I CAN NETWORK SCHOOLS

"IN A WORLD OFTEN CHALLENGING & NEGATIVE TOWARDS AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE, I CAN'S MENTORING GIVES THEM A PLACE TO BE ACKNOWLEDGED & CELEBRATED JUST AS THEY ARE."

PARENT OF AN I CAN MENTEE

"I FEEL I CAN EXPRESS MYSELF HERE, MY ANXIETY GOES AWAY"

I CAN STUDENT

GUIDE

PARENTS & CARERS

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welcome

We have created this brief guide for parents and carers of young people who are thinking about participating in our I CAN School Mentoring program. We appreciate that this may be the first time your young person has had the opportunity to be involved with an Autistic-led organisation like I CAN, so we want to ensure that you and your family have all information you need.
Please note that whilst most of our participants are Autistic, we also welcome young people who are neurodivergent in other ways. We embrace and validate the different ways people see and process the world.

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what we do

We are Australia's largest Autistic-led service provider, dedicated to empowering autistic young people. We do this through strengths-based, neuro-affirming mentoring programs in schools, communities and online.

What makes I CAN different from so many other organisations is that Autistic people are integral to the design, delivery and continual enhancement of our programs. Through our own lived experience, our mentoring team can personally relate to so many of the challenges that autistic and other neurodivergent students face.

It's not uncommon for young people who are new to our mentoring program to join us with a sense of shame about being Autistic. Too often, they have internalised the negative perceptions of others and the deficits-based view of Autism.

At I CAN, we believe in a rethink of Autism that moves young people from a mindset of 'I CAN'T' to 'I CAN.' Since our launch in September 2013, we have helped thousands of Autistic young people develop a stronger sense of self-acceptance, confidence, optimism and belonging. Learn more about our work by visiting our website icannetwork.online.

Please note: I CAN is a group mentoring service. Whilst we immerse students in a safe environment where they can build self-advocacy skills, we are not positioned to provide individual advocacy support to families or advice in meeting with schools. However, we do have strong links to key advocacy organisations such as:
The Association for Children and Young People With Disability Australia www.cyda.org.au and Different Journeys: www.differentjourneysautism.com and encourage families in our program to access these services if individual advocacy support is needed.

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our mentoring program

I CAN School® Mentoring Programs are for Autistic students attending secondary or high schools in Australia. Our programs involve bringing Autistic students together in a group setting within a safe, fun, engaging space. Over a number of sessions, students can connect with other autistic peers and mentors and participate in games and activities to build their self-confidence and self-esteem. Some schools might choose to also include students who are neurodivergent in other ways and we have found that our strengths-based content resonates with them as well.

WHERE?

Programs are run on campus in a dedicated space (e.g. classroom, library). Inter school programs might be held off campus in a mutually convenient location for all participating schools.

HOW OFTEN?

Group mentoring sessions run weekly or fortnightly, depending on the preference of the school based on the structure of their timetable. Programs run for 8 sessions, at the same time and location each session. Please note that due to staffing demand in Greater Melbourne, most local programs run for 8 sessions.

HOW LONG IS A GROUP MENTORING SESSION?

Group mentoring sessions run for 1 hour. We work with schools to fit the sessions into the school timetable. Parents should speak to their young person's teacher/year advisor to ensure that they are able to miss class in order to participate.

WHO RUNS THE SESSIONS?

Sessions are facilitated by two I CAN mentors, at least one of whom is Autistic. I CAN mentors are trained by professionals and all have up to date Working with Children's Checks. Up to 16 students may participate. Mentoring sessions are supervised by a registered teacher, learning support officer, education support officer or school allied health staff member employed by the partner school(s).

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what success looks like

Success takes many forms, depending on where a young person is in their own journey toward self-acceptance. For some students, a successful initial experience might include taking pride in being Autistic. For others, it might mean taking those first steps toward recognizing their own strengths. We are committed to meeting every student where they are as an individual.

We readily seek feedback on our programs from mentees and their families to ensure the quality and relevance of our program.

Over time, what we see is that the I CAN program doesn't just positively impact the young people taking part, it influences those around them.

