I CAN NETWORK

SOCIAL IMPACT REPORT

I CAN NETWORK LTD 2022

DEVELOPED BY DR JAMES ONG

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FOREWORD

"Going to the I CAN program was the best bit out of my day/week…" These are the words of an I CAN program participant, which is so validating for the I CAN team and partners to hear. Welcome to the I CAN Network's 2022 Social Impact Report. You will find it a heart-warming read.

Our Social Impact report series is one of the key mechanisms through which I CAN Ltd remains accountable to the Autistic community, in whose name we exist *'to prove what Autistics CAN do'*. This report also provides our many stakeholders including young people, their parents/ carers, our staff and education and employment partners with an indication of our impact in 2022. As you will read in the following report and case studies, you can be confident that our impact is significant.

The Board and I would like to firstly commend the ongoing leadership of I CAN co-founder and Evaluation and Policy Manager, Dr James Ong. James is an enormous asset to the I CAN Network family. Since James offered to support my idea for the I CAN Network in 2012, he has championed the development of our outcomes framework, evaluation tools and our social impact reporting. I am extremely lucky that it was James who was the first supporter of I CAN. James is highly respected among our team, government and philanthropic partners because he personifies the I CAN value 'We value Integrity' and keeps an eye constantly on our program improvement and programmatic policy insights. We look forward to James' ongoing leadership in I CAN.

We thank our committed staff for delivering 159 I CAN group mentoring programs in 2022. This included 84 school mentoring programs with a participant satisfaction rating of 85% and 75 online mentoring programs with a satisfaction rating of 89%. The neuro-affirming attitudes, positivity and role modelling of our 90 diverse mentor staff, including 74 neurodivergent staff, is what has made our programs so successful. Thank you to our team.

This report's analysis is reflective of the positive impact Australian Catholic University (ACU) also observed from the I CAN program in their 2022 independent evaluation of I CAN's mentoring programs in Victoria. I would encourage you to read ACU's Executive Summary and Sandra Buchanan's arts-based evaluation alongside this 2022 report to gain a compelling picture of I CAN's impact through international evaluation tools and I CAN's internal evaluation tools.

This report is rich with the voices of Autistic young people, whose voices are so important in our collective efforts to improve the conditions of Autistic Australians. 90% of Autistic Australians will have a co-occurring mental health condition and tragically, we have a suicide rate 7 times the national average. The central outcomes of the I CAN program – belonging, confidence, optimism and self-acceptance and Autistic pride – are important protective factors for the mental health and wellbeing of Autistic young people.

Across 2022's 84 school mentoring programs, this report zeroes in on several programs. At Mater Christi College in Melbourne, a teacher reflects that they have *'…never seen the students participate and engage in their classes the way they do in I CAN!'* At Crusoe College

Bendigo, a young person says the program gave them *'a bit more confidence and realisation that I'm not alone in being Autistic'*. At Rollins Primary School Geelong, a primary student observes *'the great thing about the I CAN is you get help from people you can trust'*. Lastly, at Craigslea State High School in Brisbane, one young person lists what they have gained from the program: '*Confidence, friends, happiness'*.

The whole team commends James and the I CAN Online Management team for the longitudinal data they are now collecting from our online mentoring programs. This data shows that repeated participation in I CAN Online programs continues to improve participants' self-acceptance and communication. The data in this report is complemented by the creations of I CAN Online mentees visible in our online Art Gallery.

Thank you for your trust. This report will validate that trust.

Chris Varney
Founder & Chief Enabling Officer I CAN Network Ltd.

GLOSSARY

School mentoring programs refer to I CAN Network Ltd.'s group mentoring program in both primary and secondary schools.

I CAN School® Mentoring Program refers to the secondary school version of I CAN Network Ltd.'s school mentoring programs which focuses on building Autistic identity and social connections.

I CAN Imagination Club® refers to the primary school version of I CAN Network Ltd.'s school mentoring programs. At times in this document, I CAN Imagination Club® can be referred to under the umbrella of 'I CAN Schools' or 'I CAN School® programs'.

AUTHOR PREFACE

Things are gradually returning to normal as the world comes out of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic continues to have ramifications on people's mental health and surface inequities that are not yet resolved. These are especially true for Autistic people who continue to face challenges in their life and need plenty of support to thrive in a new world. In 2022, I CAN Network continued to expand its school and online mentoring programs to support more Autistic young people across Australia.

The 2022 Social Impact Report provides a comprehensive overview of the impact our online and school mentoring programs are having to Autistic young people, backed up by high-quality results. The main focus of this report is on the evaluation results of the school mentoring program. From gathering evaluation data of all school mentoring programs in 2022, we are seeing a positive difference to Autistic young people's sense of self and engagement with other people. These results highlight how our school mentoring programs provide a valuable support mechanism to Autistic students who are struggling to re-engage with school after the COVID-19 pandemic. We also provide some case studies describing the positive impact of our mentoring programs to Autistic students in individual schools. The evaluation results of the online mentoring programs round off this report. They paint a positive picture of how online mentoring programs are making a difference to the most vulnerable Autistic young people, both among first-timers and repeat mentees.

I hope that you enjoy reading the positive results of the mentoring programs presented in this report, and that you will pass on these results to other people who would like to know how I CAN Network is making an impact to Autistic young people across Australia.

Dr. James Ong
Evaluation and Policy Manager, I CAN Network Ltd.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As Australia and the world gradually return to normal life, we are continuing to assess the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's physical and mental health. In particular, Autistic young people face issues in integrating back into school, with a range of mental ill health such as anxiety and depression and behavioural challenges such as 'School Can't'. Support programs such as I CAN Network's peer mentoring programs provide an important avenue for Autistic young people to feel supported and connected as they build their self-esteem and support networks. The 2022 I CAN Social Impact Report provides a comprehensive summary of what we have achieved in our online and school mentoring programs among Autistic young people in 2022.

I CAN School® Mentoring Programs were running back to normal in 2022 after COVID-19-related disruptions over 2020 – 2021. This resulted in us running 84 school mentoring programs across Victoria and Queensland which engaged 1,090 students. In running these programs, we have collected plenty of evaluation data on school mentoring programs. These evaluation results describe the positive reception of the I CAN School® Mentoring Program, with 85% of mentees enjoying them. The evaluation results also describe the positive changes the school mentoring programs are promoting to Autistic young people, both in terms of themselves and how they connect to other people.

Highlights of the I CAN School® evaluation results include:

1. A 16% increase in mentees' self-confidence;

2. An 18% increase in mentees' social connection; and

3. A 15% increase in mentees' public speaking skills.

These numerical results are backed up by comments from 216 mentees who not only had a positive program experience, but also had opportunities to connect with other Autistic students, improve their self-esteem and build their knowledge and skills. Case studies on individual schools across different I CAN regions back up the general evaluation results found across multiple schools.

The online mentoring programs are also continuing to grow. In 2022, we ran 75 online mentoring programs across five six-week cycles and two school holiday programs, engaging 983 Autistic young people across Australia. Within that group, we take in a sizable number of Autistic young people with co-occurring conditions, with 87% online mentees having anxiety, followed by ADHD at 54% and depression at 26%. Mentees continue to be satisfied with the online mentoring program, with approximately 89% mentees in each cycle saying that they enjoyed the program. Furthermore, the online mentoring programs induced positive changes in terms of how mentees interact with other people and in being themselves in the group.

Highlights of the I CAN Online evaluation results include:

1. An 18% increase in mentees' social connection;

2. A 13% increase in mentees' communication skills; and

3. An 11% increase in mentees' self-acceptance.

Repeated participation in online mentoring programs can sustain these changes, with repeat participants becoming increasingly capable in communicating with other people in their group and being themselves in the group. Collectively, these results highlight the continuing positive reception and impact of the online and school mentoring programs to Autistic young people across Australia. It is hoped that these results will provide an evidence base to continue expansion of both online and school mentoring programs across Australia in 2023 and beyond.

SCHOOL MENTORING PROGRAMS

As COVID restrictions are lifted across Australia in 2022, primary, secondary and special schools have opened up to full-time face-to-face teaching. This has allowed I CAN Network to expand its school mentoring programs and deliver them face-to-face and online. The growth of school mentoring programs in 2022 has been strong in Victoria, particularly after the 2022 Education State Principals Conference which has seen numerous schools sign up for a professional development session and/or a school mentoring program. Consequently, in 2022, we engaged 1,090 students across 84 schools in Victoria and Queensland.

