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INDEPENDENT EVALUATION RESULTS OF THE ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAMS FROM ACER

Executive summary by Dr James Ong, Evaluation Manager I CAN Network

In December 2021, as part of the independent evaluation of I CAN Network's online mentoring programs, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) conducted a survey with Victorian mentees who participated in an online mentoring program in 2021 and their parents/carers. Across two separate surveys for Victorian mentees and parents/carers, ACER collected information on mentee demographics, session accessibility and general and program-specific outcomes of the mentoring program. Overall, ACER collected 47 mentee responses and 130 parent/carer responses.

Most mentees had a positive experience with the online mentoring programs, with 79% of them enjoying the program and most of them feeling positive changes in themselves and enjoying meeting with other mentees. Parents/carers also reported that the mentoring sessions were accessible for their young person and that the content was clearly presented and engaging for their young person.

In addition to statements relating to program-specific outcomes of the mentoring program, ACER also measured engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness and happiness (EPOCH) among mentees using items from the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Wellbeing survey. Responses of both mentees and parents/carers in engagement, perseverance and optimism were similarly distributed and mirrored those of benchmark data. Mentees and parents/carers also showed a ceiling effect for connectedness, with a larger number of high responses than expected from benchmark data due to the fostering of social connections within the online groups. In contrast, mentees' happiness was rated more highly among mentees than their parents or carers which was rated lower than benchmark data.

Survey comments indicated that mentees felt positive during and after the sessions. They liked coming to mentoring sessions as they were able to connect with like-minded people, share their interests and build their confidence and forward-thinking. Parents reported that their young person had improved social connectedness and sense of community as they could engage and share their interests with like-minded people and build their confidence in expressing themselves in social settings. Areas of improvement noted by parents/carers included providing better continuity of online programs, moderating the effects of confident or dominant mentees and improving the time management of sessions.

Overall, the preliminary results put forward by ACER provide a positive picture of the online mentoring programs for Autistic young people.

Main report by ACER

This report addresses the survey findings of the initial Round 1 delivery of a survey to address mentees and families involved in Cycles 1 - 6 (2021) and the School Holidays program. Further data will be gathered through and reported in our Final Report in June 2022:

- surveys of two further mentee cohorts for Cycles 1 (7th February -21st March) and Cycle 2 (2nd May – 6th June) of the NOMP;
- a survey of the SHMP cohort from term 2 (should this be possible);
- desktop review of sampled NOMP and SHMP materials; and
- sample matched analysis of I CAN creations using an arts-based assessment rubric.

Responses to both the mentee and parent/carer survey are reported and some preliminary findings are presented. These are based on 47 completed mentee responses and 130 completed parent/carer responses. The mentee responses represent 11% of the reported cohort of mentees and parent/carer responses represent 30% of the reported cohort of parents/carers, remembering that some families have more than one mentee attending the NOMP sessions. Results are reported as counts (N) and percentages (%) to allow easy comparisons. Survey questions for both the mentee and the parent/carer survey are included as appendices.

The parent/carer survey responders reported that the young people they cared for ranged from 7-8 years old to over 18 years old, most were between 11 and 16 years old. (see Table 2.)

Table 2: Parent/carer: age of young person

Age of young person	N	%
7-8 years	2	2
9-10 years	19	15
11-12 years	33	25
13-14 years	29	22
15-16 years	29	22
17-18 years	10	8
Over 18 years old	8	6
Total	130	100

Similarly, the mentee survey responders also ranged from 7-8 years old to over 18 years old, most were between 11 and 16 years old. (see Table 3.)

Table 3: Mentee: age of young person

Age of young person	N	%
7-8 years	2	4
9-10 years	5	11
11-12 years	14	30
13-14 years	8	17
15-16 years	11	23
17-18 years	3	6
Over 18 years old	4	9
Total	47	100

Mentee respondents identified as female (32%), male (62%) and non-binary (2%) and parents/carers also identified their young people as female (30%), male (60%) and non-binary (5%). Half of both sets of respondents said it was the mentees first I CAN online program.