These are typical outcomes we see from students who engage in our programs over time:

STUDENTS FEEL:

* more confident
* a greater sense of belonging
* more optimistic about their future
* more accepting of themselves and of being Autistic

STUDENTS EXPERIENCE:

* improved mental wellbeing
* smoother transitions to high school; post-school.
* greater engagement in school

STUDENTS DEVELOP:

* stronger communication skills
* stronger social skills
* stronger self-advocacy skills
* transferable skills, including leadership abilities

"IN THE I CAN MENTORING GROUP:

- I CAN BE MYSELF WITHOUT JUDGEMENT.
- I CAN HAVE FUN.
- I CAN MAKE FRIENDS WHO UNDERSTAND ME
- I CAN FORGET ABOUT BEING INSTANTLY LABELLED INCORRECTLY."

- I CAN STUDENT MENTEE

Please see our website for more details on our impact and program outcomes: https://icannetwork.online/our-impact

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our themes

Participating schools have a number of modules to choose from, depending on how many sessions are purchased. I CAN School® Mentoring Program runs for 8 sessions.

Our modules include:

"THE STUDENTS ARE COMFORTABLE IN THE GROUP & DON'T HAVE TO BE ON GUARD, THEY'RE ENCOURAGED TO TALK ABOUT THEIR PASSIONS, THEY ACTUALLY FEEL THE ACCEPTANCE IN THE ROOM."
- TEACHER

TEAMWORK:

By working together, mentees get to know each other and learn how their strengths are an asset to group work.

UNDERSTANDING AUTISTIC STRENGTHS:

Mentees learn more about themselves and how their Autism contributes to their strengths and special interests.

COMMUNICATION:

Mentees learn how to listen and communicate with other people and build their confidence in public speaking.

STRESS MANAGEMENT:

Mentees learn how to recognise, manage and regulate their stress.

PLANNING A CELEBRATION:

Mentees focus on organisation and begin to plan for their end-of-year I CAN Expo event.

ANNUAL CELEBRATION EVENT:

The program ends with a student-led celebration where students of the program are invited to present a short 'I CAN TALK' about their time in the program or about their special talent or passion.

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our assurances

For over a decade, we have had the privilege of mentoring thousands of Autistic and other neurodivergent young people across Australia. We are passionate about our work and the young people we engage with. If your child takes part in one of our programs, you can be assured that:

- All of our mentors have been trained by professionals and hold Working With Children's Checks or Blue Cards.
- An authorised school staff member will supervise each session.
- Our mentors will meet your child wherever they are in their own journey toward self-acceptance and pride. Every participant is different.
- We encourage participants to engage and try new things on their own timetable and comfort level. There are no 'mandatory' activities but we find that offering a safe, judgement-free space often inspires young people to try new experiences.
- Autism and neurodiversity are discussed in respectful, positive ways. Likewise, challenges that people face are discussed from a place of understanding and support.
- Our mentors are committed to maintaining a trust-based space. That means personal stories or perspectives shared within the group will be treated with the sensitivity they deserve and identifying information will not be shared outside the group.
- Your child's support requirements will be respected and their strengths and interests will be celebrated.

REPORTING BACK TO YOU ON WHAT HAPPENS IN THE SESSIONS

Following each I CAN group mentoring session the I CAN Program Facilitator will send the school a written summary of the session's purpose, activities and outcomes which the school will forward to parents who have registered students for the program. It's important to I CAN that parents can travel with the outcomes and messages of the mentoring sessions. We hope the session summaries support you with understanding the impact of the sessions on your young person.

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preparing for participation

Some young people are very excited about an opportunity to be part of an I CAN group, while others might be curious but hesitant to take part. We find that reluctance tends to stem from the anxiety of facing a new situation and not knowing what to expect. Here are some steps you can take to help ease their minds:

- We have a dedicated tip sheet **Welcome To The I CAN Network** that directly addresses the most common questions we get from new mentees. You can share this resource with your young person.

