

Independent Evaluation: I CAN Network Mentoring Programs

Executive Summary
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Research Impact Unit

Executive Summary

Background

I CAN Network is an autistic-led organisation that has been providing mentoring to autistic children, adolescents, and young adults since 2014. Whilst previous evaluations have been conducted, this is the first in-depth independent evaluation of the I CAN Network's mentoring programs (i.e., I CAN Online Program, I CAN Imagination Club, I CAN School Program). The purpose of this independent evaluation was to explore and provide evidence for the contribution and impact of the I CAN Network Mentoring Programs are having on mentees/students, their parent/carers, and teachers and schools across metropolitan and regional Victoria.

Method

This independent evaluation was led by two autistic researchers and a practicing registered psychologist. A participatory research approach was adopted, and a mixed-method convergent research design including various quantitative and qualitative methodologies was implemented. Mentees, students, their parent/carers and teachers were invited to complete an online survey both before and after participation in the I CAN Mentoring Programs. The evaluators developed an overview of the key outcomes to be assessed based on the I CAN Outcomes Framework and publicly available marketing communications from I CAN.

Findings

There is strong evidence supporting improved outcomes for mentees and students, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The I CAN School Program was observed to have the largest impact on positive autistic identity, while an increased sense of belonging was established as a consistent benefit across all mentoring programs. There were notable differences observed between students in regional Victoria and metropolitan Melbourne. Students living in regional Victoria scored lower on most measures at baseline (compared to students in metropolitan Melbourne) and showed consistent improvement in all outcomes after participating in the I CAN Imagination Club and the I CAN School Program. There were 14 key categories identified from the qualitative data that describe the lived experiences of program participants and those who care for them at home and school. Myths and misperceptions fuelled underlying assumptions that are detrimental to the health and wellbeing of children, adolescents and young people who have already been identified or self-identify as autistic.

Discussion and Recommendations

This report highlights several important key findings and recommendations. The strong evidence demonstrating marked improvements in outcomes for mentees and students warrants a tangible and time-sensitive expansion of the I CAN Network Mentoring Programs to allow all neurodiverse students the opportunity to access whichever version of the program is most suited to their needs.

Given the strength of the positive impact the I CAN School Program has had on the development of a positive autistic identity, the I CAN Imagination Club should similarly incorporate this component as part of the program. Furthermore, mentees/students' participation in an I CAN mentoring program led to a greater sense of belonging than they had predicted would be possible before commencing the program. This suggests there are limited circumstances in which a sense of belonging is felt, as has been the experience of many minority groups. In the same way that cultural and religious needs are considered across the education sector, so too should the needs of autistic people be addressed. In the absence of an I CAN Network mentoring program that has been specifically designed by an autistic-led organisation and delivered by an autistic facilitator, there are currently limited (if any) opportunities for neurodiverse students to develop a sense of belonging among others. There is also an opportunity for maximising impact in regional areas and working towards overcoming potential barriers in metropolitan-based schools to better understand how the I CAN Network can best support primary and secondary schools to improve student outcomes.

Although the education sector and school systems purport to support an ethos of accepting learning differences and neurodiversity, current practices are in direct contrast to the most basic needs of autistic children, adolescents, and young people. The assumption that 'more support is better support' is inherently flawed due to known differences in information and sensory processing specific to this population. Despite the estimation that 1 in 44 Australians are autistic, it is only through participating in the I CAN Network Mentoring Programs that mentees, students and their parent/carers realise they are not alone, there are others who experience the world in the same way as them and as a result, come to understand there is nothing 'wrong' with them. Should the recommendations of this independent evaluation be recognised as having merit from an academic, clinical, and lived-experience perspective, the education sector in Victoria has an opportunity to play an integral role in reshaping schools to better serve the increasing number of neurodiverse young people and their families.

I CAN Online Program

Mentee Pre-Program Goal

"I hope to gain more social abilities, as that is my weakness."

Mentee Post-Program Gain

"They have helped me. I have more confidence in myself and I CAN has taught me to believe in myself and that I can do anything I want to."

Parent/Carer Pre-Program Goal

"Engaging with others. Greater confidence in own capacities, and therefore higher level of social functioning. Greater capacity to manage own emotions and anxiety."

Parent/Carer Post-Program Gain

"Feeling heard and understood in a group has strengthened his self-esteem... I found him smiling and laughing lots (although technically not a NDIS goal, it does show a positive experience)."

"...listening to him converse in these groups shows me what he's capable of in a supportive environment."

I CAN Imagination Club and I CAN School Program

Student Pre-Program Goal

"My parents thought it would help me."

Student Post-Program Gain

"It has helped me so much that I can't put it into words."

Parent/Carer Pre-Program Description

"A programme being run at school, to help children with ASD learn new skills."

Parent/Carer Post-Program Description

"A safe space for my child, where she can be herself and connect with others in her school that get her. She often feels ignored in school and disengaged. This club has given her a reason to attend and helped her discover a 'best friend'... her emotional well-being has tripled because of this."

Teacher Pre-Program Experience

"It has been positive, and the email responses have been comprehensive."

Teacher Post-Program Experience

"Staff members have been brilliant. Their ability to form relationships with our students is superb. These relationships aid the improvement of our students to achieve the outcomes we are all working together to achieve."