. However, the transition program did clarify support structures for mentees, with a 15% increase in mentees feeling they had someone who can support them in their transition to secondary school. Consequently, mentees felt more comfortable about the transition to Year 7 after the program, with a 31% increase in 'Yes' responses, and looked forward to Year 7 in 2022, with a 17% increase in 'Yes' responses.

These results are backed up by mentee comments, with mentees appreciating the opportunity to meet Year 6 students from other primary schools who are coming to the same secondary school as them. This strengthened their social connections which will support their transition to year 7. This is best summarised by one mentee who said that the program allowed them to *...meet new people and get to know them a lot.*

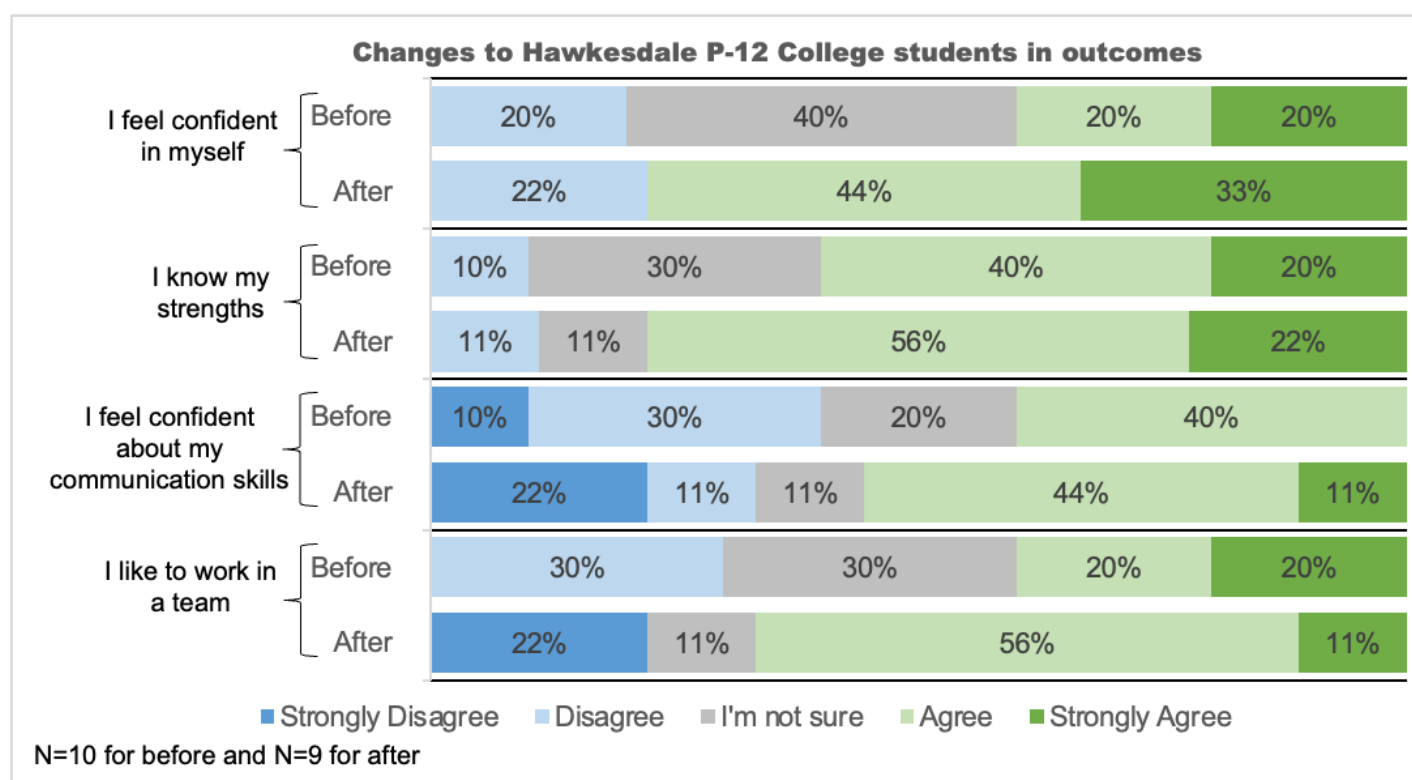
The program also gave mentees the opportunity to learn more about their secondary school which enhanced their confidence in entering Year 7 in their secondary school.

Collectively, these results highlight the success of the pilot program in preparing Year 6 neurodivergent students to enter Year 7, particularly in regional areas.

## SOUTH WEST VICTORIA

2021 has been a challenge to run school mentoring programs in the South West region, with frequent transitions between face-to-face and remote learning combined with difficulties in accessing devices and strong internet connections. Despite this, school mentoring programs in the South West region have made some positive changes among mentees participating in the programs. Two such schools in the South West that have seen positive outcomes for Autistic students are Hawkesdale P-12 College and Mercy Regional College.