The I CAN programs that were participated in by the highest number of respondents were 'Minecraft', 'Drawing & Art', '13-15 Years', and 'Screen, Tunes & Characters' according to both sets of respondents (Table 4.).

Table 4: I CAN programs joined

Program	Mentee %	Parent/Carer %
Minecraft	34	31
Drawing & Art	26	19
13-15 Years	19	16
Screen, Tunes & Characters	19	14
Anime	13	8
Young adults	9	6
Star Wars	6	6
Pokemon	6	6
9-13 Years/Afternoon	6	11
Dinosaurs	4	5
Dungeons & Dragons	4	6
Marvel	4	4
10-13 Years	2	7
LGBTQIA+	2	6
Mythical Creatures	2	1
Space	2	2
Animals	2	2
AFL	0	3
Harry Potter	0	1
Imagination Club	0	3
No response	0	2
Total responders	47	130

PERCENTAGES MAY NOT SUM TO 100 AS RESPONDENTS COULD SELECT MORE THAN ONE RESPONSE

To understand whether the responses to the surveys were representative of the full cohort of 2021 mentees, an analysis of school attended by young person of the parent/carers was undertaken. Table 5 clearly shows that the parent/carers survey responses had good coverage across all schools attended by mentees participating in an I CAN mentor program in 2021. This gives us confidence in reporting that the survey results reflect the views of the broader cohort.

Table 5: Survey cohort representativeness by school

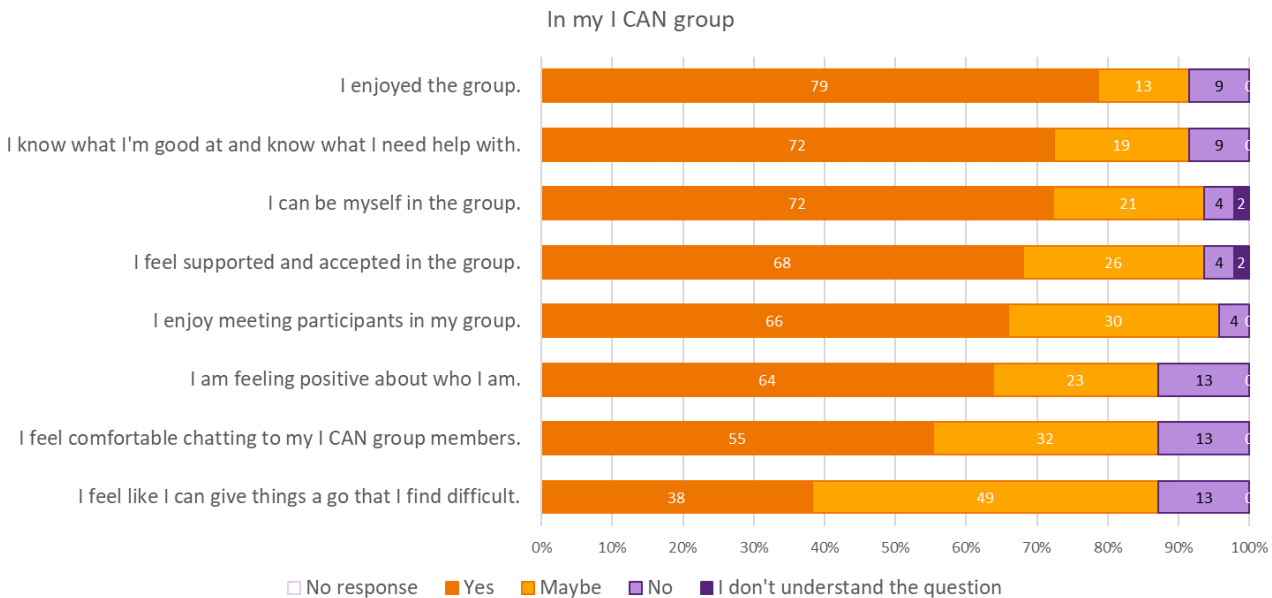
		Parent/carers Responders	All I CAN program 2021
Number of schools	N	130	437
School type	Combined	19 %	17 %