In addition to internal evaluations of our school mentoring programs, I CAN Network also engaged the Research Impact Unit of Australian Catholic University (ACU) to conduct an independent evaluation of I CAN School® mentoring programs in Victoria. Funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training (VDET), ACU noted that mentees experienced an increased sense of belonging and social connections, a more positive Autistic identity and improved self-esteem and optimism after participating in an I CAN School® Mentoring Program. These results informed their recommendation of *"…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…"*. The executive summary of the independent evaluator's report can be found here.

I CAN SCHOOL® MENTORING PROGRAMS IN 2022

In 2022, we have been able to collect plenty of evaluation data on secondary school mentoring programs across Victoria and Queensland. Overall, the I CAN School® Mentoring Programs have been well-received by Autistic young people, with 85% of mentees enjoying them. The I CAN School® Mentoring Programs have also promoted positive changes among mentees, not only in themselves but also in how they engage with other people.
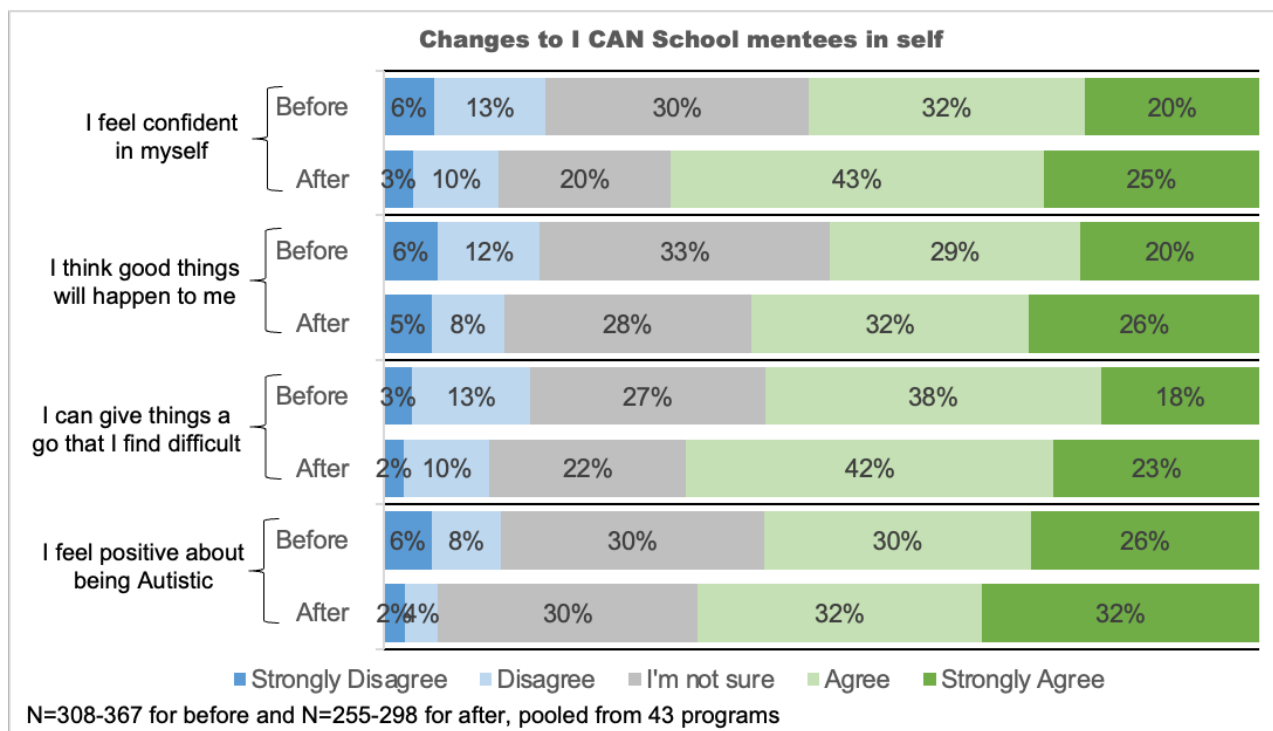

Figure 1: Changes in self among Autistic young people attending I CAN School® Mentoring Programs

Mentees exhibited a variety of positive behavioural changes by participating in the I CAN School® Mentoring Programs (Figure 1). After the mentoring program, we saw a/an:

- 16% increase in mentees feeling confident in themselves (statement 1, 'self-confidence', $p < 0.001$, 95% confidence interval = [8%, 23%], h = 0.31, "small effect");

- 9% increase in mentees feeling that good things will happen to them (statement 2, 'optimism', $p = 0.033$, 95% confidence interval = [2%, 16%], h = 0.21, "small effect");

- 9% increase in mentees giving things a go that they found difficult (statement 3, 'self-confidence', $p = 0.018$, 95% confidence interval = [1%, 17%], h = 0.17, "insignificant effect"); and

- 8% increase in mentees feeling positive about being Autistic (statement 4, 'self-acceptance, $p = 0.051$, 95% confidence interval = [0%, 15%], h = 0.14, "insignificant effect").
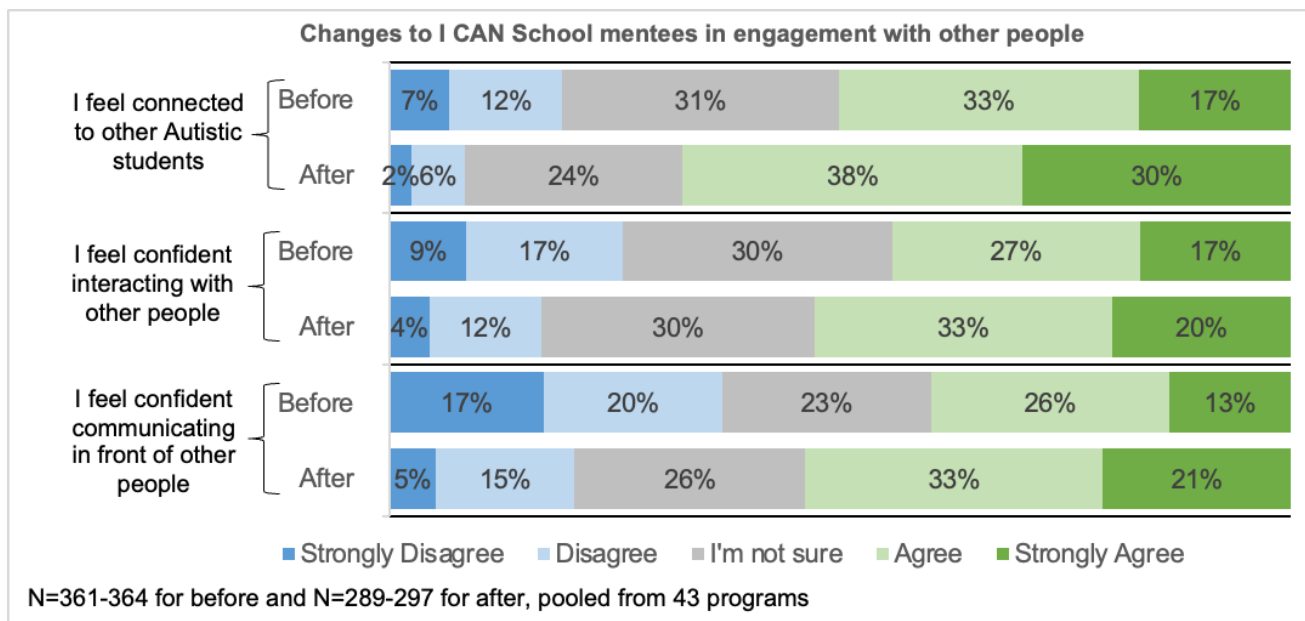

Figure 2: Changes in engagement with other people among Autistic young people attending I CAN School® Mentoring Programs

Mentees also felt more connected to and more confident to engage with other people (Figure 2). After the mentoring program, we saw a/an:

- 18% increase in mentees feeling connected to other Autistic students (statement 1, 'social connection', $p < 0.001$, 95% confidence interval = [10%, 25%], h = 0.34, "small effect");

- 9% increase in mentees feeling confident to interact with other people (statement 2, 'communication skills', $p = 0.027$, 95% confidence interval = [1%, 16%], h = 0.23, "small effect"); and

- 15% increase in mentees feeling confident to communicate in front of other people (statement 3, 'public speaking', $p < 0.001$, 95% confidence interval = [6%, 22%], h = 0.40, "small effect").