Hawkesdale P-12 College is a combined primary/secondary school in Hawkesdale, located 33km north-west of Warrnambool. It is a small school, with 44 school staff and 179 students in 2021. Despite this, Hawkesdale P-12 College ran an I CAN School® mentoring program in 2021 for the third year running. Although there have been some mentees who have returned to the program from previous years, most mentees participated in the program for the first time in 2021.

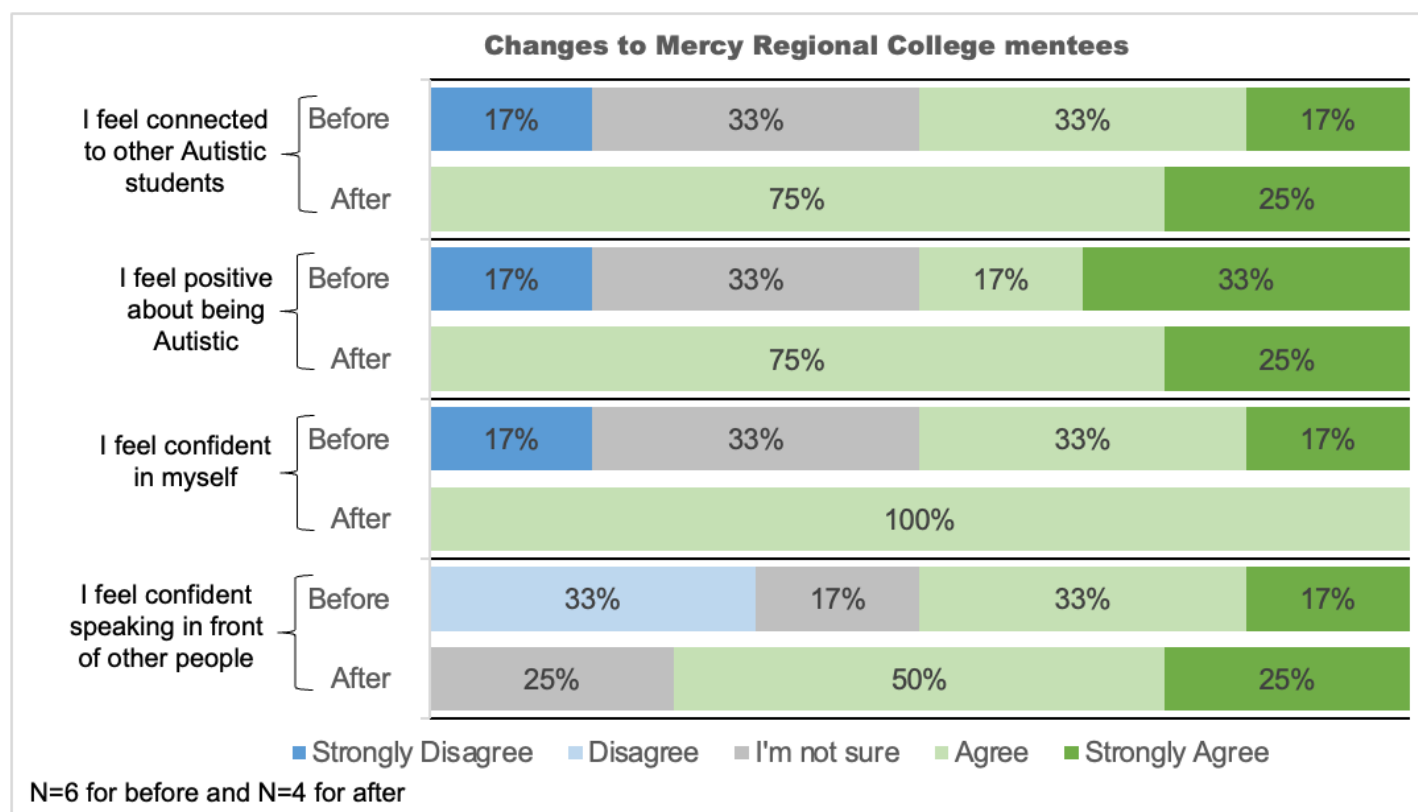


**Figure 19: Responses to statements among Hawkesdale P-12 College mentees before and after the program.**

During the mentoring program, we have seen steady improvements in mentees' sense of self (Figure 19). Mentees became more self-confident, with a 37% increase in mentees feeling more confident about themselves, and were more self-aware, with an 18% increase in mentees knowing more about their strengths. There have also been improvements in mentees' skills, with a 15% increase in mentees feeling more confident about their communication skills and a 27% increase in mentees working as a team.