- We have an array of recommended resources from within and beyond our I CAN team to help you have discussions with your child about Autism and neurodiversity. This can be found in the resources section of our website: icannetwork.online/talking-about-autism

- For those young people who aren't yet comfortable telling their peers that they are taking part in an Autism-oriented group, we suggest that they call it a 'youth leadership program'.

- Our mentors, most of whom are Autistic, can relate on a personal level to what mentees might be feeling or experiencing. They are very skilled at creating an environment where everyone feels accepted just by being themselves.

- We have an array of short video presentations on our YouTube channel from dozens of I CAN mentees, sharing knowledge about their personal passions and how they have benefitted from being a part of I CAN group mentoring. These segments can be useful for showing new mentees what I CAN Network is all about!

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staying connected

Many students respond so favourably to their I CAN mentoring sessions at school that they are looking for a way to remain connected to I CAN and other Autistic/neurodivergent peers beyond the duration of the program.
We are very proud to offer a variety of ways that students and their families can remain connected to our work and to Autistic networks:

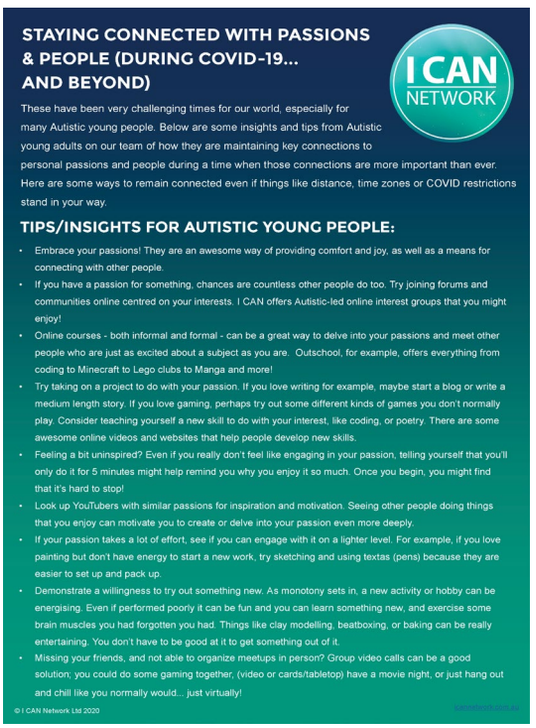
I CAN ONLINE GROUP MENTORING: In addition to our school-based programs, we also offer a national program of online group mentoring for Autistic young people ages 8-22. Sessions are held via Zoom in the afternoons or early evenings. We have age-based cohorts (modelled after our school-based program), groups for Autistic LGBTIQA+ teens and young adults and also offer Autistic-led interest based groups on a range of themes, from Anime to Art to Minecraft to Star Wars and more! The program runs in 6-week cycles (6 weekly sessions) and is offered five times per year. To express interest/learn more, visit: https://icannetwork.online/online.

I CAN EXPO: Held each spring in person (Melbourne) and simultaneously online, our annual AWETISM Expo is a celebration of the passions, talents and insights of the young people in our programs. To register, please go to: https://awetism.vfairs.com/. You can view past AWETISM Expos on our YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/user/TheICanNetwork

I CAN RESOURCES: Our website includes an array of tips and webinars from Autistic young adults on our team to help their younger peers (and families) navigate things like dealing with executive functioning challenges, managing overwhelm, heading toward post-school life, being Autistic & LGBTIQA+ and more. https://icannetwork.online/online-resources/

THE A-LIST: The A List is an online directory of Autistic-friendly activities across Australia (face-to-face and online) for Autistic kids, teens and young adults in Australia.

I CAN NEWSLETTER: Keep up-to-date on the latest programs and news from I CAN by subscribing to our newsletter: https://icannetwork.online/subscribe



STAYING CONNECTED WITH PASSIONS & PEOPLE (DURING COVID-19... AND BEYOND)

These have been very challenging times for our world, especially for many Autistic young people. Below are some insights and tips from Autistic young adults on our team of how they are maintaining key connections to personal passions and people during a time when those connections are more important than ever. Here are some ways to remain connected even if things like distance, time zones or COVID restrictions stand in your way.