These numerical results are backed up by positive comments from mentees about the I CAN School® Mentoring Programs. Over 216 comments from mentees, five themes emerged. These are listed and summarised below:

1. Positive program experience;

2. Safe program environment;

3. Opportunities to connect with other Autistic students;

4. Increased self-confidence and self-acceptance; and

5. Improvements in knowledge and skills

THEME 1: POSITIVE PROGRAM EXPERIENCE

Mirroring the 85% satisfaction rating among mentees towards the I CAN School® Mentoring Program, mentees commented that they had fun in the program. These mentees attached positive feelings towards the mentoring program such as *happiness*, *enjoyment* and *joy* and shared positive moments and highlights of the program such as discussing fun topics and participating in games and activities. Some mentees looked forward to attending the I CAN School® Mentoring Programs as it was the highlight of their week. One mentee noted that "*Going to the I CAN program was the best bit out of my day/week…*" while another mentee identified the I CAN School® Mentoring Program as "…*something to look forward to".*

THEME 2: SAFE PROGRAM ENVIRONMENT

Mentees highlighted that the I CAN School® Mentoring Program provided a safe space within their school. This safe space allowed Autistic students to be themselves without feeling judged and to be accepted for who they are by other people. The mentoring sessions were described by mentees as "…*a place where I feel normal and people don't judge me*" and "…*a safe space where I was accepted by other Autistic students".* Consequently, mentees felt safe and a sense of belonging at school, with one mentee saying that the I CAN School® Mentoring Program allowed them to "*feel safe at school for once".*

The safe program environment, combined with the small mentoring group, allowed mentees to be familiar with each other and to share information about themselves that they would not normally give outside the program. This was highlighted by one mentee who felt that the program allowed them to "…*trust people to know things about us that i would not tell lots of people".*

THEME 3: OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT WITH OTHER AUTISTIC STUDENTS

The I CAN School® Mentoring Program provided plenty of opportunities for Autistic students to meet like-minded peers. Mentees appreciated being able to connect with other Autistic students in their school and to talk to them during the program. One mentee noted that they enjoyed "…*connecting with other Autistic students; it was great to talk with other people'*.

Within these social connections, mentees shared their experiences and identified common things with each other. This allowed them to understand and relate to each other and to get along. One mentee noted that the program was beneficial in making "…*connections about being Autistic…*" which allowed them to "…*understand what we both go through*…". Consequently, mentees realised that their problems are shared by other people, relieving the sense of loneliness they felt before the program. For instance, one mentee learnt that they were "…*not the only one that has trouble communicating*".

The program also allowed mentees to make new friends and strengthen existing friendships at school. Some mentees noted that they made '…*new friends out of the program'* while another mentee found out that, by learning more about Autism, they '…*became closer to my friends'*.

THEME 4: INCREASED SELF-CONFIDENCE AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE

Mirroring the positive numerical results in the evaluation, mentees noted how their self-esteem improved during the program. Mentees became more confident in themselves and their abilities, particularly in interacting and communicating with other people. One mentee felt "…*more able to express my point of view…*" while another mentee gained "…*confidence working with other Autistic people*…". Mentees also became more capable in improving themselves, with one mentee highlighting that the program allowed them to "…*find my inner self, and become a better person…".* Combined, the increased self-confidence and self-awareness enabled mentees to be more accepting of themselves and their Autism. They felt good to be themselves, with one mentee noting how they could "…*be proud of who I am*", and more comfortable to be Autistic, with another mentee enjoying "…*being Autistic*".

THEME 5: IMPROVEMENTS IN KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Driving the increased self-acceptance of Autism among mentees was that they learnt more about Autism during the program. Mentees learnt more about the positives of Autism, how to manage their challenges and how Autism varies among individuals. One mentee learnt, as a way to manage their challenges, that they should '*Try not to think about negative things and try thinking about positive things*…". This motivated mentees to change their views about themselves. One mentee noted how they should be themselves and "*not care about other people's opinions*…".

Mentees also improved on their skills during the program. Mentees found it valuable to learn skills that allowed them to calm down and manage their stress. One mentee found the stress management skills taught in the program helpful to "…*calm me down and ease… into my piano lesson*…". Additionally, mentees improved their social and communication skills, increasing their confidence to interact with their peers and to speak in front of other people. From the program, one mentee learnt "*more ways to communicate to others and to express myself*" while another mentee noted that they felt "…*much more comfortable communicating with people*…".

I CAN IMAGINATION CLUB® MENTORING PROGRAMS IN 2022

In addition to collecting mentee evaluation data for I CAN School® Mentoring Programs, we also collected mentee evaluation data for I CAN Imagination Club® programs in primary schools. The I CAN Imagination Club® programs have been well-received, with 89% of mentees enjoying the program. The positive changes among mentees in I CAN Imagination Club® programs are subtle from the mentees' responses to statements, but they are more obvious among the mentees' comments.
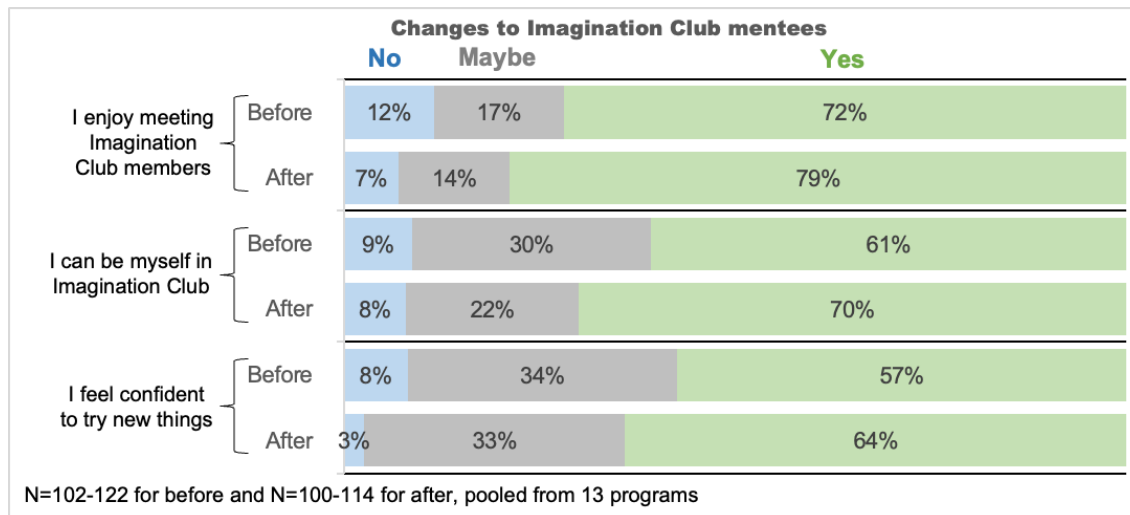

Figure 3: Changes in outcomes among students attending I CAN Imagination Club® programs

Looking at the mentees' responses to statements (Figure 3), we can see a:

- 7% increase in mentees enjoying meeting other I CAN Imagination Club® members (statement 1, 'social connection', p = 0.225, 95% confidence interval = [-4%, 18%]);

- 9% increase in mentees being themselves in I CAN Imagination Club® (statement 2, 'self-acceptance', p = 0.169, 95% confidence interval = [-4%, 22%]); and

- 7% increase in mentees feeling confident to try new things (statement 3, 'self-confidence', p = 0.296, 95% confidence interval = [-6%, 19%].

The small positive changes seen from responses to statements are backed up by the large number of positive comments received from mentees in I CAN Imagination Club® programs. The high program satisfaction rating among mentees (at 89%) is backed up by positive feedback from mentees who said that they had fun and enjoyed the program. In particular, individual mentees identified parts of the program that they enjoyed such as the games, food and activities. The I CAN Imagination Club® programs were something that mentees looked forward to attending, with one mentee commenting that the program was a *"nice place to hang out on the first day of the week"*.

The I CAN Imagination Club® programs gave mentees the opportunity to meet new people like them. In meeting with other mentees, they had fun playing with each other and getting to know them. In the program as well, mentees not only learnt how to make new friends, but they made new friends during the program. This boosted their confidence in making new friends, with one mentee commenting positively that *"I can make friends"*.

Mentees also experienced changes in themselves by participating in I CAN Imagination Club®. During the program, mentees not only gained a lot of confidence, but they also felt better to be themselves.