These results are backed up by the fact that mentees have developed cohesion and connectedness amongst each other by building warm, kind relationships with each other. One mentee appreciated *Hanging out with people, [and] see what people's interests are...* while another mentee noted that *Everyone [in the program] is kind and positive.*

Another school that has seen positive changes from its I CAN School® mentoring program is Mercy Regional College. We ran the I CAN School® Mentoring Program in both its Junior campus at Noorat (for Years 7-8 students) and its Senior campus at Camperdown (for Years 9-12 students). We have seen positive impacts in both programs among Autistic students.



**Figure 20: Responses to statements among Mercy Regional College mentees before and after the program.**

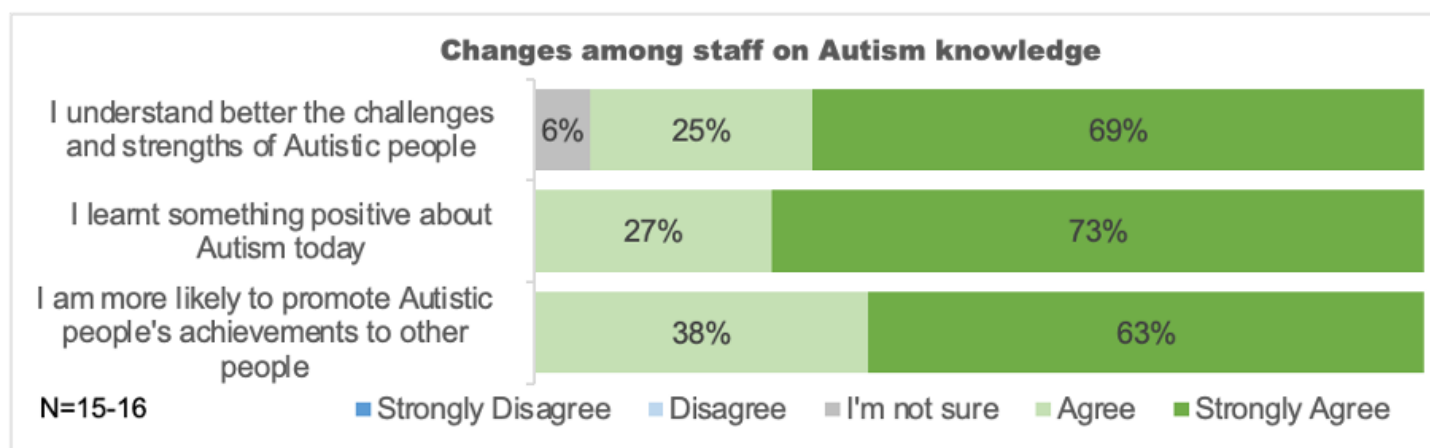
We have seen positive changes among senior students attending the I CAN School® mentoring program in Camperdown (Figure 20). By participating in the program, mentees built social connections with other people, with a 50% increase in mentees feeling connected to other Autistic students. Mentees also experienced changes in themselves, with a 50% increase in mentees feeling positive about being Autistic, and a 50% increase in their self-confidence. This increased self-confidence carries over to their public speaking skills, with a 25% increase in mentees feeling confident to speak in front of other people. Mentees in the senior program appreciated being able to take a break from the pressures and worries of school, where they were *doing something different each week.*

A similar result was found among mentees participating in the I CAN School® Mentoring Program in the Junior campus at Noorat. Interviewing two mentees from the program as part of the AWETISM Expo, both mentees appreciated going out of class to participate in fun activities. By participating in fun activities, they learnt some positive things about Autism. One mentee liked the activity where they guessed what other people have created, learning that people can *...interpret what they say a completely different way...* which shows *...how different we all are to each other.* Similarly, the other mentee learnt, by participating in the activities, that *...teamwork is everything and if you don't have good teamwork, then nothing is going to work in life...*

Collectively, these results show the positive impact the I CAN School® Mentoring Program can have to all secondary school mentees across different age groups in the South West region.