TIPS/INSIGHTS FOR AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE:

- Embrace your passions! They are an awesome way of providing comfort and joy, as well as a means for connecting with other people.
- If you have a passion for something, chances are countless other people do too. Try joining forums and communities online centred on your interests. I CAN offers Autistic-led online interest groups that you might enjoy!
- Online courses - both informal and formal - can be a great way to delve into your passions and meet other people who are just as excited about a subject as you are. Outschool, for example, offers everything from coding to Minecraft to Lego clubs to Manga and more!
- Try taking on a project to do with your passion. If you love writing for example, maybe start a blog or write a medium length story. If you love gaming, perhaps try out some different kinds of games you don't normally play. Consider teaching yourself a new skill to do with your interest, like coding, or poetry. There are some awesome online videos and websites that help people develop new skills.
- Feeling a bit uninspired? Even if you really don't feel like engaging in your passion, telling yourself that you'll only do it for 5 minutes might help remind you why you enjoy it so much. Once you begin, you might find that it's hard to stop!
- Look up YouTubers with similar passions for inspiration and motivation. Seeing other people doing things that you enjoy can motivate you to create or delve into your passion even more deeply.
- If your passion takes a lot of effort, see if you can engage with it on a lighter level. For example, if you love painting but don't have energy to start a new work, try sketching and using textas (pens) because they are easier to set up and pack up.
- Demonstrate a willingness to try out something new. As monotony sets in, a new activity or hobby can be energising. Even if performed poorly it can be fun and you can learn something new, and exercise some brain muscles you had forgotten you had. Things like clay modelling, beatboxing, or baking can be really entertaining. You don't have to be good at it to get something out of it.
- Missing your friends, and not able to organize meetups in person? Group video calls can be a good solution; you could do some gaming together, (video or cards/tabletop) have a movie night, or just hang out and chill like you normally would... just virtually!

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testimonials

PARENTS

"My daughter joined your program after being diagnosed last year at age 16. Until then, it had been a pretty tough, anxiety filled road for her. Your mentoring programs have given her a space to get to know herself, feel confident in who she is and take pride in her Autism."

"This program is incredibly important in helping young autistic people understand who they are and learn to celebrate themselves. In a world that is often challenging and negative towards autistic young people, I CAN's mentoring gives them a place to be acknowledged and celebrated just as they are."

A TEACHER

"For students, no matter where you are on that journey toward [self] acceptance, the I CAN Network can meet you in that journey and support you through it. The mentors do a great job of going at the pace of each student."

I CAN MENTORS

"My I CAN mentors showed me that it was okay to be different. They showed me that I had so many qualities to give to other people. They allowed me to be myself and want to help other people like myself. It makes me feel proud that as a mentor now, I can have a positive influence on our mentees."

"Once I started meeting Autistic role models and peers, it made me feel like I was part of a community and that helped me accept myself more and more. A lot of Autistic people struggle with finding their place in society and having Autistic mentors can help you feel like you belong."

A STUDENT MENTEE

"I CAN helps people develop confidence and pride in being Autistic. For me, I've gained an appreciation of why I do certain things and I've also realised that I am not alone. There are so many Autistic people who can relate to my experiences, and when we share things each of us has been through, we can support each other."

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stay in touch

I CAN Social Media: We invite I CAN families to remain connected with us on our multiple social media channels, including our very active Facebook page that regularly highlights young Autistic voices and content relevant to school and home life. Find us on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn. Our Website - icannetwork.online

YOUTUBE - https://www.youtube.com/user/TheICanNetwork
Subscribe to our YouTube channel for free webinars, relative conversations and great story telling.

FACEBOOK - https://www.facebook.com/theicannetwork
Join our Facebook community where you can find relevant insights into Autism and education.

INSTAGRAM - https://www.instagram.com/autismrethink
Our Instagram page is a great way to connect with like-minded people and communities.

LINKEDIN - https://www.linkedin.com/company/i-can-network and https://www.linkedin.com/in/icanceochris-varney Professionally connect with us, I CAN staff and our Founder and CEO Chris Varney.

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