Mentees learnt that it is *"ok to be yourself around others"* which allowed them to feel less stressed. The increased self-confidence also came in the form of improved teamwork and communication skills. This allowed mentees to interact with other people better while talking to others and/or while working in groups. One mentee commented that during the program, they learned *"how to talk to teachers and stuff"* while another mentee *"…liked the egg drop…"* activity as they learnt *"…how to work in [a] team".*

Collectively, these comments indicate that I CAN Imagination Club® programs are being received positively by mentees, even if the increases to the proportion of agree responses are small. Due to the positive changes seen among mentees in I CAN Imagination Club®, we will keep running them in 2023, with a few changes. Firstly, evaluation tools such as surveys have been re-designed to be more friendly to primary school students. It is hoped that these tools will collect more accurate survey data that are reflective of the mentees' mental state and capabilities before and after the program. Additionally, a module on neurodiversity has been incorporated in the I CAN Imagination Club®. It is hoped that this module will further enhance mentees' acceptance of themselves by learning to be proud of their neurodivergent minds and how they can positively contribute to the world.

CASE STUDIES

GREATER MELBOURNE: MATER CHRISTI COLLEGE

Mater Christi College is a Catholic secondary school for girls located in Belgrave, 36km east of Melbourne. Mater Christi College learnt by word-of-mouth the positive impact of the I CAN School® Mentoring Program on Autistic young people. Hence, they ran an 8-session I CAN School® Mentoring Program for 13 girls from mid-July 2022 to the beginning of September 2022. Overall, the school has fully supported the program which was incredibly well-received by both staff and students. Of the six mentees surveyed after the program, all of them enjoyed the program and felt supported and accepted in the group. Mentees had a place where they could be themselves, celebrate what is unique about themselves and build capabilities in self-advocacy and social justice. Levels of engagement among mentees were also high, with teachers noting that they have *…never seen the students participate and engage in their classes the way they do in I CAN!*

Changes to Mater Christi College students in outcomes

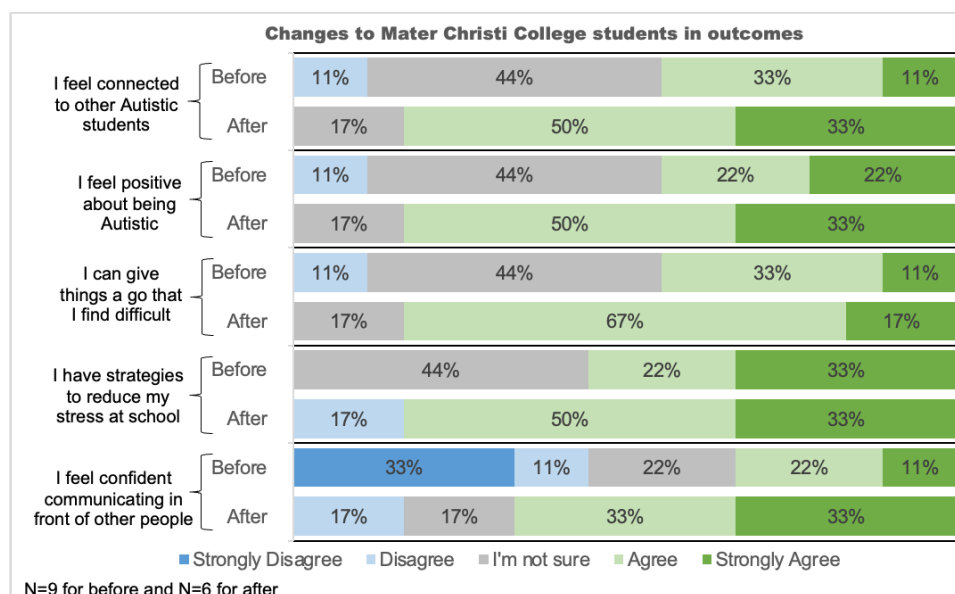|		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	I'm not sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel connected to other Autistic students	Before		11%	44%	33%	11%
	After			17%	50%	33%
I feel positive about being Autistic	Before		11%	44%	22%	22%
	After			17%	50%	33%
I can give things a go that I find difficult	Before		11%	44%	33%	11%
	After			17%	67%	17%
I have strategies to reduce my stress at school	Before			44%	22%	33%
	After		17%		50%	33%
I feel confident communicating in front of other people	Before	33%	11%	22%	22%	11%
	After		17%	17%	33%	33%

N=9 for before and N=6 for after

Figure 4: Changes in outcomes among students attending the Mater Christi College I CAN School® program

The positive impacts of the Mater Christi College I CAN School® program can be seen in the evaluation results (Figure 4). After the program, we saw a 39% increase in mentees feeling connected to other Autistic students, in feeling positive about being Autistic and in giving things a go that they find difficult. The mentees also learnt stress reduction skills (28% increase) and improved their public speaking skills (33% increase). Mentees commented that they built strong social connections with other Autistic students in the program. These social connections allowed them to build a social network which enabled them to make new friends, to receive assistance from other people and to safely share things about themselves. One mentee commented that the program environment allowed them to *"…trust people to know things about us that I would not tell lots of people".*

As a result of the positive reception of the program, Mater Christi College is now running two 8-week programs in 2023: one in terms 1-2 and another in term 3. The programs are being run by the same I CAN Program Facilitator and Mentor as last year, in order to maintain their connections with the Mater Christi community. Furthermore, the programs have attracted both new and existing mentees.

NORTHERN VICTORIA: CRUSOE COLLEGE (BENDIGO)

Crusoe College is a government Year 7-10 secondary college located in the Greater Bendigo region, 130km north-west of Melbourne. Crusoe College ran two consecutive I CAN School® Mentoring Programs in the second half of 2022 which ran weekly. Overall, mentees liked participating in the programs, with 12 out of 13 mentees enjoying them. The programs created a safe and accepting environment where mentees, particularly those who were newly diagnosed, could openly discuss and explore what it means to be Autistic in many areas such as communication preferences and sensory needs. In turn, mentees felt a sense of belonging, empowerment, self-acceptance and an understanding of self and others. Additionally, two mentees from the first program took up leadership roles in the second program, volunteering to run games, lead activities and initiate discussions. These mentees have grown through these leadership opportunities, with one of them giving a talk during the 2022 AWETISM Expo and the other thinking about becoming an I CAN Mentor in the future.
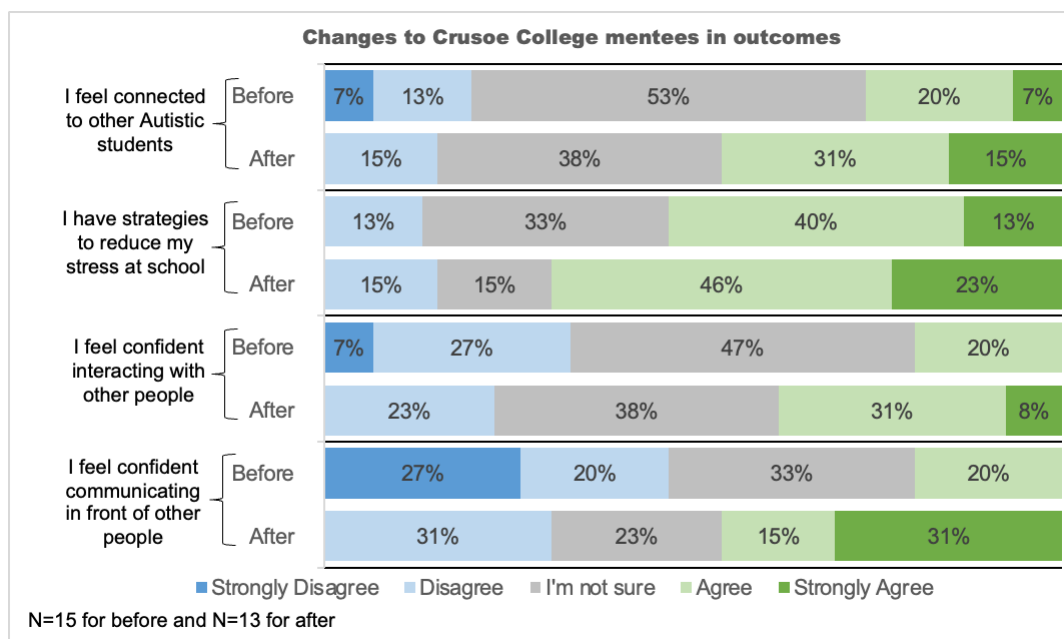

**Figure 5: Changes in outcomes among students attending the Crusoe College I CAN School®
program**

These positive comments are backed up by positive evaluation results (Figure 5). Mentees strengthened their social connections with each other, with a 19% increase in mentees feeling connected to other Autistic students. The program also contributed to improvements in stress management and communication, with a 16% increase in mentees having strategies to reduce their stress at school, an 18% increase in mentees feeling confident to interact with other people and a 26% increase in mentees feeling confident to communicate in front of other people. Mentees commented that the program improved their self-acceptance of Autism by building their self-confidence and connecting them with other Autistic students. For instance, one mentee gained from the program "*A bit more confidence and realisation that I'm not alone in being Autistic*". Another mentee appreciated the stress management strategies they learnt during the program, saying that it has helped them *"…calm me down and ease me into my piano lesson…".*

SOUTH WEST VICTORIA: BAIMBRIDGE COLLEGE HAMILTON

Baimbridge College is a government secondary school located in Hamilton, Victoria, 260km west of Melbourne. In 2022, Baimbridge College purchased 10 sessions for their I CAN School® Mentoring Program with School Focussed Youth Services funding. School Focussed Youth Services is a Victorian Department of Education-funded scheme to support students at risk of disengagement with school education.