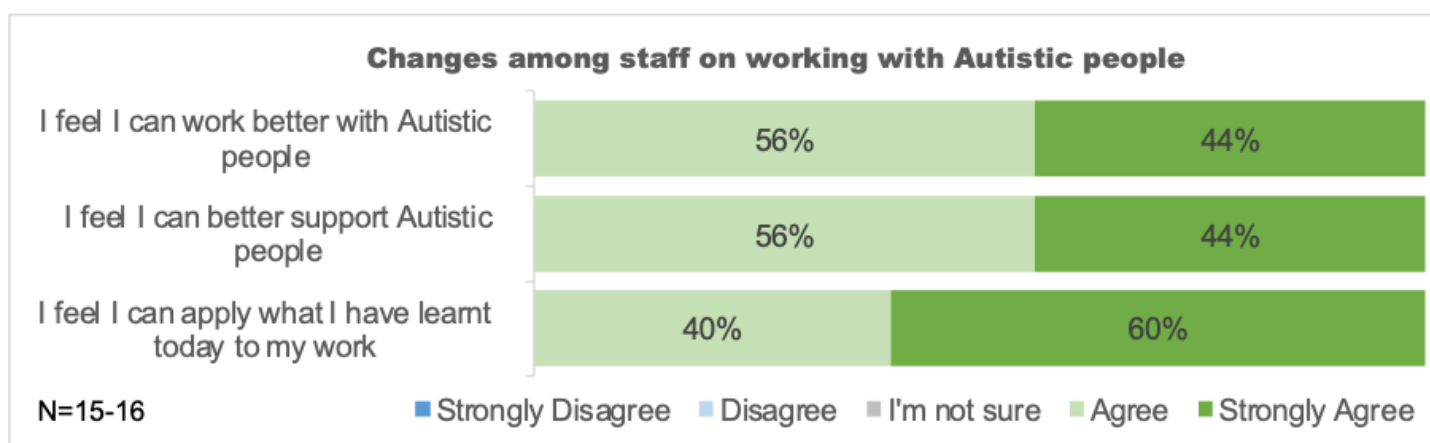
## BARWON

In 2021, I CAN Network ran some school mentoring programs for the first time in the Barwon region, encompassing Geelong, Queenscliff and the Surf Coast and Colac Otway shires. I CAN Network recruited a Program Manager to run some initial mentoring programs in the Barwon region. Leopold Primary School, located in Leopold 10km east of Geelong, was the first school in the Barwon region to engage with I CAN Network, running a staff PD session, Program Information Night and an Imagination Club. The staff PD was well-attended by school staff in Leopold PS, and was considered a success in enhancing staff knowledge on Autism and improving their practices in working with Autistic students.



**Figure 21: Responses to statements relating to Autism knowledge among Leopold PS staff participating in professional development.**

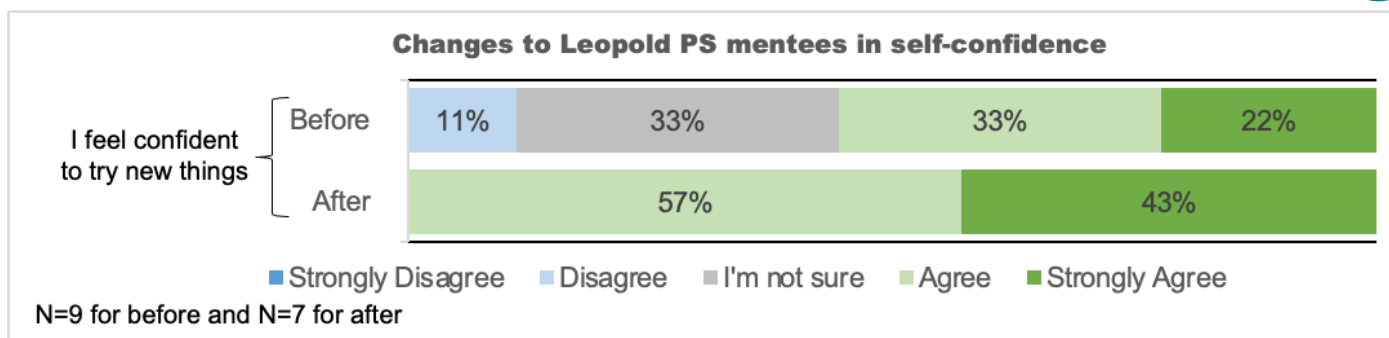
After the staff PD, staff members at Leopold PS better understood the challenges and strengths of Autistic people (Figure 21). They also learnt something positive about Autism and were more likely to promote Autistic people's achievements to other people.



**Figure 22: Responses to statements relating to working with Autistic people among Leopold PS staff participating in professional development.**

Additionally, staff members were more confident in working with Autistic people (Figure 22). They felt more capable in working with and supporting Autistic people in their work. They also felt they could apply what they have learnt from the staff PD to their work in school.





**Figure 23: Responses to the self-confidence statement among Leopold PS mentees before and after the program.**

Following the staff PD, I CAN Network ran an I CAN Imagination Club® for primary school students in Leopold PS (Figure 23). Attended by 12 students, the program was well-received, with 86% of mentees reporting that they enjoyed the program. The most noteworthy change seen among mentees in Leopold PS was their increased self-confidence, with a 45% increase in mentees feeling more confident to try new things. This result is backed up by comments from staff and parents. School staff reported that mentees became more confident in themselves and in interacting with other people after the program. One staff member recalled two mentees who have *'...become much more confident in themselves and their abilities...'* particularly in giving presentations to other people. Similarly, parents reported that their child became more confident to try new things and to interact with other people, with one parent remarking that their child became *'a little more tolerant... to try new tasks'*.