Percentage of schools	Primary	35 %	33 %
	Secondary	32 %	32 %
	Special	5 %	9 %
	Unknown	10 %	10 %
School sector Percentage of schools	Catholic	17 %	18 %
	Government	59 %	59 %
	Independent	14 %	13 %
	Unknown	10 %	10 %
Region Percentage of schools	Major Cities	71 %	68 %
	Inner Regional	11 %	17 %
	Outer Regional	9 %	4 %
	Unknown	10 %	10 %
ICSEA* band Percentage of schools	<1000	17 %	20 %
	1000-1100	47 %	49 %
	>1100	26 %	22 %
	Unknown	10 %	10 %

*ICSEA STANDS FOR THE INDEX OF COMMUNITY SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL ADVANTAGE

Three-quarters or more of mentees were positive about their group experiences. There were also a small number of respondents who didn't feel supported and accepted, and who reported that they could not be themselves in the group (see Figure. 2). When considering these results it is important to understand that this cohort would not usually be expected to report any positive experience associated with group participation or being involved in activities that involve other people.

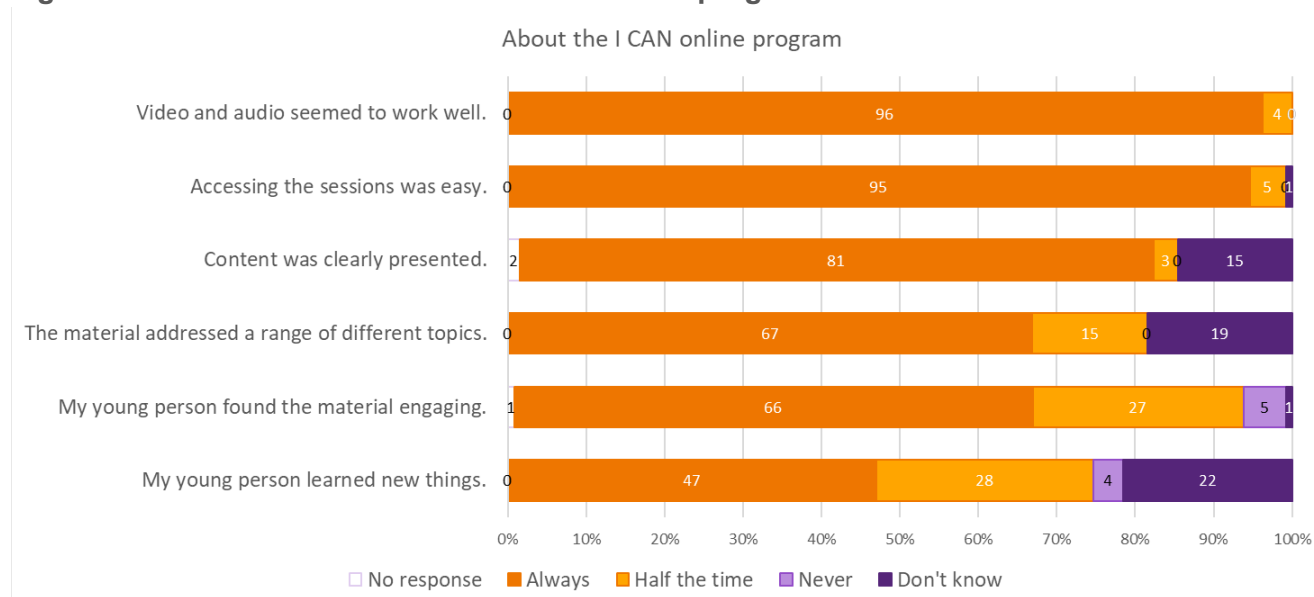
Figure 2: Mentee: Tell us how you feel about your I CAN groups



The majority of parents/carers reported that the program was accessible with almost all saying that the video and audio, and online access was always easy (see Figure. 3). Most parents/carers felt that the content was always clearly presented (81%) and that the material always addressed a range of different topics (67%), and that their young person always found the material engaging (66%). Parent/carers were less sure that their

young person was learning new things during the sessions although slightly under half of respondents reported that they always were.