Right from the first session of the program, mentees established their own I CAN Networks with other neurodivergent peers across different year levels. Additionally, to accommodate for the intersectionality of Autistic and trans/gender-diverse students in the program, mentoring staff wrote mentees' preferred pronouns on their name tags. Consequently, mentees were less likely to use incorrect pronouns when referring to other mentees, creating a safe space where all students can express themselves.

Additionally, mentees engaged in positive emotional regulation strategies during the program. Before the mentoring program, students did not have the words to describe how they were feeling to other people. Throughout the program, particularly during the emotional regulation sessions, students openly discussed their sensory and social support needs with other people, accessing different fidget tools and asking for breaks when needing to move or get some water or fresh air. This reduced session interruptions and contributed to improved student outcomes in the program.
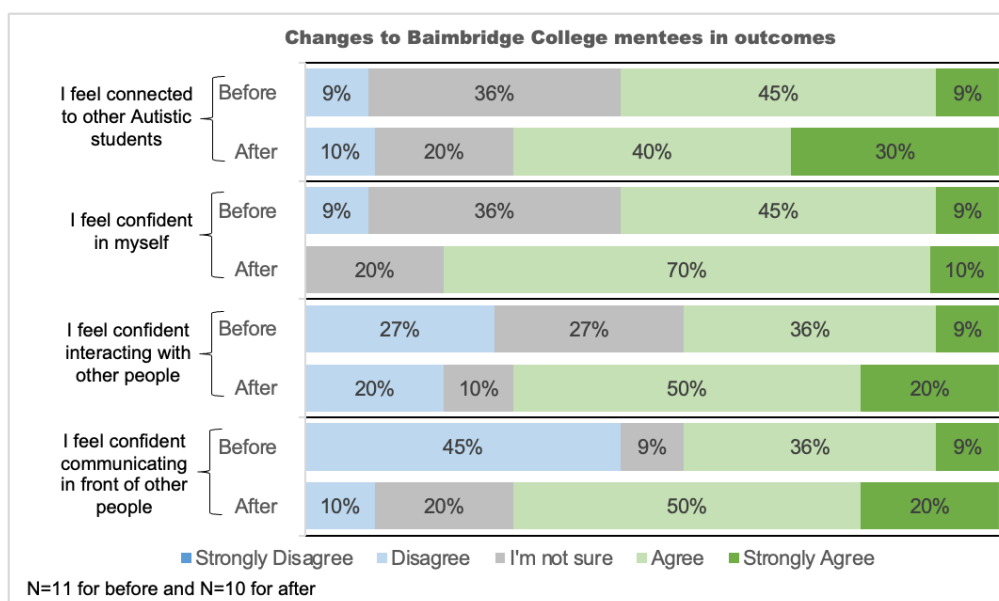

Figure 6: Changes in outcomes among students attending the Baimbridge College I CAN School® program

Overall, the I CAN School® mentoring program at Baimbridge College was positively received by everyone, with all 10 mentees surveyed saying they enjoyed the program. Social connections were built among mentees (Figure 6), with a 15% increase in mentees feeling connected to other Autistic students. Self-confidence among mentees also increased by 25%. This fed into improvements in communication skills, with 25% more mentees feeling confident to interact with other people and/or publicly speak in front of other people by the end of the program. These results are backed up by comments from mentees who say that they feel more confident about themselves, their Autism and their communication skills. This was best conveyed by one mentee who, through the program, learnt "*more ways to communicate to others and how to express myself*".

Seeing the value of the mentoring program to Autistic students, Baimbridge College separately purchased five student talks from their school budget. These student talks, lasting 30 minutes each and delivered separately to year 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 students, aimed to improve understanding of what Autism is within the student body. These talks were informed by the insights of mentees that participated in the program. Feedback from both mentees and the student body has been overwhelmingly positive. Students felt that they understood Autism better, with one student coming that "*it really helped me understand my two [Autistic] brothers better*". Additionally, multiple mentees thanked the mentoring team for providing insight to other students on why they may act, speak, or think in a different way.

As a result of the success of the program, we are in discussions with Baimbridge College to run an I CAN School® Mentoring Program in 2023 as well as student talks, a staff PD and a Parent Information Session. We are also aiming to extend our relationship with other schools in Hamilton and the surrounding area.

BARWON: ROLLINS PRIMARY SCHOOL GEELONG

Rollins Primary School is a primary school located in Bell Post Hill in the City of Greater Geelong, 65km south-west of Melbourne. I CAN Network delivered an I CAN Imagination Club® program to Rollins PS in Term 3 2022. The program was delivered weekly and attended by 16 mentees. Mentees enjoyed both the hands-on elements and team challenges of the sessions. Additionally, we helped reduce the anxiety some mentees were experiencing by not only delivering the sessions weekly, but also incorporating clear structures and visual schedules into the sessions. This helped mentees focus on the session content.
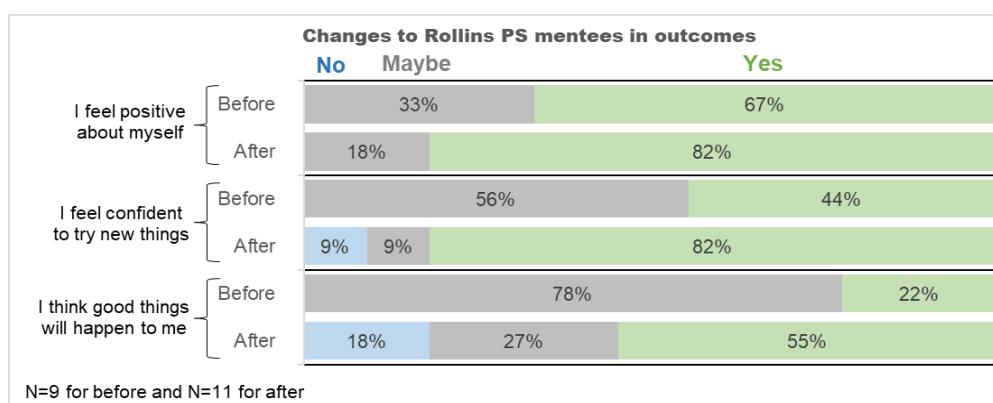

Changes to Rollins PS mentees in outcomes

		No	Maybe	Yes
I feel positive about myself	Before		33%	67%
	After		18%	82%
I feel confident to try new things	Before		56%	44%
	After	9%	9%	82%
I think good things will happen to me	Before		78%	22%
	After	18%	27%	55%

N=9 for before and N=11 for after

Figure 7: Changes in outcomes among students attending the Rollins PS Imagination Club® program

The I CAN Imagination Club® Program was positively received by everyone, with all 11 mentees surveyed post-program saying that they enjoyed the program. Mentees developed their self-acceptance, confidence and optimism throughout the program (Figure 7), as indicated by a 15% increase in mentees' self-acceptance, a 37% increase in mentees feeling confident to try new things and a 32% increase in their optimism. Consequently, mentees became more confident to advocate for themselves, with one mentee pointing out that "*I'm different to other people and that's okay*". Mentees also commented that the I CAN

Imagination Club® was a safe space for them, with one mentee reflecting that *"the great thing about the I CAN is you get help from people you can trust."*

QUEENSLAND: CRAIGSLEA STATE HIGH SCHOOL

Craigslea State High School is a government secondary school located in Chermside West, 10km north of the Brisbane CBD. It is a co-education school with 1,171 students in 2022, consisting of 622 boys and 549 girls. In 2022, I CAN Network ran an I CAN School® Mentoring Program to bring together Autistic girls within the school in one group. Despite the sessions being run one hour before school started on Friday morning, they were consistently well-attended, with mentees coming to school early to see their friends and mentors. In addition to the supervising teacher, the school's Head of Inclusion (Jacqueline Easthope) attended very single session of the program, where she participated in the activities and built a rapport with the mentees.