**Figure 24: Parents at the Leopold PS students' end of year celebration of I CAN Imagination Club®**

The I CAN Imagination Club® in Leopold PS was capped off by an 'End of Year Celebration' attended by mentees and their families (Figure 24). The celebration gave families the opportunity to learn how the I CAN Imagination Club® was typically run, including seeing their child deliver I CAN Talks and sharing their Good News. The celebration was also an opportunity to connect families with Leopold PS, I CAN Network and other families. Overall, the I CAN Imagination Club® in Leopold PS was a success in not only enhancing school staff knowledge towards Autism, but also in building self-confidence among students in school. The success of the mentoring programs and the introduction of a new tiered funding model in the Barwon region provide a foundation for strong growth in the region in 2022 and beyond.

# I CAN AWETISM EXPO

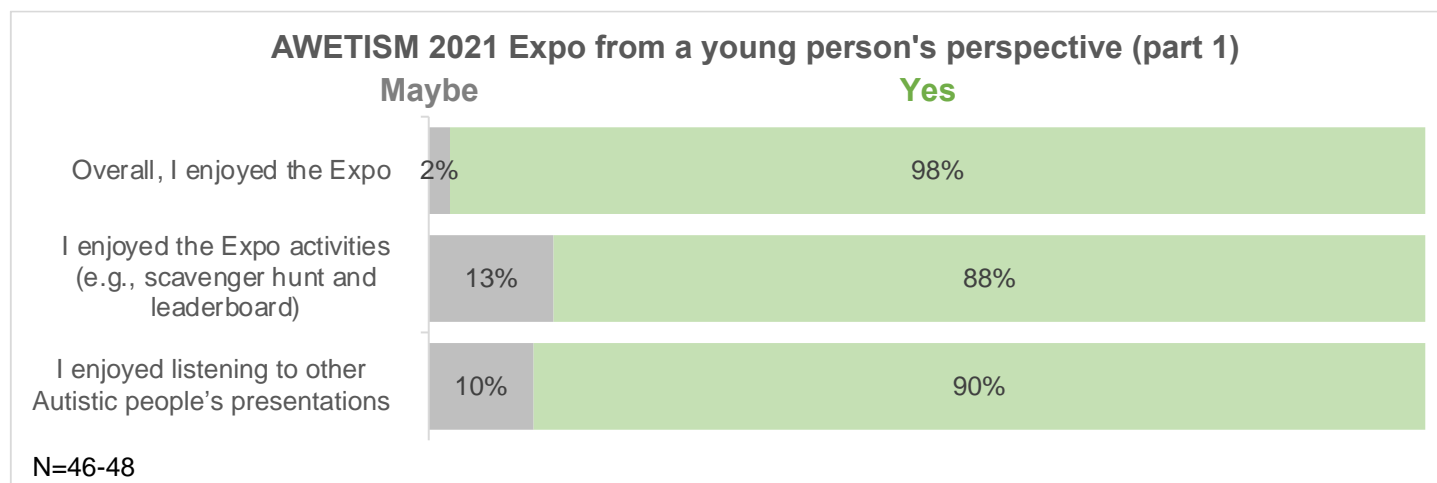
## OUR ANNUAL EVENT. DATA FROM 2021

The 2021 AWETISM Expo was run virtually on Friday 12<sup>th</sup> November 2021. Consisting of mentee presentations from both school and online mentoring programs, booths from different organisations and workshops and Q&A sessions on various topics such as education reform, the Expo has:

Run	Received	Been attended by
82	2,519	992
Presentations	Registrations	People

The Expo has been positively received by Autistic young people, parents and school staff and enhanced the experiences of mentees and existing I CAN Network customers.

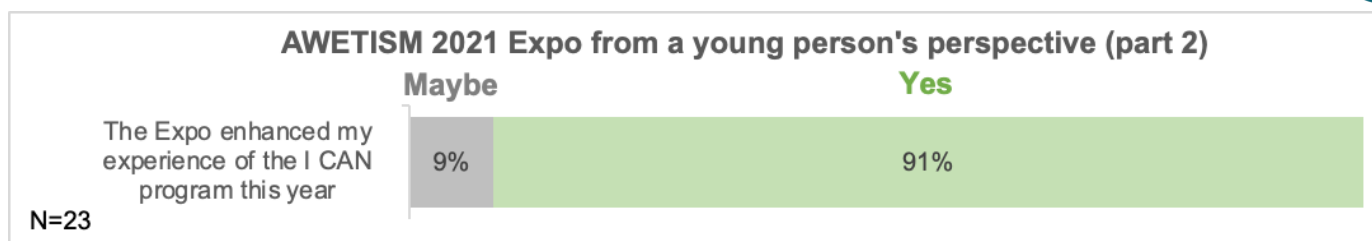
### YOUNG PERSON'S PERSPECTIVE ON 2021 AWETISM EXPO



**Figure 25: Young people's responses to the statements towards the 2021 AWETISM Expo.**

Among the 49 Autistic young people who completed the young person survey, there was a high level of satisfaction towards the Expo (Figure 25). Nearly all Autistic young people (98%) said that they enjoyed the 2021 AWETISM Expo. These Autistic young people appreciated that there was an event for them, with one young person feeling excited that *'...there's an expo for people like me'*. The Expo gave them an opportunity to meet other Autistic young people like them. One young person commented that the Expo made them feel *'...as if I am normal and do belong, knowing there are others just like me who share the same interests'*.