Figure 3: Parents/Carers: About the I CAN online program



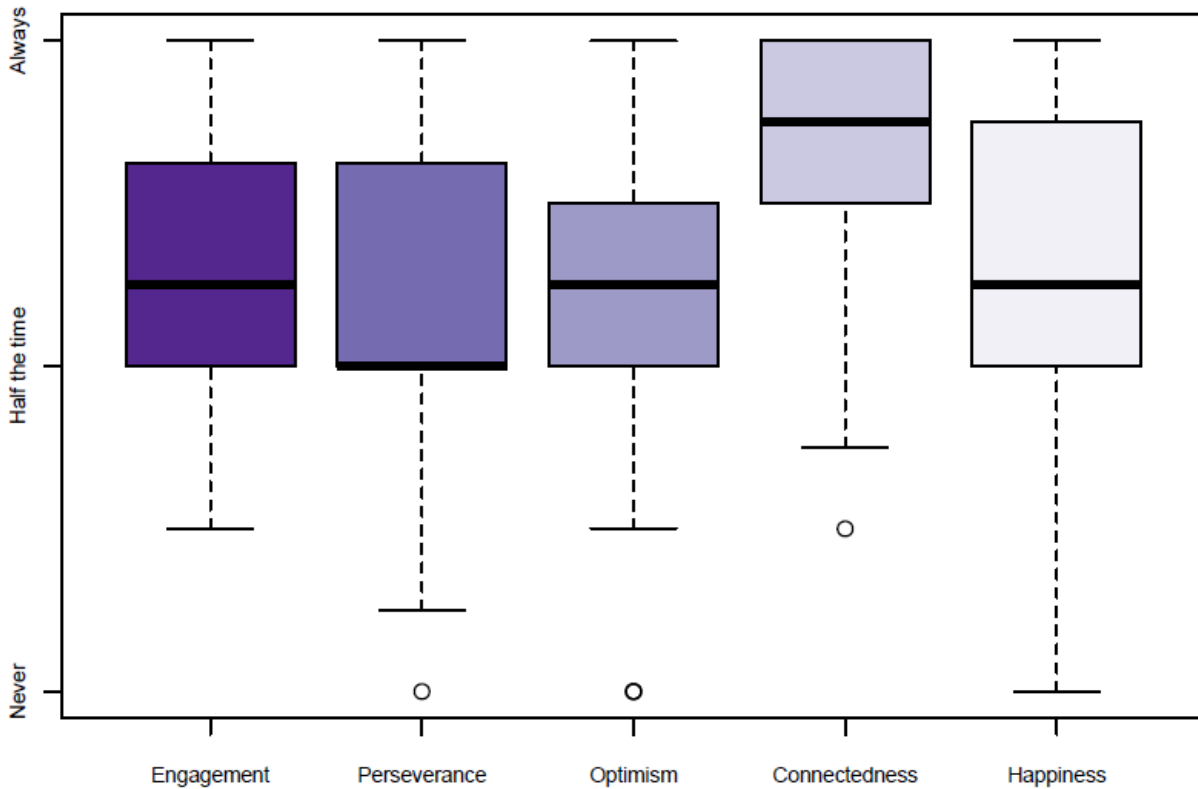
Also included in both surveys were items measuring engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness, and happiness (EPOCH) using the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Wellbeing. EPOCH measures were included to allow mentees to describe their customary state of mind. The following figures 4 and 6, show the mentee self-report and parent/carer views of EPOCH for the mentees.