The school mentoring program had a huge impact on the Autistic girls that attended. Initially, mentees were quiet, keeping to themselves in the first few sessions. As the program progressed; though, mentees were more expressive and more able to be themselves. This was a credit to the mentoring team who established a safe environment where mentees could be themselves and contribute their ideas to group discussions during the program. Most mentees also gained role models in the form of their mentors who were also female. They had someone who knew what it was like to be them which validated their sense of self.

Most of all, the mentees established a community of like-minded Autistic girls at school. This community motivated the mentees to come to school to meet and catch-up with each other during the program and school, reducing their sense of loneliness. Within the community, mentees also supported and encouraged each other. This became apparent when recording a video for the AWETISM Expo. Mentees initially felt anxious in talking alone for a video that would be disseminated to a national audience. However, the mentees formatted the video as a conversation amongst themselves which reduced their anxiety, allowing them to share their thoughts. The strong connections among mentees came together during the end-program celebration, where mentees cried tears of joy for having connected with other mentees in the program.
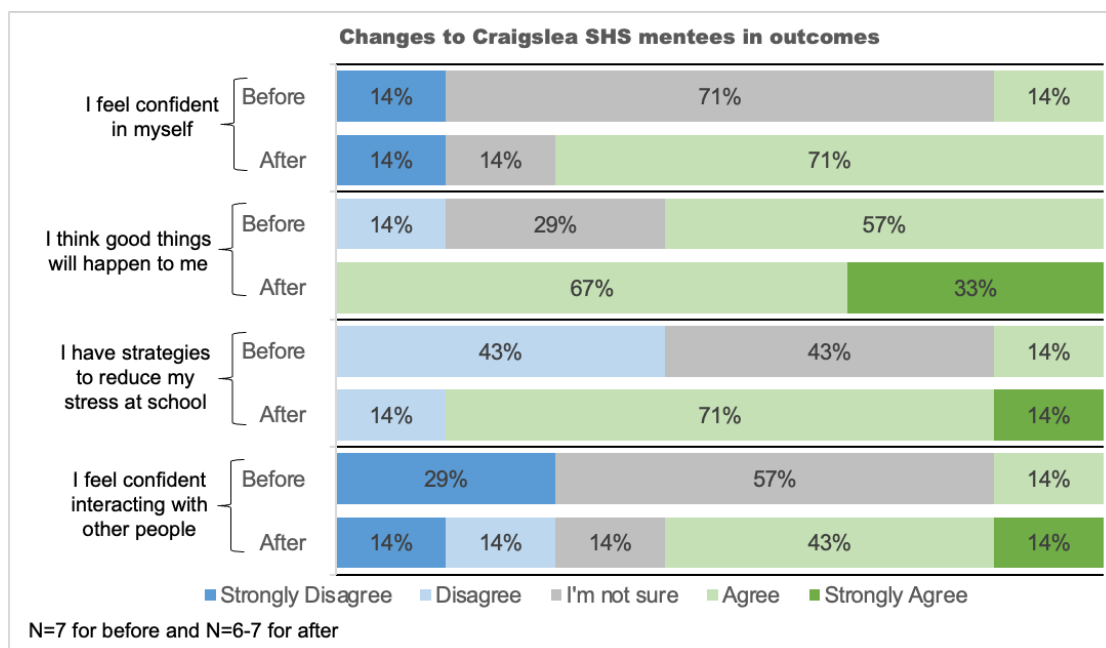

Changes to Craigslea SHS mentees in outcomes

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	I'm not sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel confident in myself	Before	14%		71%	14%	
	After	14%		14%	71%	
I think good things will happen to me	Before		14%	29%	57%	
	After				67%	33%
I have strategies to reduce my stress at school	Before		43%	43%	14%	
	After		14%		71%	14%
I feel confident interacting with other people	Before	29%		57%	14%	
	After	14%	14%	14%	43%	14%

N=7 for before and N=6-7 for after

Figure 8: Changes in outcomes among students attending the Craigslea SHS I CAN School® program

These positive observations are backed up by the evaluation results (Figure 8). The I CAN School® Mentoring Program in Craigslea State High School was positively received, with 6 out of 7 mentees surveyed post-program enjoying it. Significant changes were seen among mentees in terms of how much they

changed and the skills they developed. First, mentees participating in the program were more confident to be themselves (57% increase) and more optimistic (43% increase). Additionally, during the program, mentees developed skills in stress management (71% increase) and communication (43% increase). These results were reflected in the mentee comments, with mentees saying they felt more confident to be Autistic and to feel connected with other Autistic people. One mentee summed up best when he associated the program with "*Confidence, friends, happiness*".

I CAN ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAM

The online mentoring programs continue to grow from strength to strength. In 2022, we ran a total of 75 programs over five six-week cycles during school terms and two six-day cycles during the school holidays. These programs have engaged a total of 983 Autistic young people across Australia. In particular, four out of five six-week cycles engaged over 300 mentees, exceeding the peak of 251 mentees set during Cycle 4 2021 at the height of lockdowns in New South Wales and Victoria. This highlights the valuable contribution online mentoring programs are having in connecting Autistic young people across Australia and building their self-confidence and self-esteem after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The next three graphs summarise the demographics of Autistic young people that have attended the online mentoring programs in 2022.
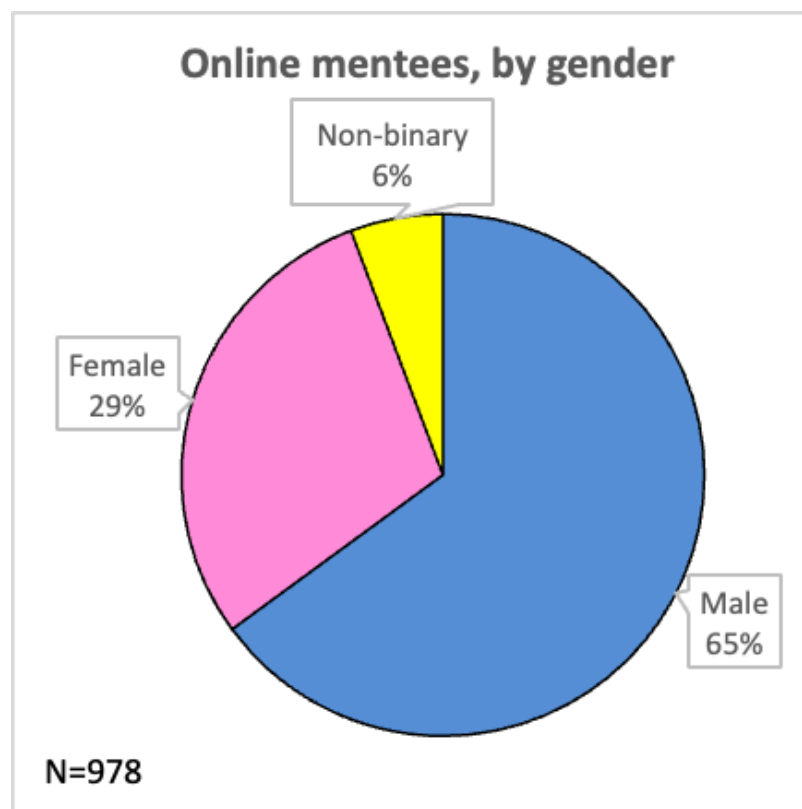

Figure 9: Online mentees, split by gender

Sorting online mentees by gender, 65% of them are male while 29% of them are female and 6% are non-binary.
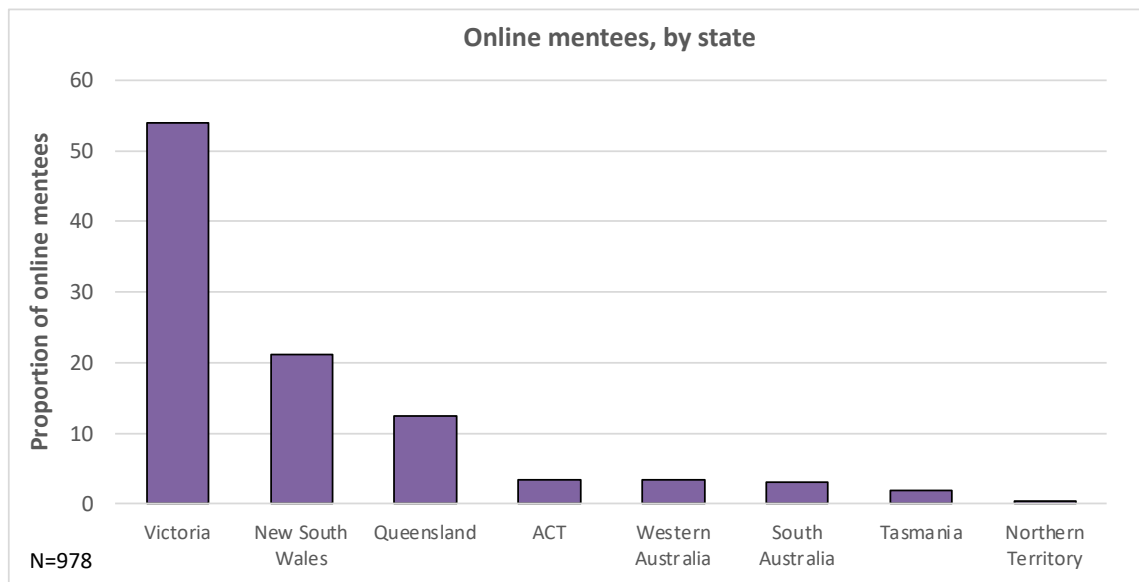
Figure 10: Online mentees, distributed by Australian states and territories