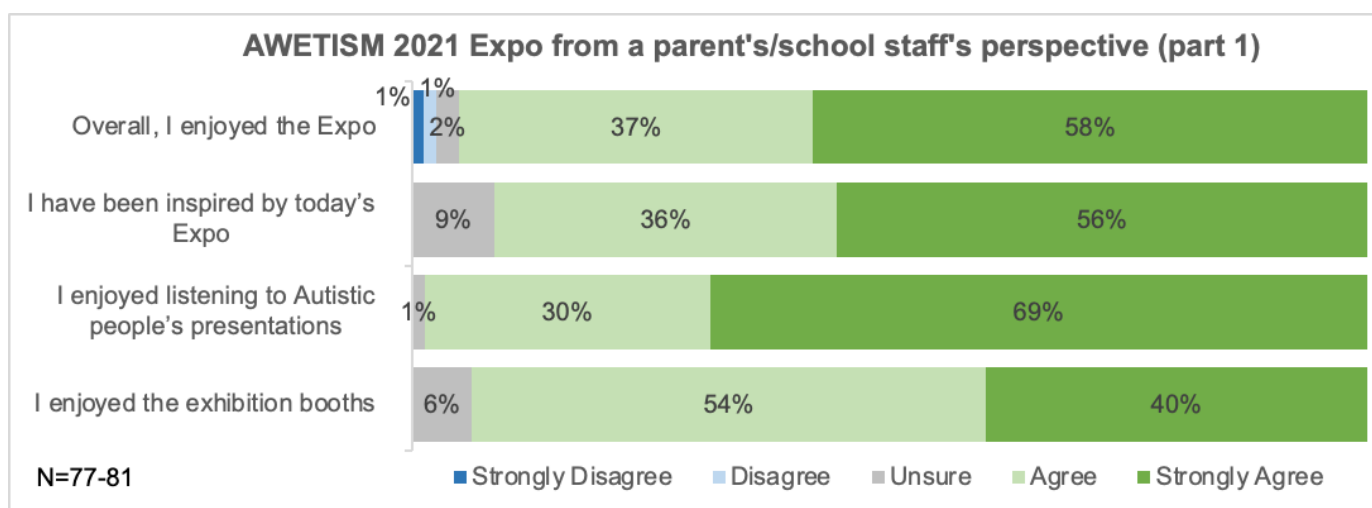
Most Autistic young people enjoyed the Expo activities such as the scavenger hunt (88%) and listening to presentations from other Autistic people (90%). These results are backed up by comments from Autistic young people who enjoyed different aspects of the Expo. In particular, Autistic young people enjoyed listening to presentations from other mentees on different topics and special interests such as anime and Minecraft. These presentations broadened their horizons on what Autistic young people enjoy, with one young person remarking that the Expo allowed them to *'see what other students are doing'*.



**Figure 26: Effect of 2021 AWETISM Expo on mentees' experiences of their I CAN mentoring program.**

There were 23 Autistic young people responding to the young person survey who participated in a school- and/or online-based mentoring program in I CAN Network in 2021. Of these people, most of them (91%) said that the Expo enhanced their experience of the I CAN mentoring program, showing how the AWETISM Expo can complement the mentoring programs (Figure 26).