Benchmarked data for EPOCH suggests that the engagement, perseverance, and optimism factors should be relatively normally distributed, with mean values slightly above the scale midpoint (Half the time). The benchmark data also suggests that connectedness and happiness factors are skewed, with some evidence of a ceiling effect. A ceiling effect occurs when a high proportion of responses fall at the upper range of a scale. This is unexpected and we attribute it to the factors discussed in the next few paragraphs.

In response to the survey the mentees appear to be similar to the expected benchmark distributions, but far more positive on the connectedness scale, even with a ceiling effect (Figure 4). If we were to take this at face-value, we might conclude that I CAN mentees are people who usually feel connected to community, which is not consistent with what we know about the I CAN cohort. Mentees usually attend the I CAN program because they would like to experience better connectedness that they do not usually feel it in their normal lives.

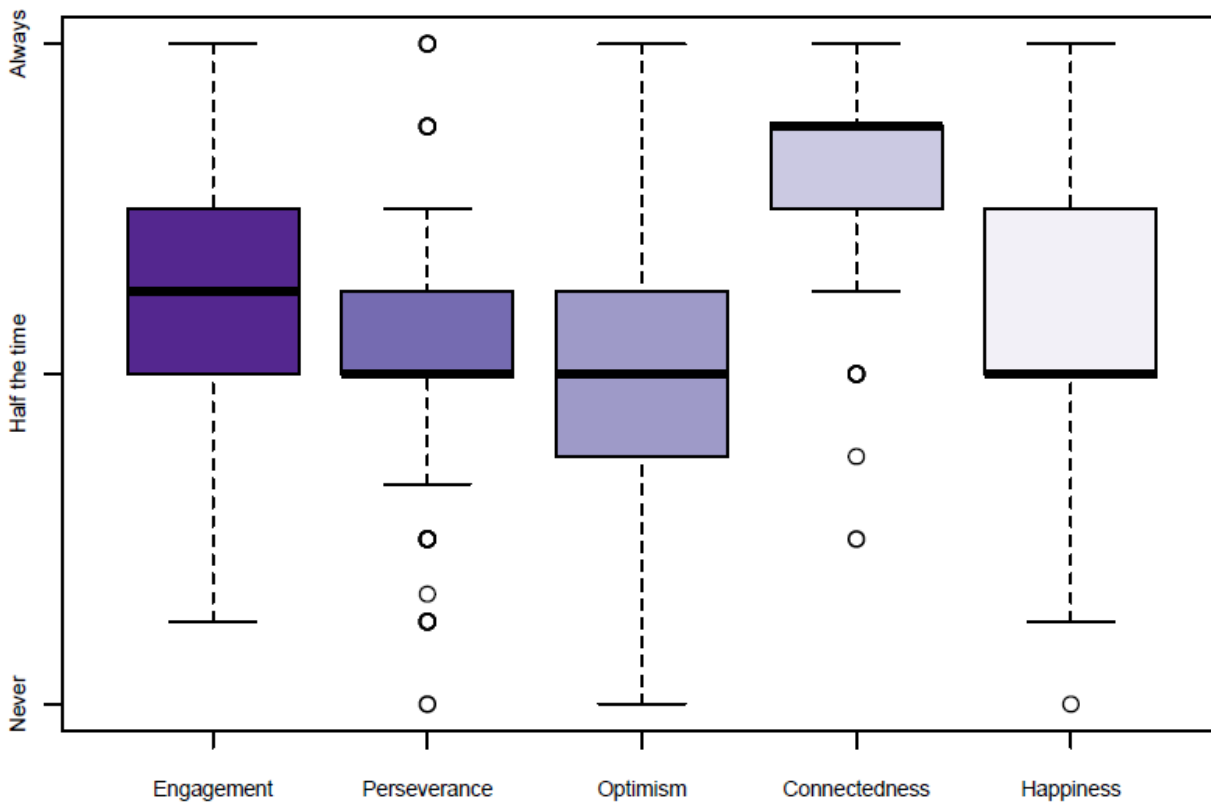
Higher than expected mentee scale responses on the connectedness scale could be because they answered questions about the I CAN group first and then answered the EPOCH items. They may have responded to the EPOCH items as though they were “feeling connected during the I CAN mentor groups” rather than considering their general levels of connectedness and happiness, independent of I CAN programs. The effect might also be attributed to possible tendencies within the cohort to respond with an immediate interpretation of the survey being related to I CAN specifically. Another possible explanation is that mentees who so rarely experience connection experience any form of connection more intensely and so inflate their report, but this is speculative and yet to be corroborated by other evidence. These results also suggests that future surveys may need to ask mentees about their personal engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness and happiness prior to and separate from I CAN network programs – perhaps in a separate survey at the beginning of the program as a baseline. This may be possible within the School Mentoring program, for example and it is currently occurring for the Cycle 1 and 2 pre-program survey.

Figure 4: Mentees: EPOCH scales



Parent/carer views of their young people indicate higher levels of engagement, but lower levels of happiness compared to what we expect (see Figure 5), in contrast to the mentee self-report results. However, there are more parent/carer responses and they are not matched to the mentee results at this stage so few conclusions should be drawn from this comparison. Parent/carer responses also indicate a positively skewed distribution for perseverance and a negatively skewed distribution for connectedness which may indicate how a neurodivergent population has different distributions compared to the benchmark data from a neurotypical population. ACER believe that collecting further data and sharing it with the broader community might allow I CAN stakeholders to provide us with further feedback and interpretation of this information.

Figure 5: Parents/Carers: EPOCH scales



The mentee survey included an open response that asked mentees “How do the sessions make you feel?” Of the 29 mentee responses to this item, more than half reported that they felt happy, comfortable or welcome in the sessions or stated that sessions left them feeling positive in some way. Preliminary thematic analysis suggests emerging themes such as social connectedness or “likeness”, sharing interests, confidence and forward thinking, and meeting new people. Responses that reflect some emerging positive themes include the following:

“Grateful and proud to be autistic”

“It made me feel that I could join something like this and be a part of it. I enjoyed it because it was about something I’m interested in. The mentors were very caring in the program.”

“The ICAN online mentoring sessions make me feel like there is a better chance for me in the world than I initially thought.”

“Good that I got to meet other autistic kids my age that like the same stuff as me.”

“I feel excited about being a part of I CAN groups, I like the people I’ve met, I feel safe in the sessions.”

The parent/carer survey included two open responses that asked parents:

- 1) What did your young person get out of the program?
- 2) What, if anything, about the program could be improved?

There were 76 responses to the first open text question and 65 related to the second question. Here we report some examples of responses based on a preliminary thematic analysis for each question respectively.

Responses to Question 1 suggests emerging themes such as improved social connectedness and a sense of community, having the opportunity to share interests with like-minded people, improved confidence in expressing themselves in social settings and signs of engagement (laughter, enjoyment, sense of fun) and one or two responses reflecting autistic pride. Responses indicative of these themes are included as examples below:

“It was a safe and well-managed social program that my young person could easily access each week and formed part of his learning how to connect with less familiar people.”

“He loved chatting and joking with the people in his group, the connection he had with others was fantastic.”

“I can hear the laughter coming from his room. He loves ICAN so much that he wants to become a mentor and work with ICAN and help his peers...I as a parent am so very thankful that you are there and he has felt connected and had fun and joy. I have seen him mature each program he has completed.”

“My daughter has developed a greater understanding of her autism and what it means to be autistic. She is learning about her tribe and tools and strategies to help her through her challenges.”

“The first one they did a few years ago they got a great sense of belonging to the autistic community, but the LGBTIQ+ one was life changing. They came out of the first session and declared “I have found my people!”

There were some responses that mentioned that the program was not suitable and did not meet the needs of the parents/carers for some students. These are reported in responses to the second open text question “What, if anything, about the program could be improved?”

Parent/carer responses to the second open text item suggested improvements that could be made to the program and there were some themes to emerge. These include improving the programs by providing better overall continuity (longer sessions, more sessions, greater frequency of sessions, more opportunities to build the connections within the group, continuity of program as students age), moderating the effects of confident or dominant mentees, improving time management of sessions (meeting prompts, ensuring all mentees have time to engage, ensuring equitable contribution). Overwhelmingly, parent/carers expressed the need for more real-world interactions between mentees that were facilitated by I CAN such as picnics or camps. Many responses expressed the view that real world contact between mentees would be a natural outcome of the program. Conversely, there were responses that reflected the understanding that this was not something I CAN were in position to offer.

There were some parent/carer responses that suggested that the program did not meet the needs of their young people. Themes from these responses fell within the following range: improving the intake process to ensure a comprehensive understanding of each young person’s needs, ensuring equity and suitability of contribution across the groups, providing content suitable to students with language processing issues, social and communication needs (social skills building and team building) or sensory needs (auditory, visual), and

allowing time for mentees to contribute more including electing topics for content, asking more questions, and facilitating conversations between mentees during sessions.

Appendix I – Mentee Survey Questions

I CAN Mentee Survey

This is a survey about you and how you feel about I CAN mentoring!

- *There are no right or wrong answers.*
- *Please answer honestly about how you feel about these things.*
- *Your responses are private – no one will know how you have answered.*
- *Select **Go**, if you consent and are happy to complete the survey.*

Thank you



Please select your age group:

- 7-8 years
- 9-10 years
- 11-12 years
- 13-14 years
- 15-16 years
- 17-18 years
- Over 18 years old

How do you identify yourself?

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Other/Prefer not to say

Is this your first I CAN online program?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Which I CAN online programs have you joined? *(tick all that apply)*

9-13 Years/Afternoon	Imagination Club
10-13 Years	LGBTQIA+
13-15 Years	Marvel
AFL	Minecraft
Animals	Mythical Creatures
Anime	Pokemon
Dinosaurs	Screen, Tunes & Characters
Drawing & Art	Space
Dungeons & Dragons	Star Wars
Harry Potter	Young Adults

About You

Tell us how you feel about your I CAN groups.

In my I CAN group

	Yes	Maybe	No	I don't understand the question	
1. I know what I'm good at and know what I need help with.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	SA
2. I enjoy meeting participants in my group.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	SC
3. I am feeling positive about who I am.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	ID
4. I can be myself in the group.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	ID
5. I feel comfortable chatting to my I CAN group members.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Com
6. I feel supported and accepted in the group.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Con
7. I feel like I can give things a go that I find difficult.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Conf
8. I enjoyed the group.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Sat

EPOCH 1 (Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, Happiness)

We would like to know how often you think or feel this way.



	Never	Half the time	Always	
9. When something good happens to me, I have people who I like to share the good news with.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	C
10. I finish whatever I begin.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	P
11. I am optimistic about my future.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	O
12. I feel happy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	H
13. When I do an activity, I enjoy it so much that I lose track of time.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	E

EPOCH 2 (Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, Happiness)

We would like to know how often you think or feel this way.



	Never	Half the time	Always	
14. I have a lot of fun.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	H
15. I get completely absorbed in what I am doing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	E
16. In uncertain times, I expect the best.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	O
17. I persist at my schoolwork or work until it is finished.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	P
18. When I have a problem, I have someone who will be there for me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	C

EPOCH 3 (Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, Happiness)

We would like to know how often you think or feel this way.



	Never	Half the time	Always	
19. I get so involved in activities that I forget about everything else.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	E

EPOCH 3 (Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, Happiness)

We would like to know how often you think or feel this way.



- | | Never | Half the time | Always | |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---|
| 20. I am a hard worker. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | P |
| 21. I love life. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | H |
| 22. There are people in my life who really care about me. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | C |
| 23. I think good things are going to happen to me. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | O |

EPOCH 4 (Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, Happiness)

We would like to know how often you think or feel this way.



- | | Never | Half the time | Always | |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---|
| 24. I have friends that I really care about. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | C |
| 25. Once I make a plan to get something done, I stick to it. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | P |
| 26. I believe that things will work out, no matter how difficult they seem. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | O |
| 27. When I am learning something new, I lose track of how much time has passed. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | E |
| 28. I am a cheerful person. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | H |

29. **How do the I CAN online mentoring sessions make you feel?**
<open text>

[SUBMIT]

Thank you for doing this survey!



Appendix II: Parent/Carer Survey Questions

I CAN Parent/carer Survey

This is a survey about how you feel about the I CAN mentoring program!

- *There are no right or wrong answers.*
- *Please answer honestly about how you feel about these things.*
- *Your responses are private – no one will know how you have answered.*
- *Select **Go**, if you consent and are happy to complete the survey.*

Thank you



About Your Young Person

Please select your young person's age group:

- 7-8 years
- 9-10 years
- 11-12 years
- 13-14 years
- 15-16 years
- 17-18 years
- Over 18 years old

How does your young person identify?

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Other/Prefer not to say



Is this their first I CAN online program?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Which I CAN online programs has your young person joined? *(tick all that apply)*

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 9-13 Years/Afternoon | <input type="checkbox"/> Imagination Club |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 10-13 Years | <input type="checkbox"/> LGBTQIA+ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 13-15 Years | <input type="checkbox"/> Marvel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> AFL | <input type="checkbox"/> Minecraft |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Animals | <input type="checkbox"/> Mythical Creatures |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anime | <input type="checkbox"/> Pokemon |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dinosaurs | <input type="checkbox"/> Screen, Tunes & Characters |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drawing & Art | <input type="checkbox"/> Space |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dungeons & Dragons | <input type="checkbox"/> Star Wars |




About the I CAN Online Program

	 Never	 Half the time	 Always	Don't know
30. Accessing the sessions was easy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
31. Video and audio seemed to work well.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
32. Content was clearly presented.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
33. My young person found the material engaging.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
34. The material addressed a range of different topics.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
35. My young person learned new things.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How Your Young Person Expresses Themselves

EPOCH (Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, Happiness) (Will be split into five item blocks as below with each block randomised)

Tell us how often you think your young person expresses the following responses.

	 Never	 Half the time	 Always	
36. When something good happens to them, my young person has people who they like to share the good news with.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	C
37. My young person finishes whatever they begin.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	P
38. My young person is optimistic about their future.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	O
39. My young person feels happy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	H
40. When they do an activity, my young person enjoys it so much that they lose track of time.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	E
41. My young person has a lot of fun.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	H
42. My young person gets completely absorbed in what they are doing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	E
43. In uncertain times, my young person expects the best.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	O
44. My young person persists at their schoolwork or work until it is finished.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	P
45. When they have a problem, my young person has someone who will be there for them.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	C
46. My young person gets so involved in activities that they forget about everything else.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	E
47. My young person is a hard worker.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	P
48. My young person loves life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	H

EPOCH (Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, Happiness) (Will be split into five item blocks as below with each block randomised)

Tell us how often you think your young person expresses the following responses.



	Never	Half the time	Always	
49. There are people in my young person's life who really care about them.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	C
50. My young person thinks good things are going to happen to them.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	O
51. My young person has friends that they really care about.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	C
52. Once they make a plan to get something done, my young person sticks to it.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	P
53. My young person believes that things will work out, no matter how difficult they seem.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	O
54. When my young person is learning something new, they lose track of how much time has passed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	E
55. My young person is a cheerful person.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	H

Impact of the I CAN Online Program

56. What did your young person get out of the program?

<open text>

57. What, if anything, about the program could be improved?

<open text>

[SUBMIT]

Thank you for doing this survey!