Most mentees come from the eastern Australian states (Figure 10), with 54% of them coming from Victoria. This is followed by New South Wales at 21% and Queensland at 13%. The rest of the states and territories have a small proportion of mentees, hovering around 3% or below.
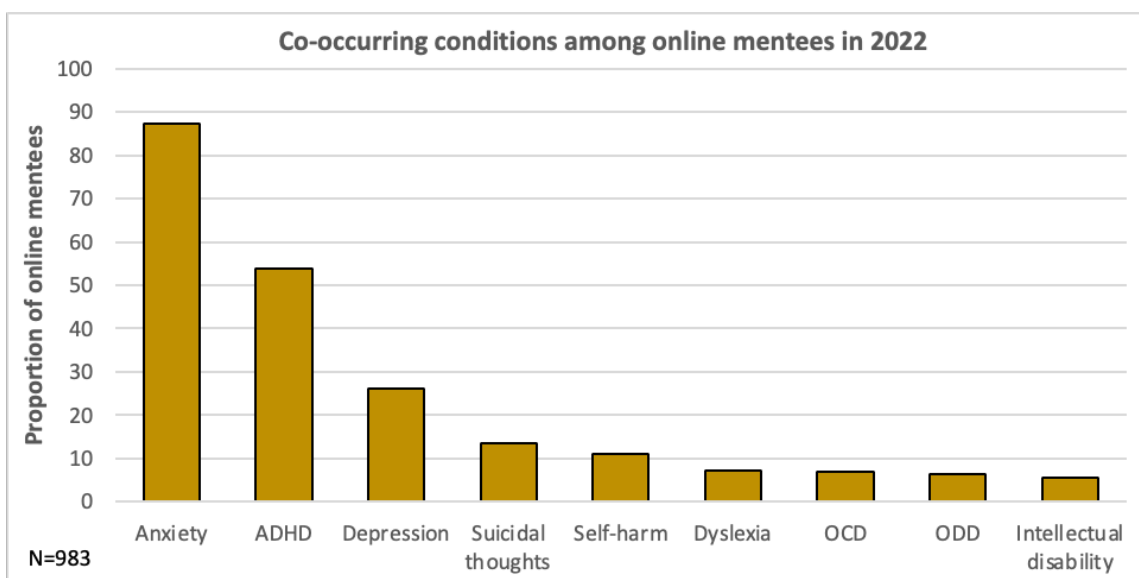

Figure 11: The proportion of online mentees in 2022 who have specific co-occurring conditions.

The most common co-occurring condition among online mentees in 2022 has been anxiety, with 87% of online mentees having the condition (Figure 11). This is followed by ADHD at 54% and depression at 26%. A sizable number of online mentees also have suicidal thoughts (13%) and/or engage in self-harm behaviour (11%). Other co-occurring conditions experienced by a small proportion of mentees include dyslexia (7%), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD, 7%), Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD, 7%) and intellectual disability (5%).

SOCIAL IMPACT DATA

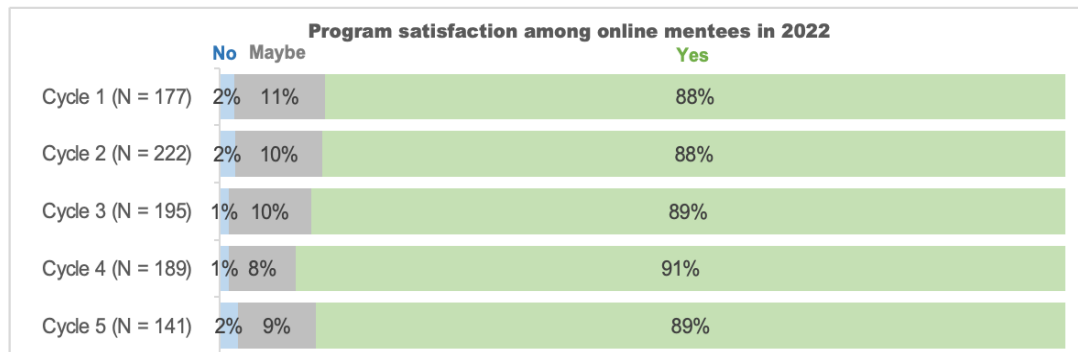## I CAN ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAM

Figure 12: Program satisfaction among all online mentees in 2022

We have maintained high satisfaction ratings across all five six-week online cycles in 2022 (Figure 12). In each cycle, approximately 89% mentees said that they enjoyed the online mentoring program. These results indicate the continuing positive reception of the online mentoring programs among Autistic young people in Australia.
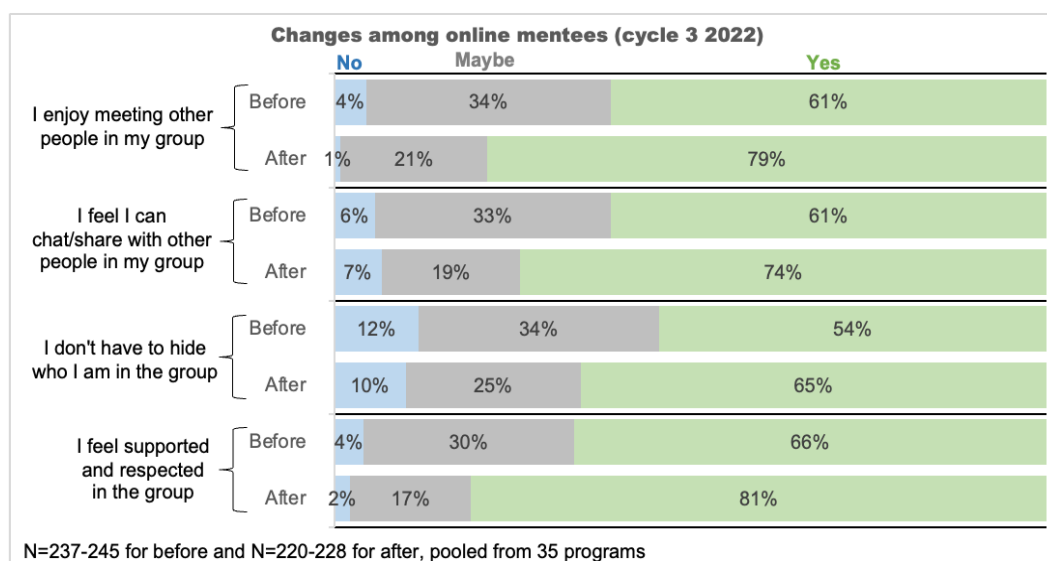

Figure 13: Changes seen among all online mentees in cycle 3 2022

In a typical six-week online cycle, we saw positive changes among Autistic young people in terms of how they interact with other mentees and in being themselves in the group (Figure 13). During Cycle 3 2022 which ran from mid-July to mid-August 2022, we saw a/an:

- 18% increase in mentees enjoying meeting other people in their group ($p < 0.001$, 95% confidence interval = [9%, 25%], $h = 0.25$, "small effect");

- 13% increase in mentees being able to chat or share with other people in their group ($p = 0.003$, 95% confidence interval = [4%, 21%], $h = 0.20$, "small effect");

- 11% increase in mentees not having to hide who they are in their group ($p = 0.016$, 95% confidence interval = [2%, 20%], $h = 0.21$, "small effect"); and

- 15% increase in mentees feeling supported and respected in their group (p < 0.001, 95% confidence interval = [7%, 22%], h = 0.19, "insignificant/small effect").