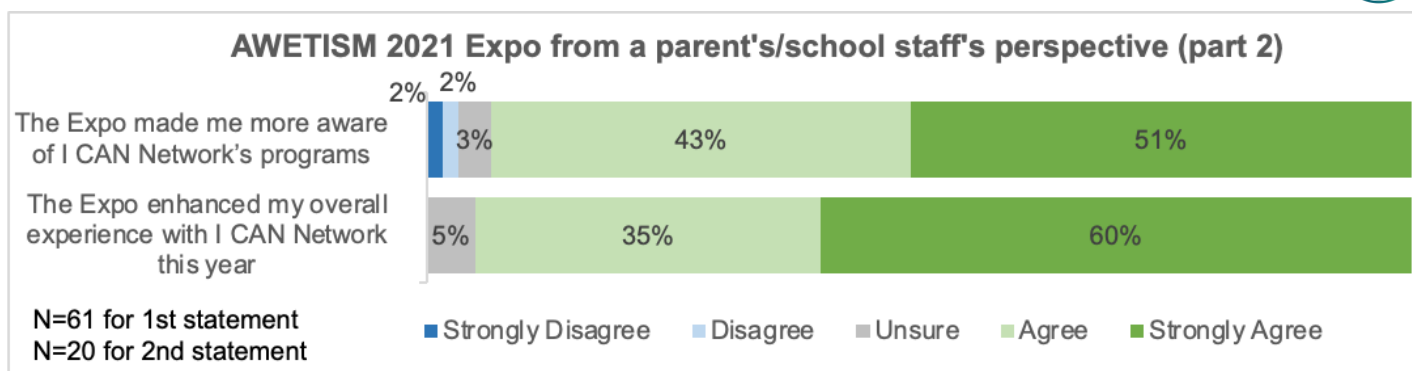
## PARENT'S AND SCHOOL STAFF'S PERSPECTIVES ON 2021 AWETISM EXPO



**Figure 27: Parent's and school staff's responses to the statements towards the 2021 AWETISM Expo.**

Additionally, 82 parents and school staff responded to the parent and school staff survey there was a high level of satisfaction towards the Expo, with 96% of parents and school staff saying that they enjoyed the Expo and 91% being inspired by the Expo. Parents and school staff gained valuable information and insights from Autistic young people and experts on various topics such as adapting teaching practices to Autistic people and Autism-friendly employment. One respondent appreciated how they were able to hear *'...from those with Autism and those in the know about how we can best support pupils on the spectrum'* They also obtained knowledge on resources and programs that are available to support Autistic young people, with one respondent amazed by *'the variety of information available about programs I can tap into for my students'*.

Parents and school staff enjoyed the presentations from Autistic young people (99%) as well as the exhibition booths (94%). The presentations were the highlight for parents and school staff as they learnt a lot about the lived experiences and special interests of Autistic young people. One respondent learnt *'...so many new 'games' and 'interests' that I can use to connect with like-minded young people whom I teach!'* Parents and school staff also saw the passion the student presenters exhibited in their presentations, with one respondent being fascinated by *'...the amount of knowledge and confidence they [the presenters] both showed'*.



**Figure 28: Effect of 2021 AWETISM Expo on parents' and school staff's perspectives towards I CAN Network.**

We also surveyed parents and school staff on separate statements based on whether they were prospective or existing customers of I CAN Network of the 61 prospective customers surveyed, 93% of them agreed that the Expo raised their awareness of I CAN Network's mentoring programs. Similarly, of the 20 existing customers of I CAN Network, 95% of them said that the Expo enhanced their overall experience with I CAN Network in 2021. These results show how the Expo can complement I CAN Network's efforts to market its mentoring programs to prospective customers and enhance the overall experience of its mentoring programs among existing customers.



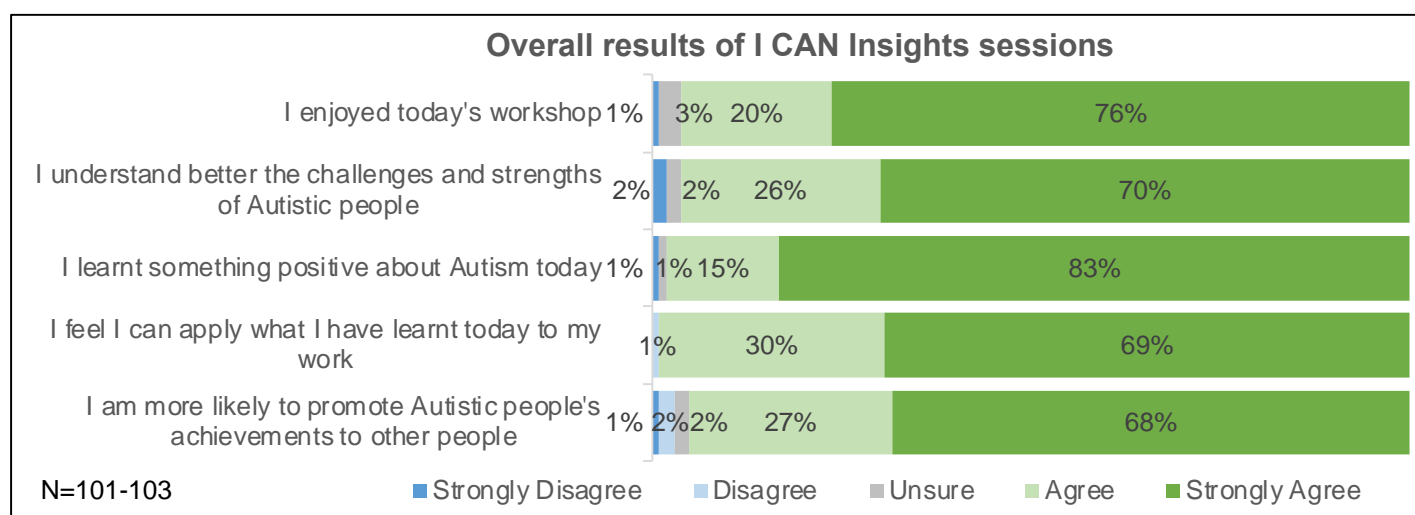
## CONCLUSION

In summary, the 2021 AWETISM Expo was well-received by Autistic young people, parents and school staff who attended the event. The 2021 AWETISM Expo was the event for Autistic young people to meet like-minded peers and to enhance their participation in an I CAN Network mentoring program. The Expo was also valuable for parents and school staff to learn better ways to support the Autistic people they work with and to be aware of programs that cater to Autistic people. Autistic young people, parents and school staff, in particular, enjoyed the presentations given by Autistic young people participating in I CAN Network's mentoring programs. For Autistic young people, the mentee presentations broadened their horizons of what their peers enjoy. For parents and school staff, they learnt about the lived experiences and special interests of Autistic young people and saw how passionate Autistic young people were in their special interests. Hence, the 2021 AWETISM Expo provides an avenue for Autistic young people to show their strengths and special interests to other people and for I CAN Network and other Autism organisations to promote their programs to prospective customers.



# I CAN INSIGHTS

I CAN Insights is I CAN Network's consultancy arm, where 'valuable Autistic insights meet diverse professional experience'. In I CAN Insights, we combine our lived experiences of Autism with lessons learnt from mentoring Autistic young people to provide unique insights that are appreciated by our clients. We run motivational presentations and professional development days to drive a rethink of Autism in schools and communities away from deficits and towards strengths. We also engage in some consulting, providing advice to our clients on how to better engage Autistic young people.



**Figure 29: Responses to statements relating I CAN Network's professional development programs in 2020-21.**

The professional development sessions are not only well-received but also have an impact on the people that attend them (Figure 29). Over the 2020-2021 period, 96% of people surveyed said that they enjoyed the sessions. The I CAN Insights sessions enhance attendees' knowledge of Autism, with 96% agreeing that they better understood the challenges and strengths of Autistic people and 98% saying they learnt something positive about Autism. The I CAN Insight sessions also have a positive influence on attendees' actions, with 99% feeling they can apply what they learnt from the sessions to their work, as well as their attitudes, with 95% feeling more likely to promote the achievements of Autistic people to other people.

Attendees learnt a lot of things by attending I CAN Network's professional development sessions. Firstly, attendees gained a new perspective on Autism and were more appreciative of Autistic people's strengths, interests and challenges. In particular, attendees liked the idea of leveraging an Autistic person's strengths and interests to engage them. One person said that *...being able to showcase the talents of a person with ASD will benefit their time and enjoyment of going to school*. Consequently, attendees were more positive about Autism. One person came to the realisation, after the session, that *The future looks brighter for students with Autism* while another person said that the session *...refreshed my belief that students with Autism can achieve*. In addition to a rethink on Autism, attendees also learnt practical tips when talking and working with Autistic people, particularly in the classroom. Attendees learnt things such as *How to be more inclusive when teaching students on the spectrum* and *...How to support anxious students with phrases such as "You've got this!" [and] "I've watched you do harder things."*

Powering the positive impacts of our professional development sessions is the attendee's appreciation of the use of Autistic people's lived experiences during the sessions. The sessions are tailored in a way that accommodates the client's needs and provides personal stories that accompany the content. One person said that *...It was fantastic to actually hear from people with diagnosed autism rather than only "experts" speaking on the subject*.

Overall, the reception towards I CAN Network's professional development sessions are overwhelmingly positive and has helped improve the outreach and social impact of I CAN Network among different organisations.

## CONCLUSION

The 2021 Social Impact Report highlights the positive work I CAN Network has done to Autistic young people across Australia and their parents and school staff in 2021. Our online mentoring programs continue to see strong growth in 2021, with high program satisfaction and improvements in outcomes among Autistic young people participating in them. For our school mentoring programs, we see strong engagement of our programs from Autistic students in school, with some mentoring programs continuing to run even during lockdown periods. Mentees in these school programs also not only felt change in themselves, but also built social connections with other Autistic students. Lastly, we have engaged well with parents and school staff of Autistic young people in promoting the positive side of Autism through not only the 2021 AWETISM Expo but also the professional development sessions.

Collectively, these results highlight the positive impact I CAN Network is having to Autistic young people and their networks. As Australia opens up in 2022 and beyond, I CAN Network will continue to play a leading role in supporting Autistic young people and their networks to develop positive self- and Autistic identity and to build social connections with other Autistic people.

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](#).

Contact us via [social media](#) or our website: <https://icannetwork.online>

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.

Thank you for your time,

Dr James Ong, Chris Varney and the I CAN team.