Furthermore, the online mentoring programs not only have an immediate impact on first-time participants, but these impacts can be sustained as participants attend subsequent online mentoring programs. This can be seen when we split data based on the number of cycles in which participants have attended an I CAN Online mentoring program.
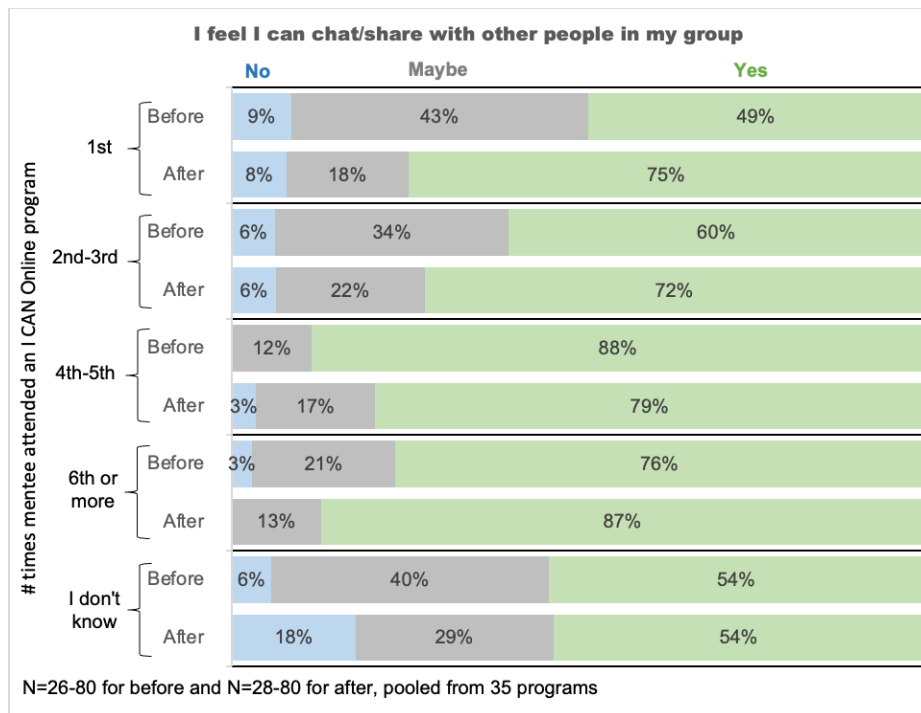

Figure 14: Changes among mentees in how much they can chat or share with other people in their group, split by the number of times mentees attended an I CAN Online Mentoring Program
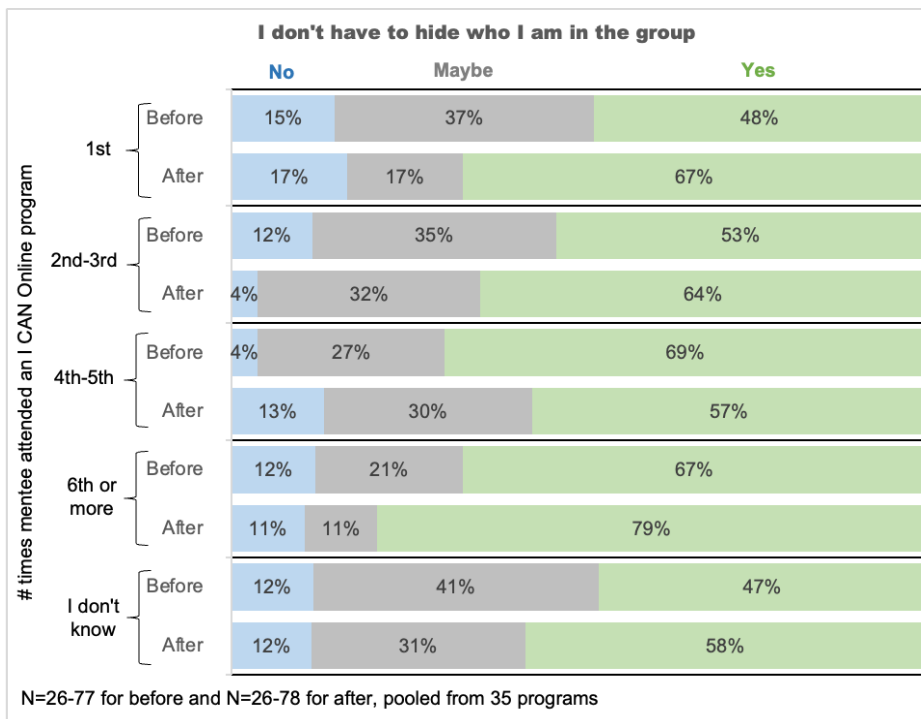

Figure 15: Changes among mentees in how much they could be themselves in their group, split by the number of times mentees attended an I CAN Online Mentoring Program

In a typical six-week cycle, there was a 26% increase in communication skills (Figure 14) and a 19% increase in self-acceptance among first-time participants after the program (Figure 15). As mentees continue to attend online mentoring programs, they became increasingly capable in communicating with other people in their group (Figure 14) and to be themselves in the group (Figure 15). These are indicated by the increasing proportion of 'yes' responses among mentees who attend two or more online mentoring programs before the program started.

Collectively, these results not only highlight the positive outcomes that can be achieved among Autistic young people attending I CAN Online Mentoring Programs, but that these outcomes can be sustained in the long-term as mentees continue to attend I CAN Online Mentoring Programs.

APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY OF I CAN NETWORK'S INTERNAL EVALUATIONS

DATA COLLECTION OF SCHOOL MENTORING PROGRAMS

Quantitative data and comments on the Imagination Club® and I CAN school® mentoring programs were collected by the use of surveys. These surveys were either completed on a Google form or on paper forms which were subsequently entered into a Google form. The surveys were conducted twice: pre-program data were collected within the first two sessions of the program while post-program data were collected within the last two sessions of the program. In both timepoints, mentees responded to statements relating to the program outcomes using a three-point scale (for I CAN Imagination Club®) or a five-point scale (for I CAN School® mentoring programs), plus an additional option of 'I don't understand the question'. Quantitative data from schools that completed both pre- and post-program evaluations were compiled and graphed in an Excel workbook. The post-program surveys also contained open-ended questions where mentees could comment on what they got out of the mentoring program.

DATA COLLECTION OF I CAN ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAMS

Demographic data of all mentees who participated in at least one session of an online mentoring program in 2022 were collected from I CAN Network's CRM, Salesforce. These data were downloaded as CSV files before being cleaned and analysed in R with the tidyverse, lubridate and writexl packages. The demographic results were exported from R as an Excel file and graphed using Microsoft Excel.

To collect pre- and post-program data for online mentoring programs, polls were conducted via Zoom during the first and last session of each online program respectively. Each statement was linked to an outcome of the online program, with mentees either responding 'Yes', 'Maybe', 'No' or 'I don't understand the question'. Mentees also answered questions relating to how many times they attended an I CAN Online Mentoring Program and which state they lived in. After all sessions in a given week were run, poll data were downloaded from Zoom as CSV files and collated in one Excel workbook. Graphs and statistics were then generated from the Excel workbook to compare the distribution of responses before (pre) and after (post) the program.

DATA ANALYSIS

For each statement, we calculated the proportion of positive responses in both pre- and post-program timepoints. Positive responses were defined as 'Yes' responses for I CAN Imagination Club® and I CAN Online Mentoring Programs and a combination of 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree' responses for I CAN School® mentoring programs. The difference in the proportion of positive responses between pre- and post-program timepoints was calculated and compared to 0% via a two-proportion z-test. This test extracts a p-value representing the statistical significance of the result from the z-value that represents the difference in two proportions.

Exact p-values are written in this report, with any p-value that is 0.05 or below considered statistically significant. To measure the extent of uncertainty around the percentage increases, 95% confidence intervals were also included. In addition, where the difference in percentages between pre- and post-program was statistically significant, the effect size of the difference between the two percentages was calculated using Cohen's h. Thresholds of h = 0.20, h = 0.50 and h = 0.80 indicate small, medium and large effect sizes respectively[1].

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[1] Cohen, Jacob. (1988). Statistical Power Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences. 2nd ed. Routledge: New York.
[2] Braun, Virginia & Clarke, Victoria. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology,

Survey comments for school mentoring programs were analysed using inductive thematic analysis[2]. Briefly, all survey comments were read and coded. Themes were derived from the data, with comments being grouped into different themes according to what was described in the comment. These themes were continually revised, with some smaller themes being bunched with other themes to form bigger themes. These bigger themes formed the basis for summarising the comments, with paragraphs structured around the sub-themes. Quotes are included in the report as indicative examples to back up what was explained in each theme.

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[2] Braun, Virginia & Clarke, Victoria. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77-101, DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa